

1,419 Enslaved in Russia Find Mexico Haven

BY STANLEY JOHNSTON.

[Chicago Tribune Press Service.]

(Map and picture on page 6.)

LEON, Guanajuato, Mexico, Sept. 14.—Far from their native land but safely distant also from its scourge of terror, 1,419 exiled Poles have found a war time haven in an unusual colony founded for them in central Mexico.

Tho their lives now are relatively serene, they still are suffering reactions from their slavery in Russia, from exposure, starvation, and brutal mistreatment, from sinister disappearances of their kin, and from the ordeal of traveling more than the distance around the globe—some of them nearly 50,000 miles—to get here.

Relatives in U. S.

Many have relatives in the United States. Countess Tyszkiewicz, only member of nobility in the group of middle class exiles, is the sister of a frequent Chicago visitor, Prince Drucki-Lubecki of New York. With her are her four young sons, matured beyond their years by experiences that included helping their mother dig with bare hands a grave for their father when he died in Russia from the rigors of their enforced journey.

Survivors of that terrible trip now live together in thankful contentment in an abandoned hacienda comprising 260 acres made available to them by the Mexican government. This refuge, Colonia Santa Rosa, lies about five miles from the city of Leon and about 250 miles north of Mexico City.

It is one of several such camps established thruout the world for exiled Poles. The Poles at Santa Rosa were seized by Russian troops who invaded Poland in September, 1939, in the rear of Polish armies fighting a German invasion of their western border. Taken to Russia, they were imprisoned in concentration camps and compelled to labor for the soviets. After many months they were released and permitted to depart, if they could, to a place of safety.

264 Orphans in Colony.

About 700 exiles reached the Mexican camp on July 1, 1943, and approximately the same number arrived last November. Today there are 217 men, 547 women, 253 boys, and 423 girls. Among the children are 264 orphans, each marking a family tragedy, and a number born in the colony.

Expenses of the camp are shared by several sources, but all the money for its operation comes from the United States. Thru credits advanced by the United States government, the Polish government in exile meets the cost of feeding, housing and managing the colony. The Polish-American war relief council of Chicago bears the expense of clothing, health and instruction. And the Catholic Welfare association of New York provides money for entertainment and cultural programs.

The exiles' surroundings are adequate but not luxurious. They live in the one story dwellings, the usual patio in the center, that

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1,419 ENSLAVED BY RUSSIA FIND HAVEN IN MEXICO

Aided by Contributions of Chicago Poles.

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sprawl over the acreage. Crowded together, an entire family or group of three or four in one room, they sleep on folding camp cots and have little privacy and only the barest equipment.

Served Army Style.

Communal meals are provided. All the food—abundant and wholesome—is cooked in one kitchen and is dished out, army style, to individuals or heads of families, who take it to their rooms and eat with their groups.

The colony has a school, including kindergarten, grammar, and high school classes, in which five nuns from Chicago help with the teaching. The exiles cultivate small gardens, tend a few community owned cows to provide milk for children, and publish a daily multigraphed newspaper containing radioed news. They have a hospital staffed by their own doctors and nurses, and their own religious leaders conduct services in the old hacienda chapel.

Those who perform community work, such as preparing food, cleaning, and repairing, are paid the prevailing Mexican wage rate, about 3 to 4 pesos a day. A peso is worth about 20 cents. Others, unable to work because of infirmities or lack of jobs, receive 10 pesos a month to enable them to make occasional small purchases.

Ask to Visit U. S.

Except for the issuance of passes to make one day visits to this city of 59,000, the exiles are confined to the camp under terms of Mexico's permission for their stay here. Neither may they accept employment outside the camp. Some have sought to visit the United States on the basis of guarantees by their American relatives that the exiles would not become public charges, but none of the colonists with whom I talked knew of any such case being successful.

Terms of their acceptance here provided that the Poles may stay for the duration of the war or until such time as they can return to Poland and that, meantime, they may not move to another country or become citizens of Mexico or of any other country.

But the exiles have no desire to emigrate. Their fond ambition is to be able to return some day to their old homes in a liberated Poland. Meantime, they are so grateful for deliverance from the chaos in Europe that they have no complaints about the minor discomforts of their present existence. The suffering they endured and the greater miseries they escaped are still too fresh in their memory to permit discontent with any shortcomings of their haven.

