

National History Challenge 2009

'Triumph over Adversity'

Despite harsh post-war immigration policies and strong Anti- Semitic feeling Polish Jews, displaced by World War Two triumphed over adversity to make a new life in Australia

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Dedicated to the memory of my
Grandfather, who passed away earlier this year

Hitler's brutality ripped apart Europe in the 1940's but no country was more greatly affected than Poland. By the end of the war, 90% of the Jewish population in Poland had been killed by the Nazis. Those who did survive were scarred by their experiences. My grandfather, Walter Ziegler, was one of those Jews, who having survived the war, immigrated to Australia only to encounter more difficulties and new kinds of discrimination. His story is one filled with adversity but ultimately his courage and determination prevailed, and he triumphed in establishing a new life in Australia.

Walter Ziegler (or Cygler as was his birth name) was born in a small town in Poland called Olkusz. His father owned a very successful business and a small house where he lived with his wife and six children.¹ On September 1st 1939, when Walter was only eleven years old, Germany invaded Poland and the family's life began to fall apart. From the beginning, the Nazis put in place demeaning rules targeted towards the Jewish population which numbered about 3.3 million or 10% of the Polish population. For instance, in the first month after their arrival the Nazis established laws that all Jews could be selected for manual labour at anytime and their Synagogues were to be destroyed. This was only the beginning of the problems that the Jews faced. Three months later, virtually all freedom was taken from the Jews. They were contained by a curfew and forced to wear indentifying stars on their clothes. Jews were also not permitted into some major cities in Poland, their bank accounts were frozen, and they were forced to register for ownership of all their property.²

These acts of humiliation were minor compared to the horrors that lay ahead. During 1940 and 1941 mass ghettos and death camps were erected all over the country. It is hard to imagine the conditions people faced in the camps and ghettos. Jack Oran, a holocaust survivor described his experiences this way: "Everyone worked so hard, got beaten up...and came back to the camp... In the morning, sixty percent of the six people in the bunk did not wake up. The other forty percent went over the pockets of the dead people to find a piece of bread"³ Everyday, inmates were faced with the grim reality that they, like so many others, could become the next fatalities of the Nazis and that help might never come. Walter managed to survive against all the odds in the Olkusz ghetto and nine concentration camps. He described one incident in particular where he was working and from out of nowhere one of the Nazi guards beat him over the head and he was unconscious. When asked what he did next he replied "Once I woke up, I just got up and began to work again, If you were sick or injured they shot you, so you had no choice".⁴

By the end of the war nearly three million Polish Jews had perished under the Nazi reign including Walter's entire family; his parents, three sisters and two brothers⁵. Most who did survive the horrors felt they had no other choice but to immigrate to another country. These refugees lived in temporary facilities known as 'Displaced Persons Camps' until they could migrate to a safer and more democratic country. Walter was about my age when he was moved to one of these camps. Figure 1 shows children at a Displaced Persons Camp desperately in need of a new beginning.⁶

¹ Interview with Lily Ziegler

² <http://www.humboldt.edu/~rescuers/book/Makuch/conditions.html> Retrieved: 9/9/09

³ <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/294028.html> Retrieved: 9/9/09

⁴ Shoah Foundation Institution Video – Interview with Walter Ziegler

⁵ Interview with Lily Ziegler

⁶ <http://vrroom.naa.gov.au/records/?ID=18974> Retrieved 9/9/09



Figure 1: Displaced Persons Camp

While there, Walter, with help from the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), decided to immigrate to Australia in the hopes of starting a new life. Simply surviving the war after all the hardship and suffering was a major triumph, but Walter, like so many others, showed great spirit to willingly immigrate to a new country, without family or the native tongue.

