

Polish Veterans as Farm Labourers in Canada, 1946-49

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From 1946 to 1955 101,403 Polish-born persons arrived in Canada.¹ Uprooted by the events of the Second World War they did not come directly from Poland but from Western Europe and other parts of the world. The first to arrive, in fall 1946 and spring of 1947, were 4,247 ex-soldiers of the Polish 2nd Corps, which had formed a part of the British 8th Army during the war. This group constituted the nucleus of Polish postwar immigration to Canada and is the subject of this paper.

The arrival and settlement of the Polish veterans is significant for several reasons. With the exception of the war brides from the United Kingdom, this was the first large group of immigrants to arrive in Canada after the Second World War. They were admitted by an order-in-council² at a time when the Canadian government had no immigration policy respecting the acceptance of refugees and displaced persons. The Polish veterans thus represented an experiment in the evolution of Canadian immigration policy. Their behaviour, industry, and general disposition and the attitudes displayed towards them by the Canadian people were to determine the acceptance of further newcomers. Their arrival also had a tremendous impact upon the established Polish-Canadian community (hereafter referred to as Polonia). The fledgling Canadian Polish Congress quickly made their plight a cause célèbre, and their influence and participation, or sometimes non-participation, in Polish organizations transformed the character of the Polish group in Canada.

This paper will examine the ex-soldiers' first two years of life in Canada. Sources used in the preparation of the paper include the Immigration Branch Files, Public Archives of Canada; the Farm Labour Branch Files, Saskatchewan Archives Board; the Farm Service Forces Files, Archives of Ontario; daily newspapers, the Polish language weeklies *Czas*, published in Winnipeg, and *Zwiazkowiec*, published in Toronto; and approximately thirty oral history interviews from the collection of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario. Only by utilizing oral history material and other first person accounts such as memoirs can we arrive at a clearer picture of this important chapter of Canadian

history. The real impact of the postwar immigration cannot be measured in statistics but in more human terms, in the hopes and fears of the new Canadians who were the actual creators of history.

As was already pointed out, the Polish veterans did not arrive as bona fide immigrants. They came instead as agricultural labourers on a two-year permit. Only after completing this term in that occupation were they to be granted a "landed" status. Although their admission to Canada is sometimes explained on humanitarian grounds,³ other considerations were more immediate in the minds of the Canadian authorities. The postwar boom and demand for agricultural products created an acute demand for farm labour and unskilled workers. One particular source of very inexpensive labour was to disappear, as in spring 1946 the Department of External Affairs, told Prime Minister MacKenzie King that German prisoners of war who had worked on Canadian farms were soon to be repatriated, and suggested that they be replaced with Polish veterans.⁴ Since Great Britain assumed the responsibility and the burden of Polish veterans who did not wish to return to a communist Poland, there was a feeling on the part of some Canadian bureaucrats that they should assist Britain in this effort.⁵

When the first contingent of veterans docked in Halifax on November 12, 1946, the *Toronto Daily Star* greeted them with the following headline: "Boots, Boots, Boots, 1,700 Poles Who Want No Part of Home March into Canada." The *Star* writer shared the puzzlement of Canadians who could not understand why these men turned their backs on their homeland to come to a strange country.⁶

Similar attitudes prevailed in England where much was done to dissuade the Poles from making the United Kingdom their permanent home. One veteran explained how the attitudes of the British had changed since the war years: "When we landed in Plymouth in 1940, there was music, there was a welcome. In 1945 when the war was over, some said to me in a pub: 'You bloody Poles! What are you still doing here?' I did not see any future there."⁷

Aversion to communism, antipathy towards the

Soviet Union and fear of retaliation and imprisonment were the predominant influences in the soldiers' decision not to return to Poland. Ted Ives, a veteran who came from Eastern Poland, which fell under Soviet rule after the war, also explained:

For us Poles from the Eastern part it was quite a traumatic experience. We felt we were sold down the river. That land had been a part of Poland for hundreds of years. All of a sudden our home was taken away. Under the circumstances we had no home to go to because whether we agreed politically or not, the fact remained we would be returning to a different country. Therefore, we had to make a decision. Do we return to a part of Poland which we did not know or do we make another choice? I can assure you that for many it was not an easy choice.⁸

