MY VISITS TO TENERGU

In August 2015, I set out to Tanzania with two friends to climb to the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro. After a few days of travelling, we finally reached the city of Arusha. It lies at the foot of a famous volcano, Mt. Meru and is a location where many tourist routes start from.

The day before our expedition, we went to visit a Polish nun from the Congregation of the Sisters of the Elizabethans. After Mass was celebrated, Sister Ines took us to a nearby place that I had never heard of before. Not only did I cherish this place at first glance, but I also became "wonderfully" enchanted. This important visit to Tengeru impressed me so strongly and impacted my life in such a way that I have daily memories of this place. In this far corner of the world, on the eastern continent of Africa, there is a great deal of unknown and forgotten history of our country, Poland. To get to know about this region and to remember it, we have to go back to the painful events of the twentieth century in our deliberations.

1939. On the 1st of September, troops of the Third Reich without declaring war, invaded Polish territory. Thus began the Second World War.

On the 17th of September, 1939, the Soviet Red Army invaded the eastern Polish territories. The Soviet invasion of Poland was the result of a secret Ribbentrop – Molotov pact of August 23rd, 1939, which – by the will of Stalin and Hitler – decreed partition of Polish territory. The Soviet Union took 51.7 percent of the area of the country with 13 million inhabitants, Germany – 48.3 percent area with 22 million. Terror accompanied the occupation from the very beginning.

1940. On the 10th of February, the first deportation of the Polish population from the territories that were occupied by the Soviet Union to Siberia began. There were three major deportations. It was preceded by persecution and so called purges that affected mainly the representatives of the Polish intelligence, civil servants, landowners, military, settlers and the richer peasants. Whole families, including children and old people were transported to the Soviet Union to Siberia, to Kolyma, to Kazakhstan, where they were forced into slave labour under extremely difficult conditions. Over one million of Poles were deported and sent to GULAG labour camps, to that “inhumane land”. Many prisoners were murdered and executed.

1941. On the 22nd of June, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, quickly advancing into the country. With a knife at his throat, Stalin needed every pair of hands. And so the Sikorski-Maisky agreement had been signed, restoring diplomatic relations between the Polish and Russian governments (even though on the 17th of September, 1939, Russia claimed that the Polish state ceased to exist...) and announcing "amnesty" for Polish people who were kept in prisons and gulags. Not without obstruction from Stalin, the formation of the Polish Army began in August 1941 in Russia; in the area of today's Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. In early 1942, Stalin began to demand the 5th Division to be sent to the front but General Anders opposed the idea. He did not trust the Communist regime and he was right. We know from history that at the end of the Second World War, Russia incorporated the Baltic Republic with some Polish territory and established a satellite communist government for almost 50 years. When General Anders refused to collaborate with Stalin, Russia decided that from March, the food rations would be dramatically reduced (the soldiers shared their rations with civilians). Secondly, following the discovery of mass graves of Polish officers murdered by the Russians, in Katyn, Miednoje and other places, diplomatic relations between the Polish government that was in exile and the Soviet Union were broken. These two reasons resulted in General Anders deciding to evacuate his Army.
Many reports talk about the high mortality rate among the deportees, many people did not join the Polish army in time, a lot of the old and weak people did not even attempt to reach the places that were forming units and General Anders left Russia with only 120 thousand Poles. Even if some of them were kept in prison since September 1939, it would mean that only 1/3 of the deportees left with Anders. Along with the troops released from prisons and labour camps Anders managed to rescue about 47 thousand civilian exiles, mostly woman, children and old people, saving them from certain death. The whole operation lasted from the 24th of March to the 30th of August 1942.

By the spring of 1942, as part of the creation of a Polish Army from among the deported Poles and Polish prisoners of war, these children and what was left of their families, were among tens of thousands who moved to the area of today’s Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and then on to Iran (then Persia). The mortality rate over the preceding two years had been horrifically high and by the time the Poles arrived in Iran, there were many orphans and "unaccompanied children,” children separated from their parents. The Polish forces were soon moved out to Palestine and other places, to fight alongside the British troops; just as quickly as the Polish civilians that had been left behind in Iran fanned out across the British Commonwealth and beyond, to refugee camps.

