

# In the Archive of Memory

The Fate of Poles and Iranians in the Second World War

edited by Sylwia Surdykowska

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in the Second World War

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Sylvia Surdykowska

Department of Iranian Studies  
Faculty of Oriental Studies  
University of Warsaw



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First published 2014

Department of Iranian Studies  
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26/28 Krakowskie Przedmieście, 00-927 Warsaw

[www.orient.uw.edu.pl](http://www.orient.uw.edu.pl)

Editorial review: Professor Bogdan Składanek

Editing: Sylwia Surdykowska

Proofreading: Michał Bocian

The publication was co-financed by the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw, the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Tehran and the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Warsaw

Type-setting and formatting: Zakład Graficzny Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego

Cover and endpapers design: Wiktor Dyndo

First issue

Printed and bound: Zakład Graficzny Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, zam.

1015/2014

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ISBN (ePub) 978-83-8002-436-6

ISBN (Mobi) 978-83-8002-437-3

Wydawnictwo Akademickie DIALOG

00-112 Warszawa, ul. Bagno 3/218

tel./fax 022 620 87 03

e-mail: [redakcja@wydawnictwodialog.pl](mailto:redakcja@wydawnictwodialog.pl)

[www.wydawnictwodialog.pl](http://www.wydawnictwodialog.pl)

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# **Editorial Note**

In the text of the book, simplified transcription of Persian names and terms has been used. It is based on the rules of the English spelling system. Polish first names, surnames and proper names are spelled in accordance with the rules of Polish orthography and including characters used in the Polish alphabet.

Photographs on pages 14, 18, 24, 86, 96, 110, 118, 134, 140, 150, 156, 170 come with excerpts of the articles published in the book.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Office for War Veterans and Victims of Oppression, Mr Radosław Sadowski and Mrs Jolanta Sierakowska-Dyndo for sharing their photographs for the purpose of this publication.

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Jolanta Sierakowska-Dyndo

## An Archive of Memory

The book that you are holding in your hands, was born out of the need to pass on the memory of the common fate that connected the two nations: the Polish and Iranian peoples, who have been living many thousand kilometres apart, nations that represent different cultures, belong to different religions. Their fates became unexpectedly intertwined during the Second World War, when Polish people, released from the Soviet camps, found their shelter in Iran, which was then occupied by the Allied Forces. Those events left an indelible mark in the collective memory of the two nations. Samad Ali Lakizadeh, the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran, referred to that in his speech at the University of Warsaw:

“No ~~we can see a single (negative) point in history of the~~ two countries’ relations, especially in five centuries of official contacts. Accordingly, we can say that the warm reception of Polish Christian fellows is the brightest part of this common history”.

The inspiration for the book came from the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Polish refugees from the Soviet Union in Iran, which was celebrated in 2012. Memory of the past events came flooding back; the ceremonies commemorating those days rekindled it greatly.

The Department of Iranian Studies at the University of Warsaw became involved in the activities serving to preserve the collective memory of what had happened to the Polish people in Iran by organizing a seminar dedicated to the events of those days. We gave it a title “Among Friends” to emphasize dominant feelings that kept coming up in Poles’ reminiscences about Iran and its citizens, the feelings of kindness, friendship and gratitude. The seminar took place

on 7 May 2012 at the University of Warsaw, hosting many guests: Polish refugees, His Excellency Samad Ali Lakizadeh, the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Professor Włodzimierz Lengauer, Vice-Rector of the University of Warsaw, representatives of the Polish Senate, Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as academic teachers and students of the department. The seminar was one of many initiatives undertaken by various institutions to commemorate the anniversary. That is why there were no signs of it being any different from many occasional meetings of this nature. And yet, it was different indeed! The seminar and all the related activities triggered something that one could call “emotional memory” – it released memories that were blocked, gave an impulse to seek family roots; it spread far and wide in its drive to create a collective memory and the need to pass it on to other people.