Australia was one of several countries that accepted refugees although much of Australia's immigration policy had to be changed first. Even before the war Australia had a complex system of immigration. Known as the 'White Australia Policy' this scheme was designed to limit the number of non-British immigrants to Australia thus maintaining its British heritage. However, this policy was threatened early in the war when Australia was attacked by the Japanese in Darwin. This threat to national security prompted a revised immigration scheme, headed by the newly appointed Minister of Immigration, Arthur Calwell. The slogan for the campaign was 'populate or perish'. The idea of the new scheme was to increase the population of Australia and thus have a sizeable army in case another country ever tried to invade. Prime Minister Ben Chifley explained the rationale: "A powerful enemy looked hungrily toward Australia. In tomorrow's gun flash that threat could come again. We must populate Australia as rapidly as we can before someone else decides to populate in for us." For the millions of displaced refugees across Europe and Asia in need of a place to call home, this plan could not have come at a better time. The 'populate or perish' proposal stated that there should be a 2% annual population increase. Only 1% could be accounted for by natural means which meant that there was a need for about 70,000 immigrants per year to fill the quota.^{7 8}

Despite these high immigration goals, the Australian government couldn't let go of their original 'White Australia Policy' and this made it difficult to fulfil its population quota. The government claimed that the Australian population would have one migrant for every ten British people and schemes were introduced to aid them with free or assisted travel to Australia from England⁹. The

⁷ Collins, J. 1988, *Migrant Hands in a Distant Land*, Pluto Press Australia, NSW pg 20

⁸ Lack, J. and Templeton, J. *Bold Experiment*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne pg 4

⁹ Collins, J. 1988, *Migrant Hands in a Distant Land*, Pluto Press Australia, NSW pg 22

people under this scheme became known as 'the ten pound pomes'¹⁰. This pro-British mindset seemed to run through the Australian population and there was considerable anti-foreign and anti-'reffero' feeling during this time. Figure 2 is a classic example of a cartoon from that era depicting public opinion of refugees¹¹. This discrimination was yet another adversity refugees were forced to overcome upon Immigration.



Figure 2: The Smith's Weekly Cartoon of Immigrants

Focused on populating Australia as rapidly as possible and unable to attract sufficient British immigrants, Australia turned their attention to the millions of displaced persons, like Walter, scattered in camps all around Europe. When the Immigration Minister, Arthur Calwell, paid a visit to Europe in 1947 he immediately accepted 4,000 displaced persons into Australia and another 12,000 every subsequent year, with shipping supplied by the IRO.¹² Calwell expressed his motives for taking in the displaced persons as he described them as 'an ideal source of immigration who will fit smoothly into our way of life and who will help to meet Australia's labour shortages in the fields of industry and agriculture.'¹³

When the Australian government announced that they would accept displaced persons 'without discrimination as to race or religion'¹⁴ the Jews most likely felt that they finally could have a chance of a new beginning. Originally the Australian government dishonoured this agreement. They basically stopped Jews from coming into the country and were accused of 'cherry picking' the other migrants based on race and their ability to work.^{15 16} The government picked mostly young fit men who could be used for labour as opposed to the women, children and family units who would need more support from the government. Eventually, Australia cast their net further over more European populations until eventually in 1949 virtually all European races were accepted, Jews being the last on the government's list.¹⁷ Because of public sentiment at the time the government was pressured into putting a limit on the number of Jews allowed into Australia, the limit was 25% on ships and that

¹⁰ Brasch, N. 2009, *Australia's Immigration Policy*, Pearson Education Australia, Port Melbourne, VIC pg 28

¹¹ http://www.api-network.com/main/images/articles/jas77_rutland_2.jpg: 9/9/09

¹² 1993, *Chronicle of Australia*, Chronicle Australasia Pty Ltd, VIC

¹³ Lack, J. and Templeton, J. *Bold Experiment*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne pg 10

¹⁴ Lack, J. and Templeton, J. *Bold Experiment*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne pg 11

¹⁵ Lack, J. and Templeton, J. *Bold Experiment*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne pg 11

¹⁶ Collins, J. 1988, *Migrant Hands in a Distant Land*, Pluto Press Australia, NSW pg 22

¹⁷ Collins, J. 1988, *Migrant Hands in a Distant Land*, Pluto Press Australia, NSW

was later applicable to airplane too. The government tried to keep the Jewish population down to 0.5% of the overall population.¹⁸

