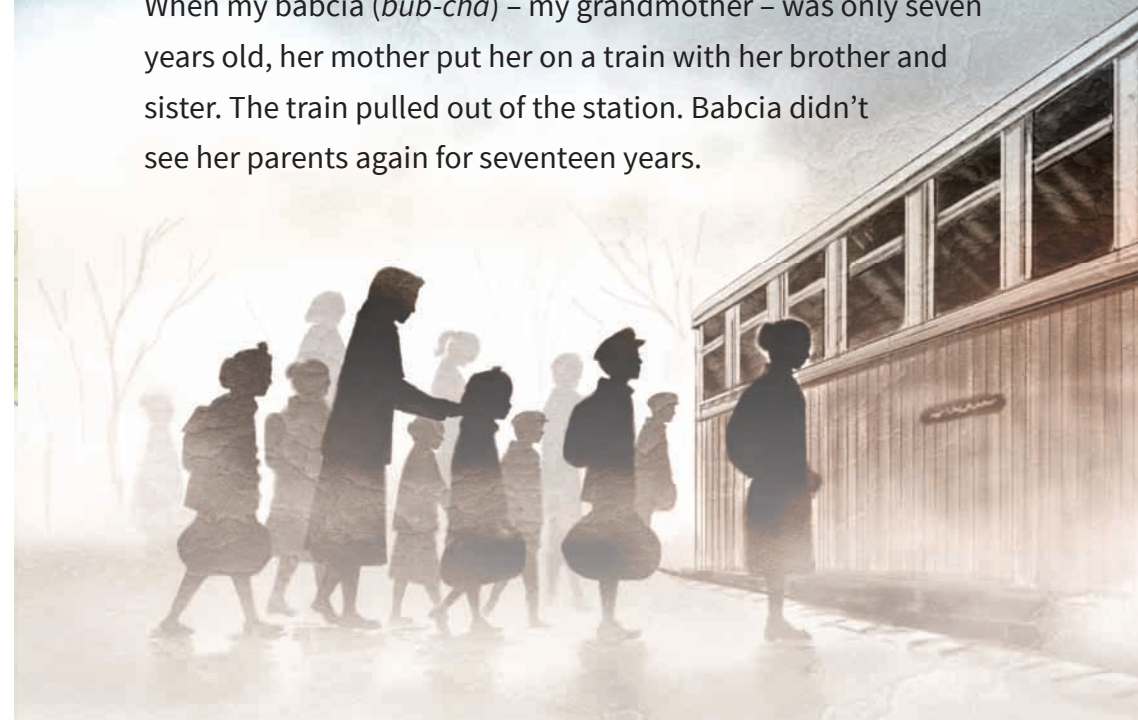


The Polish Refugee Children

– Adelphi Zawada talks to Ali MacKisack –

PART 1

When my *babcia* (*bub-cha*) – my grandmother – was only seven years old, her mother put her on a train with her brother and sister. The train pulled out of the station. *Babcia* didn't see her parents again for seventeen years.



This happened during the Second World War. The **USSR** had **invaded** eastern Poland. The invading soldiers made *Babcia*'s family leave their home. They were sent to one of the many work camps in the USSR, along with over a million other Polish people and their children. Hunger, sickness, and overwork killed thousands of them.

Going South to Iran

Babcia's family managed to stay alive and keep together. When the Polish people were allowed to leave the camps, they travelled south to get away from the freezing cold. The journey was difficult and took a very long time.

In the south, the family felt safer, but they had nowhere to live. It was also very hard to find work, and they never had enough food. Many children were travelling on to **orphanages** in Iran (then called Persia). Babcia's parents decided to send Babcia and her brother and sister there as well so they wouldn't die from hunger. That was why Babcia's mother put the three children on the train.

My dziadzia (*jah-jah*) – my grandfather – also travelled to an orphanage in Iran. His story is different from Babcia's story because both his parents died in the USSR and his youngest brother died in Iran.