Hence, the book that we present to you has been given a form that may seem a departure from the usual post-seminar academic papers. We do not want it to become a stultic collection of articles describing events and analyzing documents. A great deal of research has been conducted in this scope, and in recent times many serious works have been published as a result of years of research in the field, such as for example the most recent *Polscy uchodźcy na Bliskim Wschodzie w latach drugiej wojny światowej* (Polish Refugees in the Middle East in the Years of Second World War) by Jacek Pietrzak (Łódź 2012). Our intention was the book to become “shared remembering” expressed in a variety of forms: academic papers, reminiscences, notes, reflections, public speeches commemorating the anniversaries of the events, as well as photographs, which in a special and inscrutable way can render what cannot be conveyed in words. We want the remembering to be shared, both for those who are experienced by the fate of a wanderer, and for those who want to preserve that memory – record those emotions, remember those images, to “make the past present” as deftly put by Professor Barbara Skarga in her reflections on identity and memory.<sup>1</sup> It was indeed her

reflections about memory that inspired us to act. Professor Barbara Skarga, who herself experienced the hardship of war, the lot of an exile and prisoner of the Soviet camps, reflects on the structure of memory: “For memory, problems are not so much important as are experiences and events (...)”,<sup>2</sup> She compares memory to an archive that is a disorderly collection: contains both beautifully-illustrated manuscripts, as well as trifles, fleeting facts, documents, sounds, also memories of pain, joy, experiences.

“Events, moods, experiences fill the shelves of the archive without any order – and what is more important – without chronology (...). I run along these shelves, sometimes I find something significant that I have forgotten, sometimes somebody else reminds me about something or corrects my memories”.<sup>3</sup>

The book we are presenting you resembles the archive described above, in which memories of experiences and events become interspersed with a certain order, documents and photographs with letters and fragments of prose, all of which serves to find memory of those days in this “lack of order”, and retain it in the present. A reader will find a range of texts, from academic papers to previously unpublished reminiscences of Zofia Józefowicz-Niedźwiecka and her mother Filipina Józefowicz-Ashrafi, who came to Iran in the last transport across the Caspian Sea in 1942. Today she is an Iranist, a retired lecturer and a teacher of Persian who had worked for many years at the University of Warsaw, an author of academic papers and translations of the Persian literature. When I was inviting Doctor Zofia Józefowicz-Niedźwiecka to the seminar, what a surprise it was for me to learn from her that she could not miss the opportunity to participate in the seminar as those past events are part of her life! It was a great surprise and joy at the same time that we could listen to her memories and that she agreed to put her story into words and share her memories and documents of her mother (Zofia Józefowicz-Niedźwiecka, *On the*

*Hospitable Iranian Soil*). We would like to give her here our sincere thank you.

Memory has been brought to life again. It has also moved a translator, Michał Bocian, who rendered the Polish text into English and also proofread it. Moved by the stories of the refugees, he made attempts to trace the lot of his own family, whose ancestor during the turbulent times of war and Siberian exile found himself severed from his motherland for ever. Mr Bocian managed to find and meet his relatives during his work with the text (Michał Bocian, *A Note from the Translator*).

In many reminiscences and letters sent to us, the memory of kindness and warmth was a recurrent theme. Alina Sobczak who participated in the events of the time of exile, today a retired teacher, could not take part in our seminar due to her health condition. However, she did send an affecting letter. She writes, among other things, that she wishes to express her gratitude “to the great Iranian Nation for their heart. Dear and Solidarity with the victims of war. It was as early as we approached the “camps” established for us that the Iranian young people welcomed us with joyful cheers, flowers and fruit.” She also attached her reminiscences and information about Polish orphans that arrived in numbers in Iran. (Alina Sobczak, *Polish Cubs and Scouts in the Friendly Iran of 1940s.*)

In most of the Polish reminiscences and accounts, the image of Iran and Iranians is remarkably positive. Doctor Sylwia Surdykowska cites many fragments in her article *Iran in the Eyes of Poles*. They depict those feelings and atmosphere that seem distant today. They create an idealistic image, describing not only facts but also bringing back feelings – emotion, admiration of nature, kindness. This perception has become to some extent inscribed in the image of the East, including Persia, known from the literary tradition of the interwar period in Poland – in the poetry of Stanisław Baliński, a poet, attaché to the Polish Legation of the Republic of Poland in Tehran in the years

1925-1927. (Miroslaw Michalak, *Back to Isfahan – Polish Poet and Diplomat in Iran*).

