

*DR KEVIN F. MCGRATH is a Research and Evaluation Officer at the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors. In June 2018, he flew to Poland to rediscover his refugee ancestry. In the process, he came to better understand the effects of intergenerational trauma.*

# Poland after World War II: My refugee heritage

**A**s the plane approached Warsaw, I was overwhelmed with emotion. The farmland that reached to the horizon had previously only existed in the stories my grandmother told me. In my mind, Poland was always two places: a beautiful country filled with wildflowers; and a land savaged by war.

My family resettled in Australia in 1950 as refugees after surviving World War II. About six million Polish citizens died in the war, the same population as modern-day Lebanon. Arriving on board the former military transport ship General W. C. Langfitt were my great-grandparents, my grandparents and my aunt. My grandparents met in a prisoner-of-war camp, later a refugee camp, in Germany, where they lived for several years, married and gave birth to my aunt. They had endured the hardships of a brutal war, years of separation and the harsh reality of being displaced persons in refugee camps.

Now, 68 years later and the same age as my grandfather (Kazimierz Zielinski) when he first arrived in Australia, I landed in Poland.

Standing in the long line of sleep-deprived travellers at customs, my excitement turned to anxiety. I had not heard Polish spoken since my grandmother passed away seven years ago. I knew a few words, but it was certainly not enough to answer the questions of the perplexed customs officer looking at my Polish passport. My mother never taught my brother and I how to speak Polish, to protect us from the isolation and discrimination she had faced for having parents who spoke a foreign language. They were referred to disrespectfully as “reffos” and “wogs”. They were not “Australian”. But when, like me, your skin is pale white and burns easily under the Australian sun, comments about being “fresh off the boat” were inevitable. Now, unable to communicate in Polish, I feared a similar isolation.

I breathed a sigh of relief as the customs officer gestured me through. I grabbed my backpack and made my way to the exit. Travelling light is something I’ve always preferred, yet my backpack contained more than my entire family had with them when they were sent to Bonegilla, a “Migrant Reception and Training Centre” in Victoria.

When they arrived at Bonegilla, they were greeted



PHOTO: Torun — DR KEVIN F. MCGRATH

by armed guards and spotlights. Women and children were separated from men. They slept in hot, corrugated iron buildings and only knew what day of the week it was by the food they were served. After spending three months at sea, they believed this was yet another prisoner-of-war camp. When they were finally “discharged” from Bonegilla, they were separated once more and sent to live more than 700 kilometres apart. As new struggles began in a strange land with a strange culture and foreign language, it seemed as though the war would never truly end.

I didn’t know it at the time, but as I exited Warsaw airport I was about to retrace the steps of my grandmother, who had returned to Poland 20 years earlier – the only time she would see her homeland again. Unfortunately, she could never truly return home: war shifted Poland’s borders and the army base at Pinsk, where she grew up, is now part of Belarus.

Just as my grandmother’s family friend, Ala, was there to greet her at Warsaw airport in 1998, so too did Ala greet me. Because we had never met, Ala planned to hold a sign with her name on it so I could find her. The plan failed when we ended up walking into each

other instead, somehow recognising one another. Ala spoke to me in Polish and I replied in English, but I think we were talking about the same things: the weather, Warsaw University and the train station. Listening to Ala speak was like hearing my grandmother talk to me once more, and as I listened closely the more I began to understand. Ala introduced me to everyone she spoke to in Warsaw as if they should have recognised me: “This is my friend Bogumila’s grandson”, she told the young man at the newsagency, “he is from Australia.”

My grandmother was perhaps the most influential person in my life and, as soon as I was old enough to drive, I spent as much time as I could at her house in Canterbury, in Sydney’s Inner-West. Born Bogumila Dobrzycka and known as Mila, she passed the time in refugee camps by teaching children – a trait my brother and I both unknowingly adopted as we became teachers. She was the daughter of Polish officer Kazimierz Dobrzycki, who (in World War II) was captured by Germans and Russians, and escaped both times before joining the underground army.