Together, with Anders’ Army, around 41,000 civilians came from Russia to Persia. Several hundred children were sent to India, 6,000 women joined the army (PSK - Women's Auxiliary Service), about a thousand teenagers went to cadet schools, 1,653 Jews went to Palestine but there were still some 32,000 people left to deploy.

Already in the summer of 1942, an agreement was concluded between the British Government and the governors of Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda. Originally, it was agreed that 10 thousand Poles would be sent. By autumn, there were voices that all civilians from Iran could be dispatched to East Africa. In the years 1942-1945, ultimately in 22 camps in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), the Union of South Africa (now Republic of South Africa), Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika (now Tanzania) more than 18 thousand Poles were settled in former British Colonies - East Africa. Most of them were sent to Uganda and Tanzania. Ships were arriving mainly in the port of Mombasa in Kenya, Tanga in Tanzania and Beira in Mozambique. Crossing the Indian Ocean was a dangerous undertaking during the war. German and Japanese submarines were everywhere and transports could only be undertaken in convoys.

The largest Polish settlement in Africa was in Tanzania. The first transport with over 1,000 refugees arrived to a village of Tengeru in 1942. In total, around 5,000 Polish refugees settled in Tengeru. The camp was around 400 hectares and was located on the territories inhabited by the Maasai tribe. The site of the camp had been cleared up and new cabins were built just a few days before the arrival of the first refugees. Huts were mostly circular with a diameter of about 5 meters.

The Polish “settlers” developed a life for themselves, running specialized farms and small businesses. Several departments were established: Cultural and Educational, Public Security, Labour, Public Health, Military Families, Agriculture and also the Postal Agency, hospital, bacteriological clinic, orphanage, cooperative shops. A Camp Council was created.

A school year began in November 1942. There were three elementary schools, three secondary schools; commercial, tailoring, mechanical and technical middle schools, as well as a school of music and agriculture, a high school, vocational school, kindergarten and a nursery.

Scouting was established along with community centers such as the “Society of Mary”, the “YMCA”. Teams of art (theatre, choir, brass band), and many sports groups were active. There was also a theatre
building, sport fields and tennis courts. Polish newspapers were published. Catholic and Orthodox churches, as well as a synagogue were built. Well organized establishments and peace among the residents made the place a reminder of a distant homeland.

1945 – 1946. At the end of World War II, the refugees were given the chance to return to their homeland. Many of them had nobody to go home to. The vast majority had come from the areas which were taken away from Poland by a decision of the Yalta Agreement. Other settlers for fear of the communist government, decided to migrate to various countries.

Resettling of Polish refugees from the African settlements lasted until the early fifties (closing in 1952). Only about 20 percent of them returned to Poland. Most of them went to the UK to join their relatives and the soldiers of the 2nd Polish Corps. Significant groups left for the USA, Australia and Canada. Approximately 1,000 people remained on the basis of special settlement amounts and have been permitted to reside in Tanzania permanently. The last Polish settlement in Tengeru passed away in March 2015.

In September 1949, a group of 123 Polish Catholic children refugees arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on the US AT Heintzelman. A few weeks later, they were followed by another, smaller group. All of the children were coming from a refugee camp of several thousand Poles in Tanganyika (now Tanzania), called Tengeru, located just outside the northern city of Arusha. They had been sponsored by the Archbishop of Montreal who had heard about their plight, stranded in East Africa. What should have been a straightforward movement of immigrants to Canada had become an international incident by the time they reached Canadian shores. As they were moved through Europe on their way to Canada, the Communist Government of Poland furiously publicly attacked the International Refugee Organization (the IRO), Canada, the United States, and Great Britain for kidnapping these children to be used, in its words, as slave labour on Canadian farms and in Canadian factories, tearing them from their families in Poland in the process. The Polish Government pursued the children as they left Africa, across Italy and Germany, and even into the backwoods of Quebec, where the children were hidden upon their arrival in Canada. For all of Warsaw’s protests, the Canadian Government refused to turn over the children. After a few final diplomatic negotiations, Warsaw gave up and the children turned their attention to building their lives in Canada. Their journey from Poland to Canada, via Africa, was a complicated one that began in February 1940, with four waves of mass deportations.