The Canadian Commission, sent to Italy in August 1946 to select veterans for farm work, was instructed to choose unmarried and strong men of good character and from a farm background. Although the Commission was able to establish most criteria through army records and basic medical examinations, they had to take the candidate's word on their agricultural experience. One veteran related that:

They really didn't know whether you were a lawyer or farmer. Many officers who knew nothing about farming signed up. They gave us a little test where we had to distinguish between a sheaf of wheat and a sheaf of rye. And they asked us whether we could milk cows. I did not know how to do that but said yes. Most of the men did not know either, because even if you came from a farm, women milked the cows in Poland. I had to lie because otherwise I probably would not qualify to go to Canada.⁹

The veteran's testimony corroborated the many letters written by farmer-employers to the authorities bemoaning that their veteran-employee was born and raised in the city and was totally unsuited to and disinterested in farm work. These farmers wished to have such veterans removed from their farms. The authorities, however, explained that the veterans were feigning inexperience so that they would be released from their contract and be able to work in another trade. Such requests were usually turned down.¹⁰

For the most part, however, farmers were very much interested in obtaining a Polish veteran. There was no shortage of placements even for those deemed troublemakers. At a time when an unskilled labourer earned approximately 85 cents an hour, which came to \$37 for a forty-four-hour work week, the \$45 a month

wage set for the veterans by the government offered cheap labour. No regulations or guidelines existed as to the number of daily working hours, days off, or free Sundays. Many farmers took advantage of this and forced the veterans to work sixteen hours per day with no days off. Polish language newspapers of the period, memoirs and oral history collections are all replete with veterans' accounts of back breaking labour, inadequate and low quality food, primitive living conditions and of the verbal abuse directed at them by their Canadian masters.

The grievances about the wages came from those veterans who were paid the minimum amount of \$45 per month. Provincial agricultural representatives often suggested to farmers that they pay the going rate for farm labour in the region. In fact many veterans were earning \$65-75 per month, and one interviewee revealed he was making as much as \$140.¹¹

The stories of long hours of labour rewarded with inferior victuals have now evolved into a type of folklore within the Canadian Polonia. Here are a few representative samples of the many stories.

They sent me to Stratford where I worked for a Ukrainian farmer. I spent only three months there because the conditions were terrible. The house was indescribably filthy and the food was awful. When they gave me eggs for breakfast there were more flies in the plate than eggs.¹²

I worked for a farmer in Alberta for about a month then I told him what to do with his job. Unfortunately, unlike now, no one told us of our rights. I got paid 45 dollars per month and would have taken it, but I was not going to starve. I was a 26 year old fellow who was hungry every day of the month that I was there. So for 45 dollars, tending a herd of cows, milking them and so on, I like many others felt that I deserved better. I think I must have gotten one of the stingiest farmers in Alberta. He was pretty well off, but was one of the meanest s.o.b.'s around.¹³

The farm was about 150 acres. The farmer did not have a tractor, I had to work with horses! On some days I had to haul out two hundred wheelbarrows of manure and my hands ached. He paid me 45 dollars per month. I worked 16 hours a day and that came out to 11 cents an hour! If you worked they gave you food. But on Sunday, they gave you one egg, but not fried in margarine or butter but fried in hot water.¹⁴

It wasn't hard work at this farm but the farmer's attitude was that from early morning to night-time I was to be outside. Even when it was snowing or

raining. I had to be outside. Sometimes I had to dance in the barn with the horses to keep warm. The worst part of it was that I was hungry all of the time. Hungry in Canada! I suffered there, I thought I was going to die! I suppose I could have asked for more food but it was in my nature not to do so. And she was crying because before my arrival she used to bake eight buns per week and now she had to bake twice as many. And I could have eaten ten times as much!¹⁵

Such conditions caused many of the veterans to request transfers to another farm. Despite protests from farmers and administrators from the National Employment Service, most requests for transfer were granted. In a few instances veterans were taken to court for changing farms without permission or leaving farm employment altogether. The result was a re-dressing by the judge with a threat of deportation.¹⁶ By the end of their first year in Canada over one-third of the veterans transferred to different farms at least once.¹⁷ The insouciance of many of the veterans towards their contracts alarmed the authorities. Directions were given that any difficulties were to be cleared up quietly and quickly on the local level with as little publicity as possible.