One could ask whether the image of Iran and Iranians might have been somewhat idealized. Why do the memories of Polish refugees lack critical and biting remarks of discontent? Is it only an illusion? Has a myth of what happened become established in the collective awareness? Such questions can be multiplied, the history behind events can be sought, explanations can be pursued. One can also accept, as Barbara Skarga does, that this is the nature of memory, the nature of remembering. Such a process of remembering is about finding oneself in an existential experience.<sup>4</sup> What was important for those people – a smile, kindness, warmth radiating from Iranians – may seem an unimportant episode for others. Refugees' reminiscences and accounts show that kind gestures, compassion, help on the part of Iranians occupy chief place in their memory, they are like beautifully-illuminated manuscripts in the archive of memory.

A question emerges, however, what was the image that Iranians retained in their memory? How did they perceive Polish refugees, who together with General Władysław Anders' Army quite unexpectedly appeared on their land. Those were very difficult times for the citizens of Iran, particularly in economic terms. The arrival of about 120,000 Polish soldiers, women and children at one moment, coupled with the presence of the Allied Armies and ongoing warfare, destabilized greatly the Iranian economy (Jolanta Sierakowska-Dyndo, *Economic Situation in Iran at the Beginning of the 1940s. The Polish Refugees Context*). Despite that, Iranians' attitude to Polish people was positive. Nevertheless, the presence of refugees gave rise not only to economic problems but also to cultural ones. Especially in the contemporary Persian literature there appears a slightly critical perception of Poles due to their connections to the Allied Forces as well as their conduct, which departed from what was generally accepted in the Muslim community (Anna Krasnowolska, *The Traces of the Second World War Polish Refugees in Modern Persian*

*Literature*). To convey the atmosphere of those days, let us refer to the fragment of Manouchehr Riyahi's reminiscences, *Sarab-e zendegi* (translation from Persian into Polish by Urszula Pytkowska-Jakimczyk). The author of the book set up a Polish restaurant called "Polonia" in Tehran and employed women from the Polish refugee camps in the city.

Poles in Iran paid significant attention to the development of education and culture. They established schools and academic organizations, held lectures for refugees, published newspapers and magazines (Jan Draus, *Education of Adults in Iran 1942-1945*). Some of these publications can be found in Modern Acts Archive in Warsaw (Ivonna Nowicka, *The Bulletin My (Us). An Outline of its History and Content*). The Faculty of Oriental Studies also has a few copies of a daily *Polak w Iranie* (A Pole in Iran) and one copy of a weekly *Zew* (The Call). Published in Polish in Tehran in 1942, the copies were discovered by Professor Jadwiga Pstrusińska in a second-hand bookstore in Cracow. A few years ago she donated them to the library at the Department of Iranian Studies of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw.

Eagerness and enthusiasm accompanied Polish people in their actions in exile. They shared deep conviction and faith that the long-lasting exile and vast distance to travel, still separating them from Poland, shall come to an end, that they will return to their homeland, return home. And so they did..., only to be sent once again in exile to Siberia in 1951. Professor Andrzej Krzysztof Kunert in his speech opening the seminar presented the long road Gen. Anders' Army travelled to return to Poland. He recalled their fight, heroism and victories. But he also recalled their tragedy – another exile to Siberia, this time brought about by the communist government of Poland. In the then totalitarian system, the victimization of memory by history became a norm. "It took many years", writes Andrzej K. Kunert, "to reverse, on 15 March 1989, a disgraceful decision of the communist regime from 1946, to denaturalize Anders for activities against Polish

state”. (Andrzej K. Kunert, *General Anders’ Army on its Way Across Three Continents*).