Tanzanian Simon Joseph is today charged with preserving the cemetery and acting as a curator for visitors and the hundreds of pilgrims who come every year to pay respect to the storied history of their long lost ancestors. All people buried in Tengeru were refugees and they suffered here from malaria and influenza. Joseph inherited the site from his father who lived and worked with the small Polish community since 1942 when the first Poles arrived. He lives next to the cemetery arriving as soon as he hears a car or voices. After letting the visitors into the cemetery, he shows the Guest Book and various publications. Upon entering to the cemetery there stands a small stone gazebo that showcases greying photos and written accounts of the history - in Polish, English and Swahili. Above one installation, a quote by Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz reads: “If I forget about them – you, God in heaven, forget about me,” which is decidedly the unspoken mantra of the site.

The maintenance and upkeep of the graveyard is funded entirely by the Embassy of Poland in Kenya, as well as by visitor donations. In 2015, all of the graves were renovated, paid for by the Polish government, who has funded the cemetery all this time since the first Polish refugee was buried there. There are also five Jewish gravesites in the cemetery, near the wall which was erected in 2001. The local villagers rarely come by, but they all know that the cemetery is there, the place where 5,000
foreigners, abandoned by the rest of the world, have a little piece of home for themselves in the dusty plains.

When I returned to Canada from my first expedition to Tanzania in 2015, my thoughts were still at the Cemetery of the Polish War Refugees in Tengeru. Although I was glad that I climbed the highest peak of Africa (Kilimanjaro), the unforgettable view of Polish exiles and orphans stood before my eyes day after day. I began to delve into the history by reading the various articles available. I learned that next to the Polish Cemetery there is also a Polish Church that I did not visit, and which I regret. If I had known of that church’s existence, I would certainly have visited it, celebrated Mass and prayed there.

One Sunday during the sermon I told the faithful that during my stay in Tanzania I visited a Polish Cemetery in Tengeru. How shocked I was when after Mass my parishioner, Danuta Turkowiak, approached me and said: “Fr. Adam! I was there in Tengeru with all my siblings until 1947.” When I heard those words I stood there stunned, what a strange coincidence! Mrs. Danuta then quietly sighed: “Unfortunately my youngest brother got sick with malaria and is buried there. He was only 21 years old. Since I left Tanzania, I have never returned.” I started to remember somethings about pictures I took. I immediately asked, “What was your brother’s name?” The answer was: "Czesław (Chester) Betlejemski". In disbelief, I said: "In Tengeru there are 150 Polish refugees buried. I walked from grave to grave praying for my dear countrymen. I only took four photos from the cemetery. If I am not mistaken I have two accidental pictures of the grave of your brother”. Can you imagine the joy on Mrs. Danuta's face? No writer is able to express or photographer able to capture this. I then invited Mrs. Danuta to the office to show her the memorable photos taken with my camera. A few days later, Mrs. Danuta and her daughter met me. I gave them a detailed account of the visit to the cemetery as well as showing them the photographs.

In February of this year, I went with three friends again to Tanzania to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. On the last day before returning to Canada we ordered a taxi and went to Tengeru. I was so eager to fulfil my biggest desire to revisit Tengeru and walk the same path as on my first visit. With some difficulties, we managed to find the former Polish Church dedicated to "Our Lady of the Dawn”, who is also known as “Our Lady of Ostra Brama”. Unfortunately, today this church is rented to Anglicans and Protestants only. There is no tabernacle, cross, no sacred paintings, or any memories of the Polish community. After visiting the church, I had a longing to return to the Polish Cemetery. I had quite a bit of time to walk around and look at every grave, praying for those who were laid here. I felt emotional and peaceful at the same time, and a little sad that after all the suffering these people endured, it was not possible for them to return back to their beloved homeland of Poland where they could rest with their family. When I finished a visit to the graves of our Polish compatriots at the cemetery, I celebrated Holy Mass on the tomb of Czesław (Chester) Betlejemski. It was my sincere gesture to pay a debt of gratitude to Mrs. Danuta Turkowiak.

Upon returning to Canada in February, I talked to Mrs. Danuta and told her about the celebrated Mass on her brother's grave. Tears streamed from her eyes. And she said timidly, “Father, you did it?” I am so pleased to share the experiences of my two visits to Tanzania, with all of my dear parishioners.