

Polish Immigrants to New Zealand

The first Poles to set foot in New Zealand were two botanists, J.R. Forster and his son J.G.A. Forster. Both were members of James Cook's second expedition in **1772**.

Next to venture out to the Antipodes was explorer and geologist Sir P.E. Strzelecki, who in **1839** spent three months in Hokianga and the Bay of Islands before sailing on across the Tasman. There, in 1840 he climbed the highest peak on mainland Australia and named it Mount Kosciuszko in honour of Tadeusz Kosciuszko, one of Poland's national heroes.

On 30 August **1872** the German ship "Friedeburg", from Hamburg, sailed into Lyttelton harbour with the first Polish settlers on board.

Naming nationals of a non-existent country

During the second half of the 18th century, Poland was divided between the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and Habsburg Austria. This partitioning resulted in the elimination of a sovereign Poland -- the country as such had ceased to exist. Determining nationality was therefore not a straightforward matter. In official registers Poles were variously classified as Russians, Germans or Austrians. On the passenger lists of the "Friedeburg" passengers from what was once Poland were referred to as either Poles or German Poles. Already the Forsters were claimed to be either Germans or Poles, depending on the source quoted. Jan Jerzy Adam (or Johann Georg Adam) Forster himself was clear about who he was: "I was born in the Polish territory, a mile from Gdansk, and I have left my motherland when it passed under the Prussian rule. Therefore, I am not a Prussian citizen."

Seven waves of Polish immigrants

Subsequent arrivals of Poles can be referred to as "waves". The following classification of immigrant groups is the most official one available, and is adapted from the website of the Polish Embassy in Wellington.

(1st wave) In the second half of the 19th century emigrants from Pomerania settled in Otago, mainly around Dunedin. Others went to Taranaki and settled in New Plymouth. Their number is estimated to be around 1,500.

(2nd wave) Between 1918 and 1939 some 2,000 Poles arrived to better their economic lot.

(3rd wave) Unlike the two previous waves, the third group's arrival came about as a consequence of the Second World War. In 1944, 733 exiled and orphaned Polish children arrived in Wellington on an American warship. Having endured a grueling journey through

Siberia and Persia, they and 105 accompanying adult caregivers settled in what became known as the Polish children's camp in Pahiatua.

(For further information see NZ On Screen documentaries)

(4th wave) The fourth group arrived after the end of the Second World War, and was comprised of 850 immigrants looking for a place to live outside of what was then communist Poland. Among them were more than 200 soldiers from the Second Corps, which had been deployed to Italy.

(5th wave) Between 1952 and 1980 about 1,000 Poles came to New Zealand to join family members already living here.

(6th wave) So-called Solidarity immigrants came to New Zealand between 1981 and 1989 via refugee camps in Italy and Austria. While Poland was under marshal law, over 10,000 refugees requesting political asylum arrived in Austrian camps. The country was unable to cope with such numbers and turned to the United Nations for help. In 1981 the New Zealand government, once again granted entry to Polish refugees and accepted Poles in the groups to New Zealand. In all, 297 Poles left Austrian refugee camps with New Zealand residence visas.

(7th wave) The seventh wave includes immigrants arriving in the 1990s or later. These newest arrivals are mainly young and often highly skilled people, many of whom had initially come to New Zealand on temporary visas to work on contracts as computer, veterinary or medical specialists. Others arrived from Ireland or the UK where they had previously found work, but later found themselves unemployed due to the economic crisis.

Climbing the social ladder

The early Polish settlers came mainly from rural areas. After arriving in New Zealand they found employment in farming, building railway tracks, in the construction business, or as labourers in factories or ports. Through hard work, they achieved their goal of giving their children the best possible education. The next generation was indeed able to climb the social ladder.

It is estimated that at present the Polish community in New Zealand numbers between 6,000 and 7,000 persons.

Information compiled by Margarete Kraemer