

Polish Exiles

by Hanna Czuma

“**A**MONG THE MANY IMPRESSIONS from my stay in Kazakhstan the strongest was of my contact with Polish communities. I met four generations of Poles,” writes Barbara Mekarska in *Czas Krakowski*, a Cracow publication. “Although most of them communicate in the Russian or Kazakh language, the young are learning the history of Poland from their elders. A fourteen-year-old youth eagerly shows his knowledge: ‘Cracow was a capital of Poland before Warsaw. . . . Walesa defeated Communism. . . . My name is Stanislaw Dabrowski.’”

Mekarska, who teaches Eastern Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Poland, and some of her students spent a month in Kazakhstan on the invitation of the Polish Culture Centre, established there in 1992.

Of the 120,000 Polish people who live in Kazakhstan, eighty percent would like to relocate to Poland, the country they call home. During the years of the Soviet regime this wish existed only in their dreams; now, at last it is becoming a reality. Maria Kuberska, for example, has been living in Kazakhstan for sixty years. Soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, she went on a pilgrimage to the Polish shrine of Czstochowa and wrote a letter to (then) President Lech Walesa: “Mr. President, I want to let you know that I am Polish. Please accept us in Poland.”

Who are these people? How did they come to live in that far-off Asian land, and why did they want to leave now?

Shortly after World War I, a part of what was eastern Poland was annexed by the Soviet Union. Russification, religious persecutions, and collectivization of farms met with a strong protest. In the years 1935-36, the Soviets ended all opposition by executions and deportations. “On the order of Stalin, most men were killed or taken away to forced labour camps in Siberia, while women and children were taken away in cattle wagons to the empty steppes of Kazakhstan. They were supposed to build dug-out homes and start farming there,” reports the Social Committee for Helping Poles in Central Asia. Kuberska was thirteen when she and her family were deported:

They came for us. Nothing was explained. We were told: “Collect your belongings and come.” After many days of travel, our family,

together with several others, were brought to a steppe and left there. Twenty-six tents were put up, with spaces of two metres by two metres for a family; in some as many as fifteen people had to live. At least we had protection against *burans* (snow storms with strong winds).

At first, guards kept watch over them. The deportees were not permitted to walk further than five miles away from the compound. But where could they go, and how? The capital city, Alma Alta, was 1,500 kilometres to the south and Omsk about the same distance to the north. The nearest town was over a hundred kilometres away. After a while, the guards left, but the isolations remained. The compounds on the steppes had become prisons without walls. Three years later, the deportees were joined by new transports of Poles. In 1939, when Germany attacked Poland from the west, the Soviets invaded from the east. Thousands, mostly women and children, were deported from eastern Poland to various destinations in the Soviet territory. Some came to the steppes of Kazakhstan, and history was repeated.

Gradually, the deportees began a semblance of a normal life. They made bricks and built homes. Compounds became communities bearing Polish names such as Green Grove and Cherryhill, out of place in the steppes but dear to their hearts. They kept their language, traditions, and faith alive. In the absence of priests they organized their own religious services. "People . . . came regularly for prayers to our house. . . . Not only speaking Polish was forbidden then but also, and most of all, praying," says Kuberska. In the evenings they walked in groups far into the steppe to pray and sing hymns. With time, Polish priests and sisters began to travel to the Soviet Union in disguise, smuggling in Bibles and rosaries and working in the Polish communities.

About a third of the deportees had died in the harsh Kazakh climate and sub-human living conditions. Those who survived say that it was the hope of returning one day that kept them alive, a hope they passed on to younger generations. Today, the situation is vastly different. For the first time, Poles living in Kazakhstan, as well as all other foreign nationals, not only can leave the country but are urged to go. Kazakhs openly say they would like to get rid of them.

For years the country had been populated by people of various nationalities, races, and backgrounds, with Kazakhs themselves in the minority. But since the Kazakhstania declaration of independence in 1991, native Kazakhs have been brought back from other Soviet republics, Afghanistan, and China. Today, in the country of seventeen million,

Kazakhs form seventy-three percent of the population and declare that they want “Kazakhstan for Kazakhs.” Top positions in the political, educational, judicial, and security systems are reserved for the Kazakhs as Kazakh slowly replaces Russian as the official language. Nationalistic feelings are rising, and the Islamic religion is felt as a threat by Christians. Half of the Poles living in Kazakhstan have papers stating their Polish nationality, and others who want to return are trying to obtain them.