Memory – of events, fortunes, experiences – emerges as the main term coming to the fore in the collected texts. This memory, being something of an anti-history, gave voice to those who so far had been deprived of it. The current generation can pass this memory on, therefore let us hasten to do so as much as it is possible, so that it can find a way into our archive of memory, not only the memory of dramatic experiences in exile, but also of ones that brought hope and joy in the land of Iran. Juliusz Gojło, the Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to Iran, also spoke about the need to recall the good memory. In connection with the publication of this book, in a letter addressed to the Department of Iranian Studies at the University of Warsaw, he writes:

“Let me express my hope that it [the book] will allow to keep the best of memories from the period of our fellow countrymen’s stay in Iran and preserve them for the future generations of Polish and Iranian people, once again, in the name of memory and solidarity among the nations, above the divides of time, geography, history and politics”.

The common fate of the two nations which gave rise to their friendship is described by His Excellency Ramin Mehmanparast, the current Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Poland (Ramin Mehmanparast, *The Testimony of Friendship*). He writes:

“The true value of friendship always emerges in most difficult and trying moments—only then it can achieve the greatest intensity and meaning. Let us thank God that in one of the hardest moments of history we remained together (...)”.

To close our reflections on shared remembering, let us once again refer to the words of Barbara Skarga. Speaking about our identity which is built by collective memory she writes:

“The feeling of collective identity, such as the identity of a nation or state, is strongly connected to the feeling of dignity. A nation aware of itself accepts and appreciates itself. It appreciates its past, its grandeur, its own state that was organized by its own will, its national idiosyncrasies and even its national weaknesses. The feeling of dignity can however easily transform into a megalomania, into conceit (...) and self-acceptance starts to go with contempt for other customs, traditions, closing a nation in its egotistic and increasingly barren existence”.<sup>5</sup>

This deep reflection by Barbara Skarga, who experienced the deportation to Soviet Union, accompanied us all the time as we were putting these words to paper. We hope that difficult experiences of Poles during the Second World War and continuously rekindled memory of kindness on the part of Iranians, who did so much good, will save us from barren existence that the philosopher writes about.

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Professor Jolanta  
Sierakowska-Dyndo,  
Iranist, Dean of the  
Faculty of Oriental  
Studies, University of  
Warsaw.

*Department of Iranian Studies  
Faculty of Oriental Studies  
University of Warsaw  
26/28 Krakowskie Przedmieście  
00-927 Warszawa*

*Kępno, 30 April 2011*

*I wish to thank you kindly for inviting me to the seminar “Among Friends. The 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Arrival of Polish Refugees in Iran”.*

*Due to advanced age, the condition of my health, being single and moreover the event of the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of the president of our Siberian Exiles Group in Syców (8<sup>th</sup> of the current month), it is with great regret that I cannot participate in your remarkable event.*

*I am much obliged to my childhood friend, Władysław Czapski from Wrocław, for the precious initiative to establish contacts with the Iranian-Libyanis Group and thereby the possibility to express gratitude to the great Iranian Nation for their heart, care and solidarity with the victims of war. It was as early as we approached the “camps” established for us that the Iranian young people welcomed us with joyful cheers, flowers and fruit.*

*The least I can do to make up for my absence is to send the part of my reminiscences that was edited after being used at meetings in schools.*

*The account presented by me differs substantially from other reminiscences known to myself; however, perhaps somewhere abroad, there are other stories touching upon the subject. This is why I decided to send upon your hands a fragment presenting my account of the three years spent in Iran (1942-1945), one seen through the eyes of a child.*

