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## Polish Survivors of the Gulag

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ELDERLY people queuing in front of St. Andrew's Church in central Warsaw exhibit a camaraderie of a kind rarely seen in public in Poland, where everyday life is fraught with hardships. They are not waiting for relief goods or bickering over a place in line.

As they swap stories, the men blink back tears and the women exchange warm, knowing glances. "I was in Borovice-Jagla from '44 to '46, and in Krasne Sverdlovsk from '46 to '47," says one man. "I didn't come back until '59," says another. "Oh - then you're better," jokes the first, and they both laugh. All clutch yellowed documents, evidence of their lives spent in Siberia.

These "Siberians" - Poles once deported or exiled to Siberia or indeed any place in the Soviet Union - are lining up to join the newly formed Association of Siberians that most have heard about through word of mouth. An estimated 1.5 to 1.8 million Poles were deported to Siberia during the Stalinist terror from 1939 to 1956.

As the Soviets took possession of eastern Poland, officers and resistance fighters, as well as innocent women, children, and entire families, were carted off to Siberia. After the war, scores more were deported as the Soviet Army assured communist rule of Poland. Many officers and others returning to Poland after years in exile or in POW camps in Germany were arrested as soon as they crossed the border and put on trains heading east. Many never returned.

Nine months ago, the Association of Siberians was merely the dream of one lone woman, Irena Glowacka, who spent the formative years of her life imprisoned in Siberia. The organization has grown to more than 50,000 members today. In the first few weeks of its existence, the organization received more than 2,000 letters from Siberians and registered hundreds of them as members. Every day it receives an overflowing box of letters from potential members, including personal documents such as old photographs of the camps in Siberia, sometimes taken on homemade cameras.

A 60-year-old woman with a broad smile, Mrs. Glowacka explained that for years the Siberians couldn't talk about their experiences publicly. The Polish government has never acknowledged crimes against Poles by its Soviet big brother, and getting the communist government's approval for the organization to operate openly and legally has been fraught with legal hurdles and delays.

The organization is working to get the current government to grant its members official standing as war victims so that they can receive the same privileges, retirement, housing, and health benefits the state grants to Poles who survived German concentration camps. The Siberians also seek restitution from the Soviet government. The West German government pays reparations to Poles who survived Nazi concentration camps, and the Siberians believe they are entitled to the same reparations from Moscow.

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Siberians stream into the organization's national headquarters, a 10-by-10-foot room in the corner of a parish church donated by a priest of St. Andrew's Church and shared with three other organizations. There Mrs. Glowacka and other representatives of the association's governing body hold office hours twice weekly.

One couple, the Czarnowskis, chat with everyone who enters the crowded, tiny room. Because of their more than 20 years of combined experience in a variety of Soviet camps where both spent their young adulthood, the couple has been chosen to evaluate the claims and verify the documents of each applicant: deportation, work, and repatriation identification cards, pictures, and Red Cross papers.

Poles who have no documents send in names of those they knew in Siberia, specifying who died there and providing the addresses of survivors and sworn eyewitness testimony.

After escaping from two German concentration camps, Mr. Czarnowski, a member of the Polish conspiratorial Landed Army went into hiding in the Polish city of Vilna. When the Russians entered the city, he came out of hiding. One day in 1944 as he was walking down the street, three Russians approached him and politely asked if he would come with them. "I went with them and came out in 1955, 11 years later," says Mr. Czarnowski.

Although he was originally sentenced to death, the sentence was commuted to 10 years imprisonment, and he was sent to Siberia. There he worked at hard labor in several camps. At the last camp he helped to build a city that was populated by 185,000 prisoners and 165,000 free citizens.

There he met his wife. They wrote letters to each other, which were smuggled between the men's and the women's camps, and became engaged even before they laid eyes on each other. As Mrs. Czarnowski put it: "I got to know my husband without seeing him at all. I didn't know how he looked. I only knew one thing - that I would be his wife."

In 1954 the couple was released from the camp but not allowed to leave the area. A makeshift wedding was arranged. Their eldest son, born in internment, survived the harsh conditions, although many babies born in the bitter cold did not. The Czarnowskis reminisced about working even when the temperature fell to 65 degrees below zero. Work conditions were severe, the bread and water rations meager. There was no meat.

Despite the terrible conditions and hardships, the Czarnowskis and other Siberian survivors speak with little remorse or bitterness. They talk as if a burden of many years has been lifted, relating the facts as if removed from the actual events, sometimes almost with a breath of nostalgia.

In fact, many Siberians talk about the enchantment of the place where they were so mercilessly imprisoned - describing it as "the most beautiful spot on earth." They would never forget the skies' brilliant arrays of red, yellow, and blue. In 1955, the Czarnowskis were pardoned by the Soviet government and flown back to Poland. Mrs. Czarnowski's mother, who had believed her daughter long dead, fainted when she saw her daughter.

I visited the Czarnowskis in their tiny Warsaw apartment. Each corner of the living room - the main room - was stacked high with documents. The organization is concerned with thorough documentation to prevent fraud. Membership in it may someday entitle Siberians to special government benefits, invaluable to senior citizens on fixed incomes.

Many organizations independent of the government have arisen in the past few years, but the Siberians' cause is so compelling that their group is one of the few in Poland able to attract a broad membership, stretching beyond class boundaries. Survivors from nearly every corner of Poland are organizing local chapters.

A grass-roots organization, operating strictly through the initiative of Mrs. Glowacka and others, the association shuns any relationship with the government or government organizations, which Mrs. Glowacka and other members accuse of failing to tell the truth for years. The Siberians hope to use the church as their permanent base, and that may be possible because Mrs. Glowacka's cousin is an aide to Cardinal Glemp, head of the Polish Roman Catholic Church.

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The church is the guardian of many resources in Poland, and the group has solicited Cardinal Glemp's blessing. "People trust the church," said Mrs. Glowacka. "For years the state told us to forget the facts of Siberia. But we Siberians know we survived because of God and because of the church." According to association chairman Ryszard Reiff, "To many people the fact that we are associated with the church is proof of our credibility."

Although the Siberians have been organizing for less than a year, the members carry on the tradition of an earlier period. Two of the current founding members - having survived deportation to Siberia under czarist rule in the early part of this century as young children - also belonged to an Association of Siberians that was founded in 1928. Of course that organization ceased to exist when Poles were once again deported to the east under Stalin.

The current organization bears the same name and uses the same emblem as the former one, invoking Poles' long experience of suffering, martyrdom, and the preservation of national identity. One of the older members, now about 90, is the grandson of a leader of an uprising against czarist Russian rule in 1863. This member's father was born in Siberia, as was he.

Siberia has always been the subject of private rumor and knowledge and has even been the subject of underground memoirs. Many Poles know a survivor personally. As chairman Reiff, who spent two years in Siberia before escaping, put it, "To us, Siberia is not only a geographic entity but above all a symbol of reprisals, first by the czar and then by Stalin and his successors, against Poland and the Poles. You don't forget people with whom you shared a corner of a railway car on a long trip to the unknown, with whom you worked digging coal or felling forests, come hunger or cold." At a recent association meeting, Reiff met a fellow prisoner whom he had not seen for 43 years.

As Poland struggles to come into its own, remembering the past is a powerful political act. The Siberians queuing in front of St. Andrew's Church are poignant reminders of a past that demands recognition in Poland's looser political climate.

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