

Extract from:

## *Krystyna's Story : A Polish refugee's journey*

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### **Chapter 6 (Pages 127-129)**

I came back to myself in an orphanage on the edge of a new world. Every day long lists of children's names were put up on the noticeboard and at the top of the list were the names of faraway destinations, places across the sea in other parts of the world. All around me children were getting ready to go to countries like Canada, Africa, America and Israel.

At night we lay in bed and talked about which country we would like to go to. Poland was our first choice but the war was still on and we could not go home. We had to go somewhere else until the fighting was over.

Life in Teheran had an order and an easiness to it. Slowly the children around me changed from lice-bitten skeletons into thin serious people. I guess that I looked the same, but my body was dead to me now. All I wanted was to get enough to eat every day, to sit under the trees and to close off the places in my mind where there was sadness and hunger, screaming and crying. Every day we had Mass outside under the trees. We stood in lines and sang hymns in Polish that reached back into the life that I had lived a long time ago. At nights I longed for my mother's arms to be around me.

In the afternoons we had classes in an empty aircraft hangar. It was cool and our voices echoed loudly as we chanted our lessons aloud in Polish. There were no books. Our teachers taught us what they could remember. Sometimes when they talked about their lives in Poland it all whirled around in my head in a mix of facts and folk tales. I wasn't sure what I'd been told and that I could remember, but it didn't seem to matter. The main thing was to get on with the business of living and being Polish.

One morning my name was written up on the noticeboard. I was on the list of children to go to New Zealand. I ran to Siostra Ludwika, the nurse, and asked if she knew where New Zealand was.

'It is a little country at the end of the world,' she said, patting my shoulder. 'You will be happy there.'

But her words didn't really reassure me and rumours spread. Someone told me that there were cannibals in New Zealand. Great big people with enormous mouths and blood dripping from their jaws. At night I couldn't sleep. I saw that I would have to be very careful in New Zealand so that the eating people didn't take a bite out of me.

At classes in the aircraft hangar I asked the teacher about New Zealand. She smiled and said that it was a country flowing with milk and honey. I imagined that everyone would have a little cup to dip into the golden flowing streams. I knew that if I could keep away from the eating people I would not be hungry there.

Now I was separated from the main group and became one of the children who was going to New Zealand. As we gathered together for special lessons I looked around at the other children who were going to the end of the world with me. They had shaven heads and serious faces, all turned towards Kierowniczka Nowacka.

'You are being given shelter in New Zealand until the end of the war,' she said, 'but I want you always to remember that you are Polish.'

'But what will happen after the war?' one of the boys asked.

'The little soldiers will return to the homeland,' she said. 'We will all return to Poland.'

After weeks of anticipation we left Teheran very early one morning, climbing into army trucks after our names were crossed off a list. There were rows of benches in the back of the truck, and we sat in the middle rows while the teachers who were going with us had the seats against the wall. I clutched the board seat and stared at the wall, trying not to see the woman who sat opposite me with her arm encircling her daughter. There was no one to put their arm around me on the way to New Zealand.