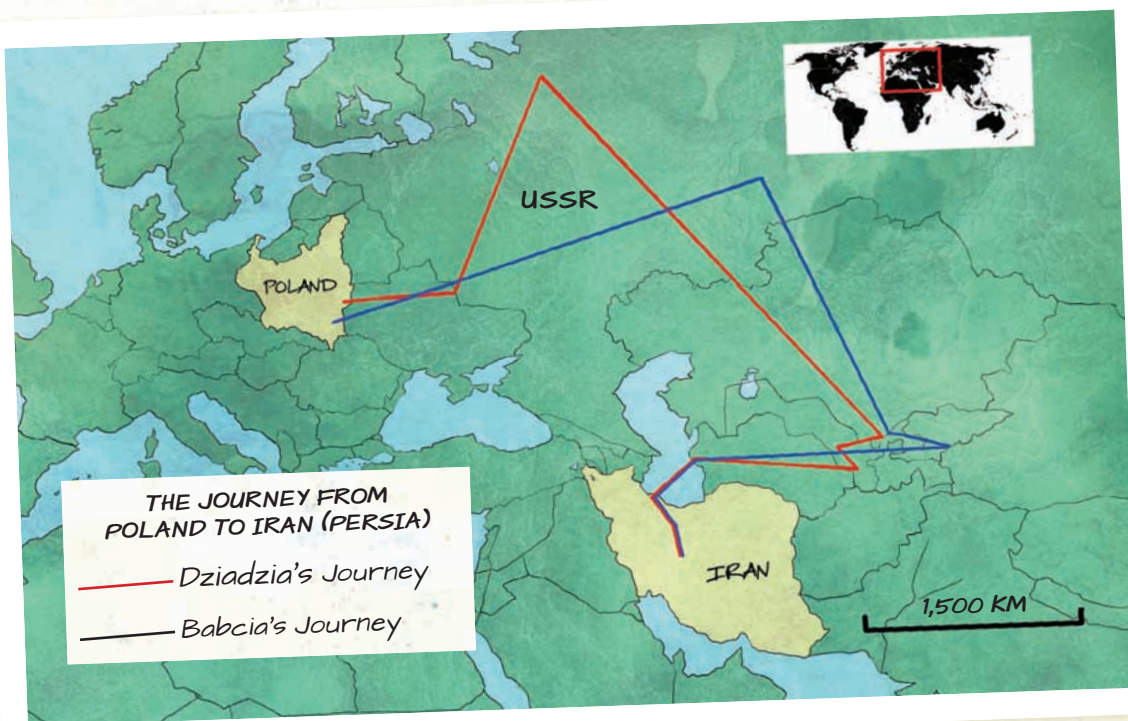


Polish refugee children arriving in Wellington

The Journey to New Zealand

Babcia and Dziadzia lived in Iran for over two years. They started learning to read and write. Sometimes the children were taken swimming, but Babcia was not allowed to go because she was often sick with malaria.

Several countries said they would take some of the Polish children from the orphanages. New Zealand was one of them. Babcia and Dziadzia came here on a ship with over seven hundred other Polish children. Babcia was ten and Dziadzia was eleven. Those children were New Zealand's first **official** group of **refugees**.



Polish refugee children being welcomed by the New Zealand Prime Minister

The Camp in Pahiatua

The Polish children and their caregivers went to live in the Polish Children's Camp in Pahiatua. For the first time in their lives, Babcia and Dziadzia went to school every day. Their teachers were also refugees from the camp. All their lessons were in the Polish language because everyone believed that, after the war, they would go back home to Poland.

However, when the war ended, the soldiers from the USSR did not leave Poland. The country was not free, so the children and the adults who were looking after them were invited to stay in New Zealand.



Babcia and Dziadzia at the Pahiatua camp



After the War

Babcia and Dziadzia spent three years in the camp. Then they left to go to high school. At first, they felt different. They spoke very little English, so sometimes they found it hard to understand their teachers. However, most New Zealanders were kind and supportive, and my grandparents settled in very well in this country. In 1963, Babcia and Dziadzia were married.

After the war, Babcia's parents returned to Poland and started searching for their children through the Red Cross. When they discovered that Babcia and her brother and sister were in New Zealand, they wanted to come here, too. After a lot of difficulty, they were able to join their children in 1959. In 1967, they became New Zealand citizens.



Babcia with her parents in New Zealand



Me looking at a photo album with Babcia

PART 2

Passing On the Polish Ways

Babcia and Dziadzia, my dad's parents, have lived here now for more than fifty years. In lots of ways, my family is just like any other Kiwi family. However, like many people who come to live here, Babcia and Dziadzia still do some things the way they did in their home country. They have passed some of these **traditions** on to their children and grandchildren.

Dziadzia, Dad, and me looking at an old family prayer book ■



Painted Polish Easter eggs ■

A lot of the Polish things we do are part of special celebrations. For example, on Christmas Eve, we sing Polish carols and have Polish Christmas food. At Easter, we paint real eggs and make Easter baskets, and on Easter Monday, we have a huge water fight. It's an old Polish tradition that goes back hundreds of years. We also sing and dance at festivals and on special occasions. My grandparents speak to each other in Polish. My brothers and I can speak and understand a bit, too.