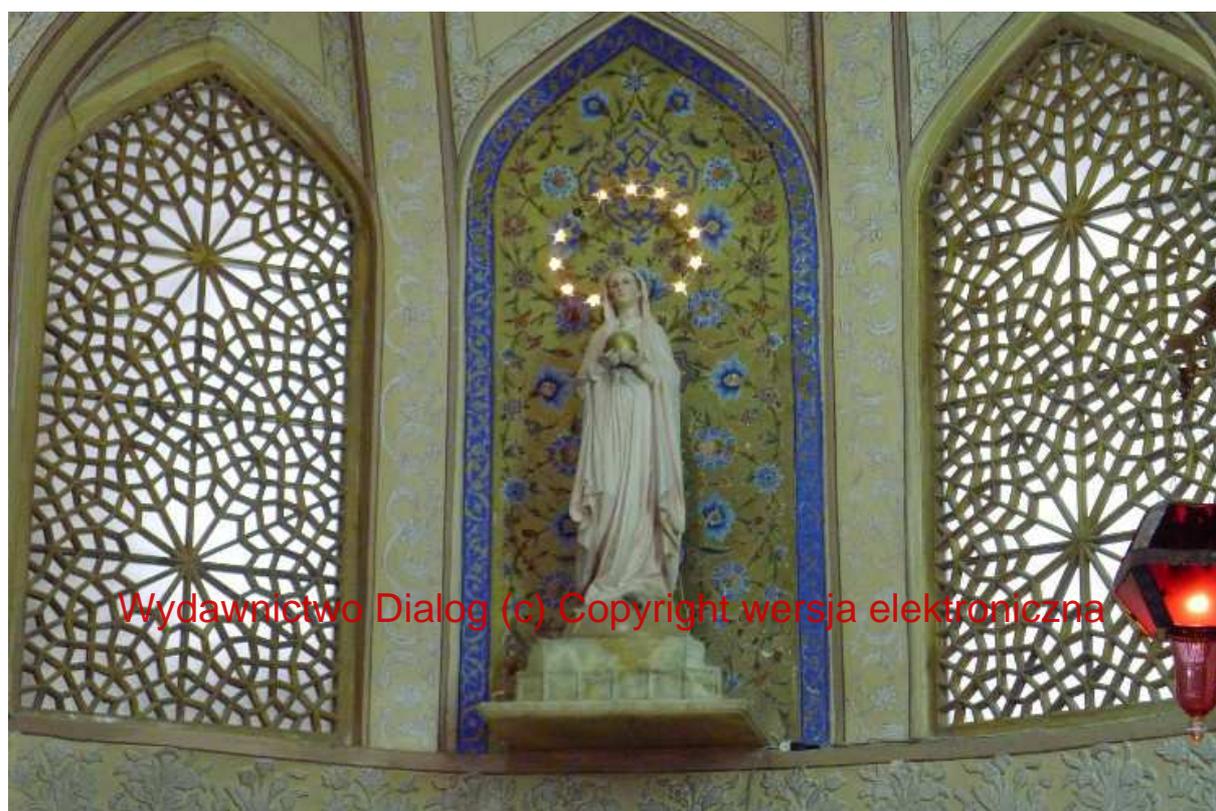
*Let me express deep respect, regard and gratitude for the Hosts and participants in the seminar. I am happy that there are people thanks to*

*whom the Isfahanian episode of Wandering Children will be saved  
from sinking into oblivion.*

*Alina Sobczak*

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A letter written in reply to the invitation to the seminar “Among Friends. The 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Arrival of Polish Refugees in Iran”, organized by the Department of Iranian Studies at the University of Warsaw on 7 May 2012.



A figure of Virgin Mary in the Chapel of Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, where Polish children prayed. Isfahan, 2012. (Photo by Jolanta Sierakowska-Dyndo)

“No-one can see a single negative point in the history of the two countries’ relations, especially in five centuries of official contacts. Accordingly, we can say that the warm reception of Polish Christian fellows is the brightest part of this common history”.

*(Turning Point in Polish-Iranian Bilateral Relations)*

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