The Jews who did succeed in immigrating to Australia were faced much adversity because of anti-semitic feeling at the time. Jews were seen by many as greedy moneylenders, who were out to destroy Christianity and undermine Australian working standards by setting up sweatshops with goods at half the cost.¹⁹ Figure 3 is from the December 4th 1946 issue of *The Bulletin* and the cartoon shows the general public opinion about Jews. It portrays the immigrants as sly and callous people who were also physically unattractive.²⁰



Figure 3: December 4th 1946 Issue of *The Bulletin*

The Polish Jews, like most refugees, were forced into jobs that Australian people didn't want, for a two year government mandated conscription. Walter was a trained tailor as his family had owned a successful business before the war. However, he was forced to work in the factories like everyone else. Other jobs that refugees were forced to take up were hard and sometimes involved dangerous labour. These were mostly jobs like working in mines and railroads, although a lot of immigrant labour did go towards the government's Snowy Mountain Scheme. The Snowy Mountain scheme was a way to create hydro-electricity this mammoth project took twenty-five years to complete with over 100,000 workers from 30 different countries all working on the construction.²¹

¹⁸ Rutland, S. 2005, *The Jews in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, VIC pg 51

¹⁹ Rutland, S. 2005, *The Jews in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, VIC

²⁰ www.api-network.com/.../jas77_rutland_1.jpg Retrieved: 9/9/09

²¹ Bracsh, N. 2009, *Australia's Immigration Policy*, Pearson Education Australia, Port Melbourne pg 28

Viktor E. Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who survived for three years in various concentration camps where he lost his wife and most of his immediate family.²² Viktor's experiences gave him a profound new perception on life, as it did for many other Holocaust survivors. He shared these thoughts saying: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."²³ His message is so relevant to many Polish Jews. Even after they suffered so much adversity during World War Two, they chose not to be crushed by what happened to them but rather to triumph in the midst of devastation. Their achievements included not only surviving the war but also bravely immigrating to Australia with no money, no family and no English skills. Despite these barriers and the anti-Semitic feeling of the day they were determined to start a new life. Walter Ziegler and the other Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust are a true example of the power of the human spirit to triumph even in the face of inconceivable adversity.

²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_Frankl Retrieved: 9/9/09

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man%27s_Search_for_Meaning Retrieved: 9/9/09

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Reference books

1993, *Chronicle of Australia*, Chronicle Australasia Pty Ltd, VIC

This reference book contained a newspaper article promoting Arthur Calwell's journey to Europe and his new 'displaced persons' scheme. This article was extremely interesting as it portrayed the public opinion of the time not only on refugee immigration but of the 'White Australia' policy as well.

Interviews

Interview with Lily Ziegler.

She was useful in that she could piece together some of the more personal details of Walter Ziegler's life.

Pictures

<http://vrroom.naa.gov.au/records/?ID=18974> – Displaced persons in a new land. Retrieved: 9/9/09

This picture is quite a sad one. It shows displaced children who probably lost their families and homes.

www.api-network.com/.../jas77_rutland_1.jpg - The Bulletin, December 4th 1946. Retrieved: 9/9/09

This cartoon shows the public attitude at the time towards Jews and immigrants in general. It shows them as unattractive and sly while at the same time it displays the 'Ideal White Australians' leaving the country.

http://www.api-network.com/main/images/articles/jas77_rutland_2.jpg - Smith's Weekly Retrieved: 9/9/09

This is yet another cartoon showing the attitude towards immigrants. It highlights the immigrants inability to speak English and again the idea that they were physically unattractive.

Videos

USC Shoah Foundation Institute – Interview with Walter Ziegler

The Shoah Foundation Institute interviewed Holocaust survivors from all over the world to assure their story was never forgotten. Walter took part in this project and his video was a very moving account of some of the horrors the Nazi afflicted on innocent people. This video gave me a new perception on my research as it made me remember the pain the people felt during the holocaust and not just the facts and figures.