Traveled 45,000 Miles.

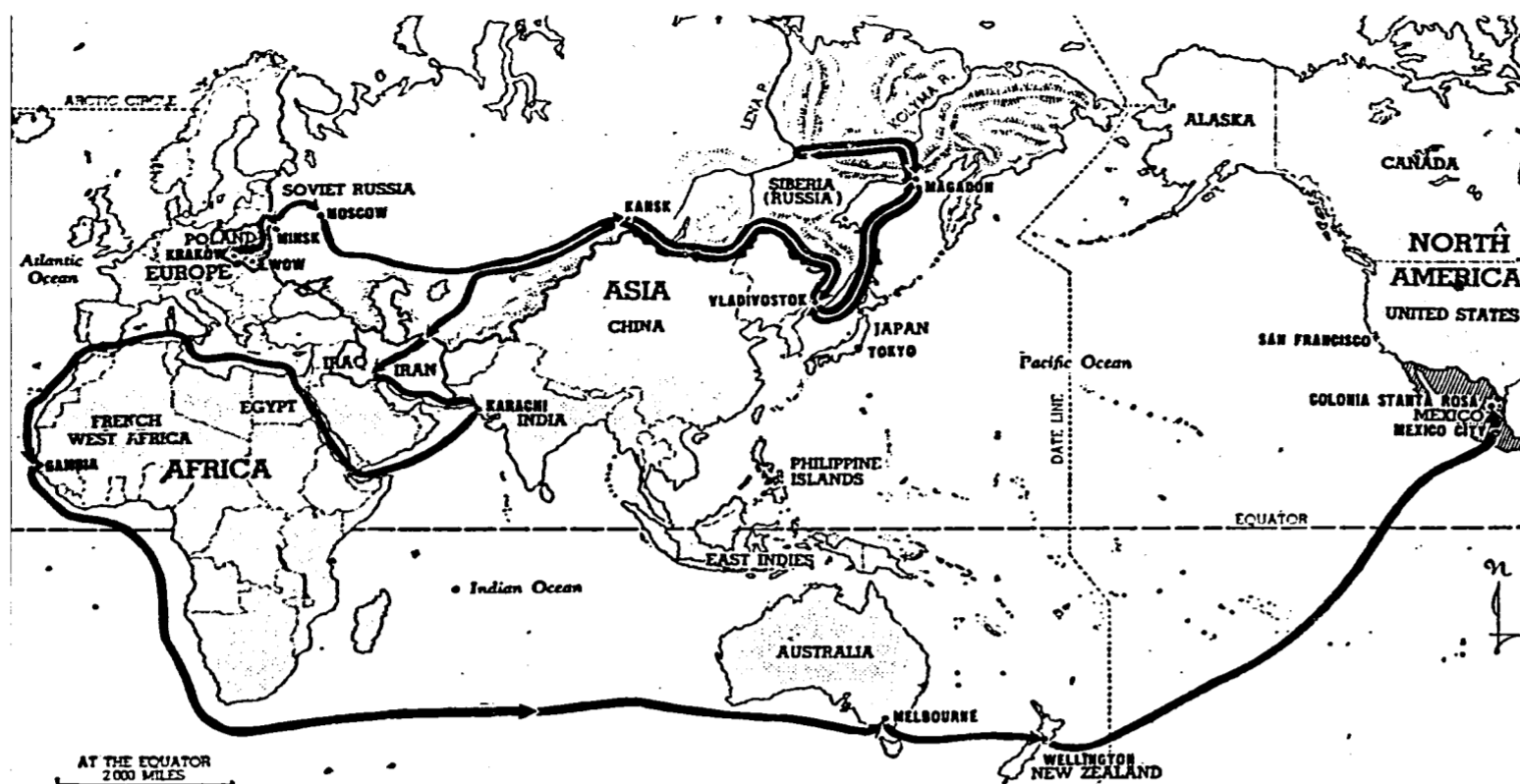
The terrible experiences of Josef Plebanek in Siberia and on his circuitous journey of more than 45,000 miles between his home in Poland and the quiet safety of the Santa Rosa colony will serve as an example of what many of the Santa Rosa Poles have withstood.