This approach was not always successful as a few incidents received widespread newspaper and radio coverage. In May 1947, L.T. Church, Conservative MP for Toronto-Broadview, voiced his opposition to bringing the remainder of the 4,500 soldiers to Canada. He accused the Poles of being one-time Nazis who had fought against the Canadians during the war. . . . Church was seconded by CCF MP Herbert Harridge, whose party had opposed the admission of the Poles from the start.¹⁸ Further support in this campaign to discredit the Poles and embarrass the Liberal Government came from Conservative MP H.O. White, who stated in the House of Commons that the farmers in the London, Ontario area were not pleased with the veterans because they had not performed as well as the German prisoners had.¹⁹ Polonia took offence to these statements and strong letters of protest were sent by the Canadian Polish Congress to L.T. Church and to Conservative Party Leader John Bracken, who eventually apologized for Church's remarks.²⁰

During the same month another event was followed with great interest by the media. A Yorkton, Saskatchewan, farmer was tried and subsequently imprisoned on charges of assault occasioning bodily harm to his hired veteran. During the trial the veteran related that soon after his arrival the farmer, who was of German descent, kicked him, swore violently, and called him a "Polish swine. Two weeks later he struck the veteran with a pitchfork and threw him to the ground, seriously injuring him. In sentencing the farmer

to a two-month term, the judge stressed the lack of supervision on the part of the National Employment Service and the ineffective system of screening the farmers before placing veterans with them.²¹

In July of the same year a similar incident occurred in Hanna, Alberta, but it was the veteran who was placed on trial after a physical altercation between himself, the farmer and his wife. The veteran testified that the farmer was a staunch Communist who displayed portraits of Stalin around his house and continually taunted and provoked the veteran. The trial concluded that it was the veteran who had been the victim, and he was found not guilty.²²

The incident in Saskatchewan resulted in an investigation where a visit by a representative of the provincial Department of Agriculture was made to every farm employing a veteran. Written reports were prepared, and in many instances certain misunderstandings were settled.²³ The agricultural representatives were generally sympathetic to the veterans and asked the farmers to be patient with them as they needed a period of time for readjustment to civilian life. They usually recommended transfers when requested by the veterans, and rarely threatened them with drastic measures such as deportation to Poland.²⁴

The major reason for dissatisfaction among the veterans with their employment on the farms, according to several of the Saskatchewan agricultural officials who visited them, was not the result of poor food, lodging or labour, but was brought about by loneliness.²⁵ The veterans felt isolated and undoubtedly missed the camaraderie of military life. Not knowing the English language, and therefore being unable to communicate with their employers, made the situation more miserable for them.

In his introduction to a volume of collected memoirs of Polish immigrants to Canada, Benedykt Heydenkorn notes the contrast between the post-Second World War immigrants and those who had arrived earlier. Unlike the veterans, the older group did not complain about their new environment, nor did they criticize the host society and government.²⁶ That the veterans were ready to bring their plight into the public eye disturbed a proportion of the older Polonia. The seniors were upset that the veterans were sabotaging Polonia's reputation in Canada, which they tended to envisage as hardworking and law-abiding. In a long newspaper essay entitled "Something Is Not O.K.," J.K. Flis admonished the newcomers: "To consider farm work as a disgrace is unbefitting of a soldier. You signed a contract and you should honour it. The conditions are not that unbearable that one has to tremble with fright from a good day's work. If you don't want to soil your dainty fingers then why the devil did you push your way to Canada, taking the place of a peasant's son who would not shy away from the beetfields and

would know what a cow looks like."²⁷

The essay precipitated several others agreeing with Flis and started a debate between the two camps. The veterans accused the older Poles of ignorance and distinguished themselves as political émigrés, as opposed to those who had come to Canada for economic reasons. It is interesting to note here that the polemics found on the pages of Polish language newspapers of the late 1940s are being echoed in the 1980s. Today the older Poles, many of them veterans, strongly disapprove of the attitude, behaviour and reluctance to accept any kind of employment by the usually well-educated group which arrived in Canada during the past six years.