Articles

<http://vrroom.naa.gov.au/records/?ID=18784> - April 22nd 1949, *"20 million needed to hold Australia"*, The Argus

This newspaper article outlines the government's motives behind the populate or perish campaign. It stresses the importance of a larger Australian population in order to keep Australia from enemy invasion.

The Age July 26th, 1947 – source: State Library Victoria

This newspaper article was very useful as it provided non-bias information about the refugee crisis in Europe and the Australian government's agreement with the IRO to take in a number of 'displaced persons'. This article also provided information about the Jewish refugees and the places they are migrating to.

The Bulletin July 23th, 1947 – source: State Library Victoria

The article I found in the Bulletin included a lot of information that I didn't find helpful. Most of the article included details about Russia and America which were not relevant to my research. The article did also include information about 'displaced persons' and the amount that each country had accepted. I didn't find this source all that useful.

Secondary Sources

Books

Collins, J. 1988, *Migrant Hands in a Distant Land*, Pluto Press Australia, NSW

This book was extremely helpful as it gave great historical insight to not only the origins of Australia's post-war immigration but also the immigration programs set up for displaced persons.

Rutland, S. 2005, *The Jews in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, VIC

This book provided useful information about discrimination that Jews and refugees felt upon immigrating to Australia.

Lack, J. and Templeton, J. 1995, *Bold Experiment*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne

This book gave great in-depth information about the history of post-war immigration in Australia in particular about displaced persons and refugee policies.

Brasch, N. 2009, *Australia's Immigration Policy*, Pearson Education Australia, Port Melbourne, VIC

This book was a very basic source and didn't go into too much depth about the given topics. However, this book did provide a brief overview of The Snowy Mountain Hydro-Electric Scheme. It also contains speech or newspaper extracts in every chapter.

Cameron, K. Lawless J. and Young, C. 2000, *Investigating Australia's 20th Century History*, Nelson Thomson Learning, Southbank, VIC

This source was less useful because of the broad view it took one 20th century Australian history in general not specifically immigration. This reference did contain some facts about post-war immigration but no wear near the depth of information that I was looking for.

Kunz, E. 1988, *Displaced Persons*, Pergamon Press, Rushcutters Bay, NSW

E. Kunz seemed to view Arthur Calwell in a less than flattering way and this is evident in his writing. Because of this, his writing, although factual, may be bias. However, this source was still useful because of its depth and focus on the experiences of Displaced Persons.

Websites

Immigration Heritage Centre NSW – Australia's Migration History

<http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/belongings/about-belongings/australias-migration-history/> Retrieved: 5/9/09

This website gave a useful overview of both the 'White Australia' policy and the 'Populate or Perish' scheme.

Israel and Judaism Studies – Jewish Immigration after the Second World War. Rutland, S. University of Sydney

<http://www.ijs.org.au/Jewish-Immigration-after-the-Second-World-War/default.aspx>

Retrieved: 5/9/09

This website had very similar information to S. Rutland's Book *The Jews in Australia*. The website did highlight the changes in the Australian Jewish communities through the post-war periods.

Conditions for Jews in Poland during World War 2

<http://www.humboldt.edu/~rescuers/book/Makuch/conditionsp.html> Retrieved: 6/9/09

This website contained a very useful timeline of the Anti-Jewish laws put in place by the Nazis during the early stages of the war.

Wikipedia – Post War immigration to Australia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post_war_immigration_to_Australia Retrieved: 7/9/09

As Wikipedia is not always accurate when it comes to information I did not use any facts from this website in my report. However, it did provide a basic overview of the topic with I found very useful as a starting point.

Conditions in Concentration Camps

<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/294028.html> Retrieved: 9/9/09

Although this website was quite factual I only found the quote by Jack Oran useful in my research.

Wikipedia – Viktor Frankl

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_Frankl Retrieved: 9/9/09

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man%27s_Search_for_Meaning Retrieved: 9/9/09

These two websites provided a brief summary of information on Viktor Frankl as well as some profound quotes he said.

Words: 1969