Plebanek, 47, is in charge of food storage at the camp. A former soldier in the Polish army, he had fought against the Germans in World War I and against the Russians in the Polish war of independence of 1919-20. He was farming a soldier's land grant of 95 acres and operating a small restaurant in Stolpce, near the Polish-Russian frontier, when the Soviets invaded Poland Sept. 17, 1939.

"They surged into Stolpce at 4 a. m. and began shooting all Poles in uniform—soldiers and police," Plebanek recalled. "A Polish soldier was thrown under a Russian tank and crushed to death. The

Route to Slavery and Then to Freedom for Poles Exiled by Russians

(Story starts on page 1.)



Broken line traces tortuous route of 1,419 Poles from their native land, first into the slavery of life in Russian Siberia, and thence back thru Iran, to India, around Africa, to Australia, and finally to haven in Mexico.



Freed from concentration camp in Russia, a Pole in rags is pictured about to cross frontier to freedom in Iran. The picture was taken in 1943.

Reds made a house to house search and arrested officials, professional men, land owners and other educated persons. When all the jails were full, the Reds used school houses and other public buildings to house their prisoners. The congestion was relieved by transporting trainload after trainload of Poles across the Russian border to Minsk."

Polish sources have estimated that 1,500,000 Poles were deported to Russia by the Soviets.

Disguised as Woman.

"Convinced that I would be shot if I were caught, inasmuch as I was an ex-soldier and landowner, I disguised myself as a peasant woman and escaped the Reds for a time," Plebanek continued.

"The Soviets were amazed at the well stocked stores in Stolpce, a city of 12,000. At first they offered their rubles, worthless in Poland, for watches, clothes, food and whatever they fancied. But soon they gave up that pretense and resorted to looting stores and homes to get what they wanted. In a few days stores

were entirely denuded of stocks.

"While the Reds were there, my brother and his two children came to Stolpce from Krakow, in southwest Poland, which he had fled to escape the invading Germans. But we discovered that while the Germans were harsher on the Jews than the Poles, the Russians were reversing that attitude. My brother decided it would be less dangerous if he returned to his home in Nazi occupied territory. Still in my disguise, I assisted him and his children across country to Lwow where he entrained for Krakow.

To Opera in Nighties.

"In Lwow one of the Reds' first acts was to order a performance of the opera. Red officials and their women attended in newly acquired dress clothes, to which many of them were unaccustomed. Some of the women, apparently seeing formal attire for the first time, were misled by the low cut of some of the clothes and were wearing nightgowns.

"When I returned to Stolpce I was pointed out to the Reds by a Jewish former neighbor and was immediately arrested and taken to Minsk. The Soviets grilled me for days trying to compel me to admit my identity, but I insisted I was

my brother, altho I learned my neighbor had given them full particulars about me.

"The Reds used a variety of brutal methods to try to break me down. One of their acts was to fire a pistol close to my ear unexpectedly. They ruptured my right eardrum. They beat me, knocked out my front teeth with a pistol butt, and said that if I didn't admit my identity I would be shot. But they added that if I did admit my identity, as a former soldier and landowner, they would shoot me anyway.

Loaded on Trains.

"Our food rations became steadily worse until we were receiving only a little bread and soup. Finally we were loaded onto trains, 2,500 to a train. There were about five Russians being sent into exile for every Pole among the prisoners, and the Russian prisoners were treated as badly as were the Poles.

"The train I was on went to Moscow, where it stopped in a suburb for two days while our captors decided what to do with us. Then we were started on a 44 day trip to the Siberian port of Vladivostok, across the width of Russia.

"We were jammed together in open cattle cars. Often we went without water for several days and frequently our only food was dry

bread. Many of the prisoners were ill, but no medical care was provided. Sometimes the sick and starving battered at the car walls in frenzied desperation for lack of care, but no help was given them despite their suffering. The Russian prisoners, outnumbering the Poles, fought us in gangs and took our few possessions. We could only endure the misery, for escape was impossible. Machine guns were manned on top of each car, and the train was illuminated at night with searchlights.

4,000,000 in Exile.