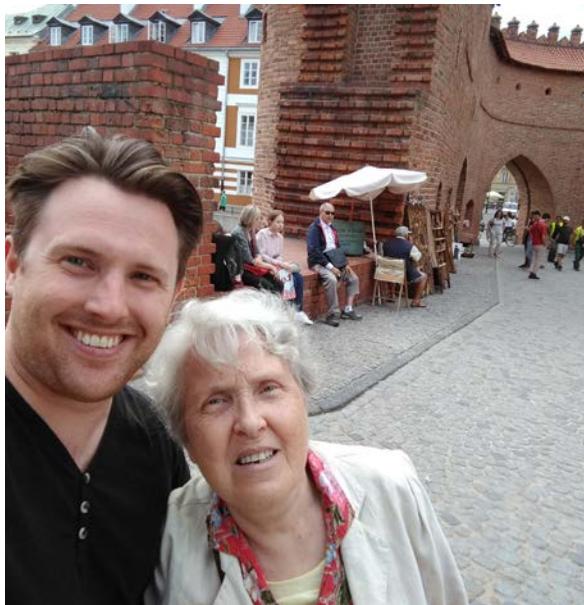
As I followed her footsteps I discovered that my grandmother had left a trail of things for me to find:

IRO (BZ) FORM II. IRO CODE No C-4-20  
 INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE ORGANIZATION  
 BRITISH ZONE OF GERMANY No 002110 B  
 CERTIFICATE

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT  
 The Bearer ZIELINSKA BOGUMILA  
 IRO Identity No. 255503  
 has been tested in EMBROIDERY  
 and has been classified as AN EMBROIDERER

Signed R. Gae Testing Official  
 State GERMANY Education  
 This certificate, based upon testing carried out by qualified persons to the best knowledge and belief of the undersigned, is valid for the purpose of employment.  
 Stamp Signed [Signature]  
REG. EMPLOYMENT OFFICER 11.8.1949.

Copy to be filed with Employment Card.  
 FRS 912/1887186X168X210-48





letters and photos of us both in a decorated box at cousins Ewa and Michal's house, her artworks on the walls of every relatives' home, and a small toy koala she had given another cousin, Marta, that sat proudly in a display cabinet with wineglasses. "Mila gave this to me when I was a child" Marta said in Polish, lifting the koala from the shelf, "I had to paint the eyes and nose back on." Places that had only existed in my grandmother's stories came alive before me: I stood atop the "mouse tower" at Kruszwica, walked along the "walls of salt" at Ciechocinek and stood at the "frog fountain" down the road from Copernicus's home.

I was struck by my ability to navigate the streets of Toruń, a city in northern Poland, without a map. Here, I joined with my parents who had been in Poland for several weeks. As we walked the cobblestone streets I felt as if I had walked those same streets many times before. The buildings, roads and monuments all seemed familiar to me. We stopped outside the door to a beauty salon. "This was once your grandfather's home," my mother said. "In the morning, he would carry his kayak down to the river." I couldn't help but smile as I recalled carrying my own kayak to the water from the house my grandfather had built north of Sydney. I never knew this – my grandfather passed away before I took up kayaking. Maybe this is why Toruń felt so familiar to me? Perhaps traces of my grandfather's life were somehow echoed in my own? As my father would later tell me: "To know yourself, you have to know where you're from."

While the streets of Toruń beckoned me, a place near the river concealed the source of my recurring childhood nightmares. It was there that my grandmother was separated from her parents, not to see them again until after the war. The Nazis used the large cellars of the ruined castle of Toruń as a type of concentration camp. Death still lingered in the cold air decades later. In one room, metal hooks hung from the ceiling. I recalled a time my grandmother had said she was warned not to eat the meat in the soup the German soldiers

served them. The marks of ash and smoke still clung to the stones in the kitchen area above the cellars.

My grandmother was sent to work as a slave labourer for a German farmer to provide food for their army. The farmer fastened a saw to the side of a bike and demanded that she ride it to collect materials. The jagged blade cut into her leg as she pedalled. He whipped her to make her pedal faster, and later sent her to have the saw sharpened. At night she slept on the floor with the animals, waiting for the war to end. "The animals were badly treated too," she would say.

She also used to tell me that there were flowers everywhere in Poland. As we drove towards the small farming town of Orle, I believed her. This was the home of my great grandfather. The house he lived in and the church he helped to build still stand today, not far from where yet another cousin, Marilka, lives. Orle, with just a few houses and a cemetery, is hard to find on a map, but it is a place of incredible beauty. Here I swam in the lake that was once owned by my family, picked wild berries with my relatives and watched the squirrels leap between the trees at dusk. For the first time I understood why my grandparents built a house on the coast north of Sydney. "I always feel like I'm at home in Orle," said my mother.

Now, back in Australia, Poland is no longer just a place in my grandmother's stories but also a place in my memories. Organisations such as STARTTS, where I now work, which help refugees to heal from trauma, didn't exist when my family arrived in Australia. What has now become known as "transgenerational trauma" was a concept unbeknownst to me, despite the horrors of war becoming embedded within my own nightmares. Being from a refugee background seems to be something that echoes through generations. The streets of Toruń and the flowers of Orle still call my family to return – and return we do, we must.

Of all the things I learned from my grandmother, her greatest lesson was that it is possible to endure tremendous pain and suffering and still be a good person. R