■ *Mazurek, a traditional Polish Easter cake*

My brothers and me in traditional Polish costumes ■



Part Kiwi, Part Polish

When they are young, a lot of children from Polish families go to Polish clubs or Saturday "schools", where they learn Polish words, songs, and games. But we also learn a lot just by being with the family and listening and joining in. My mum is a third-generation Kiwi, but she can speak Polish and she knows a lot about Polish **culture**. She says that being part of the Polish community is like having a window you can look through to get a wider view of the world.

I love having a part of me that's Polish. My teachers never seem to get my last name exactly right, but I like it that my name is unusual.

My friends also think it's pretty cool that I know Polish songs and dances and some Polish language. I do all the ordinary things that my friends do, but I get to do those other Polish things as well. I hope I can pass some of my Polish life on to my own children one day (like "Sto lat!" – the special song you sing on someone's birthday).

Different, but the Same

Babcia says that one happy memory from her childhood is from when she was about four years old. She was sitting under a tall Christmas tree. She remembers looking up and seeing candles, colourful decorations, and walnuts wrapped in silver paper.

Maybe that's why she has a huge walnut tree in her garden. My brothers, my cousins, and I all love climbing that tree. Every year, we help Babcia and Dziadzia collect walnuts for our family and friends to share.

My grandparents are different from other grandparents because of the way they came to New Zealand and because of the Polish way they still do some things. But they are also just like grandparents everywhere. They love welcoming their family and friends into their home, and there are always cakes and biscuits to share – and walnuts if you're lucky!



My family visiting Babcia and Dziadzia

Glossary

culture: the customs, beliefs, and traditions of a particular people

invaded: sent soldiers into another country to take control of it

official: approved by the government or by someone who has the power to make decisions

orphanages: places that care for children who don't have parents to look after them

refugees: people who can't safely return to their own countries

traditions: things that have been done for a long time

USSR: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (also known as the Soviet Union), a country that existed between 1922 and 1991. It was made up of several smaller states that are now independent countries. The government of the USSR was in Russia.



Babcia and Dziadzia's walnut tree



The Polish Refugee Children

by Ali MacKisack

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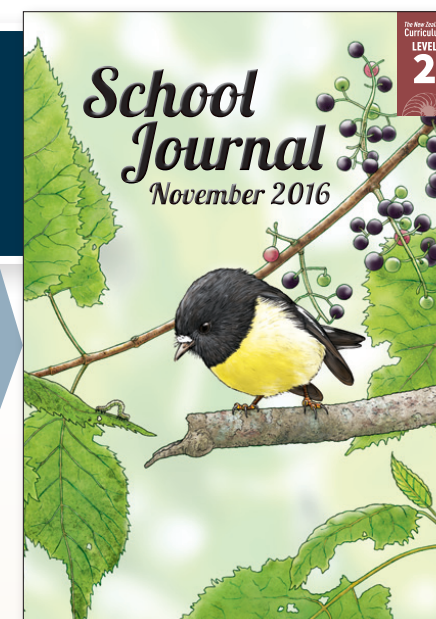
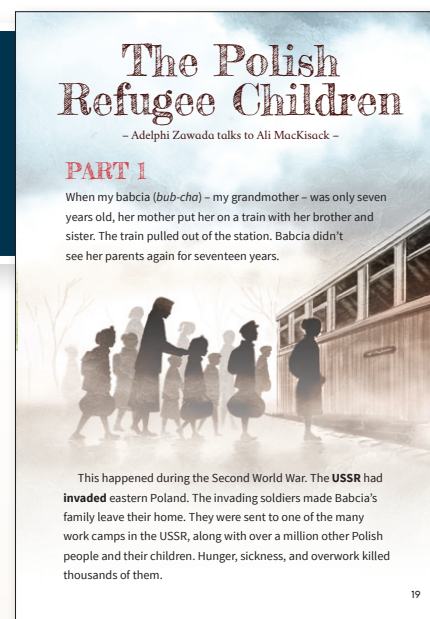
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Published 2016 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

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ISBN 978 0 478 16771 9 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editors: David Chadwick and Isaac Snoswell
Designer: Liz Tui Morris
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui, Ross Calman, and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 2 NOVEMBER 2016

Curriculum learning areas	English Social Sciences
Reading year level	Year 4
Keywords	change, citizenship, community, conflict, culture, family, grandparents, heritage, immigration, Iran, loss, Pahiatua, Persia, Poland, Polish Children's Camp, refugees, Second World War, separation, survival, traditions, USSR, World War Two