"At Vladivostok 8,500 prisoners were herded aboard an aged steamer which took us north to the port of Magadan. Then we were taken overland to a large concentration camp at the headwaters of the Kolyma river in the heart of Siberia. In this area 4,000,000 exiled Russians and many foreigners were being held captive and forced to work on Soviet developments.

"Among these exiles are Communists who fled what they considered were distasteful practices in capitalistic countries and had expected to find an Eden in Russia. But there they were with us, exiled to Siberia for the rest of their lives or at least long terms. In the camp with me were three Americans

who had gone to Russia in the late '20s.

"The Russian exiles included a number of Soviet soldiers who had refused to go to the Finnish front. One was a tankman who had been accused of deliberately freezing his fingers to evade front line duty against the Finns. He had been ordered shot but the sentence was commuted to 10 years in Siberia."

Many Former Officials.

"I saw many once important Red officials who had been banished to Siberia after the 1936 purge in Russia. Three whose names once were noted in Moscow were Isidorov, commissar of the NKWD, communist form of the Czarist OGPU [secret police], which operated the entire prison labor project; Nikishov, district chief of the settlement, and Drobkin, commandant of the camp where I was held."

The captive labor, Plebanek explained, was employed to work a new Soviet mining development, build air fields, and to construct a road more than 1,500 miles long to connect the Lena river region with the port of Magadan on the sea of Okhotsk. He said the Kolyma region, where this extensive work is being carried out by the exiles, is more highly developed than nearby Alaska.

For two and a half years, Plebanek said, he slaved in Siberia, under constant mistreatment, often with not enough to eat, and with only cotton quilted clothes to protect him against the cold and winds that sometimes blew men down. During this time 133 Polish men and two Polish women died in the concentration camp. Plebanek had a list of the names of these victims.

But freedom was near for him. In August, 1942, Russia needed whatever help she could get to stem the tide of Germans who had turned against her. Plebanek was told he could join the Polish army to fight on the side of Russia. Back he went by steamer to Vladivostok, then by train across Russia and to a Polish camp in Iran.

Had Lost 70 Pounds.

There he was found unfit for army service, like so many of the Poles who had suffered thru Russian captivity. When arrested in Poland he had weighed 160 pounds, but his weight had dropped to 90.

During the following several months that Plebanek remained in Iran, he met and married an exiled Polish widow, who now is with him at the Santa Rosa camp.

She and her son, a boy then 15, were seized in Nieswiez, Poland, by the Soviets and taken to Minsk in June, 1941. They were loaded into cattle trucks, about 40 women to a truck, and taken to Kansk, far into the Russian interior, where the widow and her son were forced to toil on a farm.

They were released a year later, at the time Russia freed thousands of Poles to permit the men to fight the Germans. The woman and her son were among about 75,000 Poles who succeeded in making the diffi-

the Polish army now fighting with the allies in Italy.

Like other exiles at Santa Rosa, the Plebaneks at first had difficulty becoming accustomed to the security of their new surroundings. For a long time it seemed unbelievable to them that they were not imprisoned or in momentary danger of being killed or enslaved, that they need not worry about the sources of their next meal, and where they would sleep.

Many of the new arrivals, especially children, were slow to give up their habit of hoarding bits of food against the uncertainty of the future. In pitiful remembrance of their sufferings, children would stow away under their mattresses a piece of bread or a potato. Even nurses at first hid extra bandages instead of returning them to store cabinets. But gradually they realized they have reached a sanctuary where they will have a place to sleep and food to eat today, tomorrow, and the next day.

cult and dangerous trek to freedom in Iran.

The widow told of exchanging a long guarded silk dress for 140 pounds of wheat which provided her and her son with food on the journey to Iran. Others who made the trip were less fortunate. Tho freed by the Russians, they had been deprived of everything except the clothes they wore, which often were only rags, and their plight was pitiful, even tho they had their liberty again.

Helped to America.

Following their marriage in Iran, Plebanek and his wife were among the exiles aided by the Polish government to make the long journey to America. Their course took them from Iran to Iraq, then to India, thru the Mediterranean to West Africa, then to Australia, to New Zealand, and finally across the vast Pacific to Mexico. Mrs. Plebanek's son had left them in Iran to join