The Polish government faces a dilemma: Poles from Kazakhstan are not the only ones who want to return. Many more live in the former Soviet Union, 350, 000 in Central Asia alone. Where is the government to find housing, employment, and money for massive repatriations? And there is another difficulty, a cultural one: while people who are returning from the Balkan or Slavonic countries find it relatively easy to relocate, those born and raised in Kazakhstan grew up in a very different culture. They need to become acquainted with the country they know only from stories that older people have told them.

With the help of charitable organizations, the Catholic Church, educational institutions, communities, and individuals, assistance is offered in several forms. Young people may apply to the Ministry of Education for permission and grants to study in Poland. Some have already been enrolled. Olga Bodenko, for instance, started a three-year course in hotel-and-restaurant management in Rzesow in September 1994:

At I first I felt homesick, but not it is better. Three other girls came from Kazakhstan; we are roommates. I am learning the Polish language, history, geography, and literature. It is not easy, but I must persevere. . . .

Thirty-three Polish teachers working in Kazakhstan make it possible for students to learn about their native country. This is especially important for those who will later travel to Poland for a short stay or move there for good. Children come to Poland for vacations in summer camps or private homes. Regional and municipal administrations have undertaken the sponsoring of returnees. In towns and villages around the country relocated families find furnished homes ready for them to move into and help in adjusting and finding work.

Then there are those too old to move but who would move like to visit Poland once more in their lives. During Christmas 1995, eighty-three former deportees visited Poland on the invitation of the Polish Humanitarian Action, initiated by the daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*. They were billeted in

Polish homes. First names only were given in an article of January 1996, which quoted some of the visitors' comments: "I have been dreaming all my life of coming here, if only for a moment," said Albin from Karaganda. Zuzanna from Akmola wiped tears from her eyes, saying, "for the first time in my life I was given real, live flowers." Eugeniusz had a cold when he left Kazakhstan which developed into pneumonia, and he had to spend some time in a hospital in Cracow. Still, he enjoyed his visit. "We have the same hearts you have. Bring us here to stay, life is so horrible there," he cried, as he said good-bye. Kazmierz from Kokcetav said: "now we have seen it all, we are ready to die." The visitors were delighted with the hospitality they experienced. They could not decide what they liked best: churches, meeting with the Polish Primate, Cardinal Glemp, or Christmas with the host families. Anna was glad to have had a guest from Kazakhstan: "Being able to do something for those Poles who had been made to suffer so much all their lives makes me feel good. This Christmas was the most beautiful in my life," she said.

It is calculated that the repatriation might take from five to seven years. "Too long; this is a crawling pace," say those who are waiting to be sponsored and the Poles who visit and work with them. Several Poles in Kazakhstan own homes, farms, and cars, and have steady jobs and savings. They want to move while it is possible to do so without losing everything they have worked for. "Any moment an order might be issued, stating that those who are leaving cannot take anything out of Kazakhstan," says Wlodzimierz Jurasz in an article in *Czas Krakowski*. "There is no future for our children and grandchildren in Kazakhstan. We must repatriate as soon as possible. We don't want to be victims of a nationalistic rebellion here," says Franciszek Boguslawski, president of Association of Poles in Kazakhstan. On his visit to Cracow in 1994, Boguslawski met with workers from the Social Committee for Assistance to Polish People in Central Asia, the deputy mayor of Cracow, Franciszek Cardinal Macharski, and representatives from the business community. At the end of his visit, he said he was "returning full of hope." Indeed, the response of the Polish people is heartwarming. As Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, executive secretary of the Polish Conference of Catholic Bishops, said: "the poor are helping the poor."

But more help is needed, and Poles living in the west are responding too. Financial assistance comes from Polish communities in western Europe, the United States, Australia, and Canada. Zwiasek Ziem Wschodnich an organization devoted to helping Poles living in the former Soviet Union, with headquarters in Toronto, raises funds in and outside Polish communities for grants, teaching materials, children's camps airfare tickets,

sponsorships, and countless other expenses. Every zloty, dollar, and euro counts. The needs are great.

When I spread holy pictures on the table in a (formerly communist) kolkhoz community hall, I had an impression of looking at a surrealistic scene: Old people under a huge portrait entitled: “Lenin with Kolkhoz Members” picking out holy pictures for themselves and their grandchildren; students from Poland giving gifts to the Polish descendants in Kazakhstan who have never seen the country of their grandparents, and all that by permission of the Kazakh director.

Thus Barbara Mekarska concludes the story about her visit. Nothing like this would have been formerly possible. And do there is reason to hope. ❧