Although the veterans were distributed throughout all of the provinces in Canada upon arrival, the majority of them eventually gravitated towards the larger industrial centres of central Canada once their two-year contracts were completed. Delegates to the Sixth Dominion-Provincial Farm Labour Conference held in Ottawa in December of 1948 reported that the Polish veterans' movement was generally successful. Quebec and Nova Scotia even considered the

Poles as eligible candidates for the veterans' land-settlement programs which were designed for Canadian ex-military personnel. The delegates were optimistic that 50 percent of the veterans would remain in agriculture after the obligatory term.²⁸ That crystal ball gazing could not have been further from the eventual result, where only about 1 percent remained in agriculture. Life in urban centres and opportunities in the factories of southern Ontario held greater attractions.

Thus, in the end, the importation of the Polish veterans to Canada succeeded. Although they did not remain in agriculture, most prospered and flourished in other occupations.

Many of the veterans were educated professionals and eventually were able to find work suited to their training. They worked with determination and learned to adjust and love their adopted country. Their perseverance overcame the initial dearth of opportunity, the bureaucratic inexperience of the officials, language difficulties and the lack of sympathy from the older Polonia. Canada was fortunate to have received these people.

Notes

1. Canada, 1971 *Immigration Statistics* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1972), p. 23.
2. Order-in-Council, P.C. 3112, 23 July 1946. Provision was made for the recruitment of 4,000 soldiers. An additional 500 were added to this number by Order-in-Council, P.C. 1746, 6 May 1947.
3. Henry Radecki with Benedykt Heydenkorn, *A Member of a Distinguished Family: The Polish Group in Canada*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 33.
4. Aloysius Balawyder, *The Maple Leaf and the White Eagle: Canadian Polish Relations, 1918-1978*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 138.
5. Report of the Activities of the Canadian Polish Movement Unit, 26 November 1946, p. 17. Public Archives Canada, Immigration Branch Files (hereafter P.A.C.) R.G. 76, Volume 648, File A85451, Pt. 1; P.A.C., G.L. Magan, Under-Secretary for External Affairs to A. MacNamara, Deputy Minister of Labour, 21 November 1946. R.G. 76, Volume 649, File A85451, Pt. 1
6. *Toronto Daily Star*, 13 November 1946, p. 24.
7. Multicultural History Society of Ontario (hereafter M.H.S.O.), oral history interview with Piotr Grochowski, No. 3761, 15 May 1978.
8. M.H.S.O., oral history interview with Ted Ives, No. 4880, 10 June 1978.
9. M.H.S.O., oral history interview with Stanislaw Kendzior, No. 3501, 5 November 1977.
10. Saskatchewan Archives Board (hereafter S.A.B.), Department of Agriculture, Farm Labour Division, Coll. R-262, File 22.
11. M.H.S.O., oral history interview with Jozef Synowiec, No. 2538, 19 January 1978.
12. M.H.S.O., oral history interview with Antoni Wroblewski, No. 2537, 9 January 1978.
13. M.H.S.O., Ted Ives, op. cit.
14. M.H.S.O., oral history interview with Stanislaw Moskal, No. 2377, 28 October 1977.
15. M.H.S.O., oral history interview with Jozef Palczewski, No. 2709, 21 January 1978.
16. P.A.C., R.G. 76, Volume 649, File A85451, Pt. 4.
17. S.A.B., Department of Agriculture, Farm Labour Division, Coll. R-262, File 22.
18. *Zwiazkowiec*, 4 May 1947.
19. *Czas*, 21 May 1947.
20. *Ibid.*, 28 May 1947.
21. *Yorkton Enterprise*, 22 May 1947.
22. *Czas*, 23 July 1947.
23. S.A.B., Department of Agriculture, Farm Labour Division, Coll. R-262, File 22.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. Benedykt Heydenkorn, ed., *Memoirs of Polish Immigrants in Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Polish Research Institute, 1979), p. xi.
27. J.K. Flis, "Cos nie jest O.K.," *Zwiazkowiec*, 14 March 1948.
28. Archives of Ontario, Deputy Minister's Correspondence, Farm Service Force, R.G. 16, B-1-1.