

Background to the Establishment of the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Fund in Australia

From the Polish Carpathian Brigade which fought with Australian Armed Forces against the German Army in Tobruk, Libya and evacuated from the Soviet Union on 3 May 1942, the 2nd Polish Corps in Palestine under the command of General W. Anders as part of the 8th British Army, was officially formed. At the same time, a fund was established for returning combatants, invalids, widows and orphans. The purpose of this fund was for their financial support in anticipation of their return to Poland after the war. However, after the war, Poland was under Soviet rule so Polish soldiers, who fought for Poland's freedom, could not return to a communist Poland.

Each serving member of the Polish Armed Forces, from the rank of Private to General, contributed 5% of their salary towards this fund for the duration of their service in the Polish Armed Forces until their discharge or retirement.

At the end of the war in May 1945, the fund contained over £220,000 and was administered by the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association in London, England. As the 2nd Polish Corps was a part of the 8th British Army, the British Government wanted to take possession of the funds and the Polish Communist Regime also wanted to take possession of the funds. Both Governments litigated for these funds but lost. The funds were referred to as "The Italian Sums" (Sumy Włoskie"). The funds were transferred to the newly established Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association to support Polish soldiers and their families now displaced.

The Polish Servicemen who chose to remain in England were provided with opportunities to learn various trades for example tailors, watchmakers, draftsmen, book keeping and many others. Specialist schools were established for Polish servicemen and women. Those servicemen and women, who commenced tertiary and post graduate studies before the outbreak of war, were provided opportunities to complete their studies in the England or Ireland. In Edinburgh, Scotland, a Polish medical faculty was established at the University of Edinburgh. These education and training opportunities were subsidised by the fund. Each Polish Ex-Serviceman was paid £20 per month which was enough to pay for lodgings, food and other modest expenses.

In the years 1946 and after, those Polish families who were deported to Siberia, began to return to Poland. These families were mainly mothers with small children. The fund administrators in London organised parcels of food, medicines and clothing for them. Children also received special parcels.

The displaced Servicemen and Servicewomen were resettled in various countries around the world in groups. There were still monies left in the fund.

Polish Servicemen and their families were offered opportunities to resettle in the UK, Canada, USA, New Zealand, South America and Australia. In 1948/49 approximately 3,000 Polish Servicemen, predominately "Polish Rats of Tobruk", resettled in Tasmania and were engaged in construction of the hydroelectric scheme. Other Polish Servicemen resettled in Australia's mainland and were also engaged in the construction of the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme and the Cotter Dam in Canberra.

Once the construction contracts were completed, Polish Ex-servicemen relocated to Australia's capital cities. They craved the company of other Poles but there were no places to meet or to engage with other Polish families.

In the early 1950s the Polish Ex-Servicemen and Ex-Servicewomen began to form the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association branch and sub-branches in Australia. In 1953 the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association sub-branch was established in Canberra.

In 1954 at a convention of members of the Polish Ex-Servicemen's association sub-branches in Australia, it was voted to move the head branch from Sydney to Canberra.

In 1957, the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association Headquarters in London, England provided funding assistance (£5,000) to the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association head branch in Canberra to build premises to meet and gather. Canberra was chosen for the premises as the land, in the city centre was provided free-of charge by the ACT Government.

The head Branch of the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association borrowed additional funds to build premises which could be utilised by the whole Polish community in Canberra. The borrowed funds paid mainly for materials and specialised work. Polish Ex-Servicemen provided most of the labour and were unpaid volunteers. The wives of these Polish Ex-Servicemen provided assistance and support by making and bringing meals to sustain the Polish Ex-servicemen unpaid volunteer labourers.

Once the premises were completed, a liquor licence was obtained and these premises become known as the Polish Ex-Servicemen's club. Several years later, a poker machine licence was obtained.

This club was profitable mainly due to the fact that the bar was staffed through unpaid volunteer labour, by members of the Association. These unpaid volunteers often worked over 12 hours per day to support their club.

Some of the profits were dedicated to charitable organisations: Polish, multicultural and Australian. Monies were dedicated to Legacy, the building of the War Veterans Home (late 1960s an amount of \$4,000 was donated), and additionally, funds were dedicated to the furnishing of one of the rooms in the War Veterans Home.

The Polish Ex-Servicemen's Club donated funds to support:

- the building of an orphanage and Polish church in Marayong in Sydney
- the building of a Polish club premises in Ashfield, Sydney
- gave their time to support other Australian charities in particular, the selling of poppies each year leading up to Remembrance Day. Amounts raised each year were in excess of \$10,000.
- ran a Polish School each Saturday morning to teach Polish language, Polish culture, Polish history, Polish traditions and Polish folklore, including singing and dancing; and
- funded the planting of a dedicated rose in the Parliament House Rose garden.

In the early 1980s, Land Lease made an offer to the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association to take over the site to build a new multi-story building whereby the Polish Ex-Servicemen's association would be offered the ground floor space to use for their club. A lease was provided for 99 years.

But due to the decentralisation of Canberra's government offices and establishment of major shopping centers in Canberra's satellite cities from the 1980s onward, the patronage of the club and also RSL Club next door, started to diminish. In the 2000s with the added strain of limited parking, patronage further diminished and caused the eventual closure of the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Club and RSL Club next door.

In 2009, the decision was made by the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association to close the club permanently, and sell the lease. The sale raised \$1,350,000. According to the Association's Constitution, this money and all other assets are the property of the Branch of Polish Ex-Servicemen's association which transferred from Canberra to Brisbane in approx. 2007. The Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association in Brisbane continues operation and support many charitable organisations: Polish, multi-cultural and Australian.

Unfortunately, a group of our ex members, who are neither non-combatants nor ex-servicemen, who have never actively supported the efforts in maintaining the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association, were accepted as full members as a courtesy due to their Polish heritage. These ex members are staking a claim for the monies despite the fact that they have never contributed their time, efforts, or provided their support to the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association. They have however taken advantage of our courtesy and taken advantage of our hospitality and good will for decades. In addition, they fail to recognise that some of the funding for the premises was provided by the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Association Headquarters in London, England and the balance was provided through borrowings and unpaid volunteer labour of the Polish Ex-Servicemen in Canberra.

Currently, these ex members are costing us great stress and well significant costs in legal fees approximately \$200,000 to date, which could be utilised more productively for the Polish Ex-Servicemen and their families, the Polish community, and other charitable organisations.

Should the sacrifices of Polish Servicemen who died, and the contribution of Polish Ex-Servicemen who fought in the honour of their country on land, on the sea, and in the air, be discarded through the illegal acts of the ex members who joined our organisation through our courtesy and now are seeking to squander monies that they did not earn, or help to earn?

*****This document is verified by the following members of the Polish 2nd corps, based in Canberra ACT, who paid the above detailed contributions from 1942 to 1948 for the care of invalids, widows, and orphans through various charitable organisations:***

***Bernard Zdzislaw Skarbek, OAM
2nd Polish Corps
3rd Carpathian Infantry Division – Signals
(from 1942 to 1948)***



***Henryk Franciszek Kustra
2nd Polish Corps – HQ
Army Air Control Support Unit
(from 1942 to 1948)***