

# DISPLACED PERSONS – BETWEEN LIBERATION AND A NEW BEGINNING

by Sarah Grandke

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Photo credit: After surviving the war, life in barracks continues: Many DP camps were set up in former war zones or concentration camp sites. Here is a view of the DP camp “Pułaski” in Weiden/Oberpfalz, 1945 or 1946. Private collection E. Hejka, Australia. [Free access - no reuse](#)

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Over eleven million people were considered displaced persons in 1945. Those who did not return immediately lived mainly in DP camps in the western occupation zones of Germany and Austria. How did they experience this time of uncertainty?



*Disappointed in our dreams and hopes and condemned to continue wandering outside the borders of our homeland, we are forced to live among strangers and people who are unfriendly towards us (...).<sup>1</sup>*

This is how Antoni Żok described the first anniversary of his liberation from the Linz III Subcamp by US troops in his diary in May 1946. The then 35-year-old Pole from Toruń, a trained surveying technician, was one of around eleven million people worldwide who were considered “displaced persons” at the end of the fighting.



Antoni Żok, undated. Private collection Dominika N. [Name anonymized upon request], Poland.  
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**What are displaced persons?**

The term “displaced persons” was an administrative category for people who were outside their countries and regions of origin at the end of the Second World War and for whom the Allies, i.e. primarily the USA, Great Britain and the Soviet Union as opponents of Nazi Germany and its allies, felt responsible. This category explicitly did not refer to Germans. German authorities were to assume responsibility for them.

With the newly created category of “displaced person”, the Allies attempted to group together what was in reality a profoundly heterogeneous group of people. Even groups of displaced persons with nominally the same citizenship, such as Poles or Lithuanians, were made up of very diverse and often politically divided subgroups. These groups contained people who had also experienced the war in very different ways: they included liberated forced laborers, concentration camp inmates and prisoners of war, refugees, anti-communists and accomplices to Nazi crimes.

The Allies’ plan was to repatriate displaced persons to their countries of origin as quickly as possible.<sup>2</sup> But things turned out quite differently. This is shown in the example of Polish concentration camp survivor Antoni Żok. On May 5, 1946, he wrote in his diary:



*It is a truly sad and deplorable fact that, twelve months after the end of military operations in Europe, we are still being moved from camp to camp, where we must once again look with disgust at the barbed wire surrounding us, and stay in dilapidated, foul-smelling barracks of former camps, which we left with such joy and never wanted to see again (...).<sup>3</sup>*

During the Allied negotiations on displaced persons, the Soviet Union had ensured that Soviet citizens would be repatriated as a priority, whether they wanted to be or not, and even under duress.<sup>4</sup> Despite the efforts of the Allies to ensure swift repatriation, there were still more than 735,000 displaced persons in the western occupation zones of Germany and Austria at the turn of 1945/46. Not all of them were in DP camps; depending on the time, between 30 and 40 percent of them were considered “free living”. One factor that made their return difficult was war-damaged infrastructure. Railroad lines, roads and bridges, particularly on

routes into Eastern Europe, had been destroyed. There was also a lack of transportation and fuel. On top of this, many people were unable or unwilling to be repatriated.

## Why did displaced persons not return home?

For some, such as the diarist Żok, repatriation was initially not possible for health reasons. A significant number of the displaced persons had also lost their possessions due to German Nazi occupation policy and/or border relocations. Many had no contact with relatives, if they were still alive. This left them with the question of where they should actually return to. For Jews, continuing anti-Semitism and, oftentimes, the desire for a Jewish state discouraged them from returning to their countries of origin.<sup>5</sup>

What was originally intended by the Allies as a brief transitional stay in DP camps thus gradually turned into a prolonged reality. Within these camps, both elected and self-proclaimed elites took on roles in self-governance. Many of them promoted their own national identity, identified as anti-communists, and stylized themselves and their compatriots in the camps as the true representatives of their homeland. They viewed their own countries – such as Ukraine – as occupied by the Soviets and called for resistance against the establishment of Soviet-aligned regimes, which further strengthened opposition to repatriation.<sup>6</sup>



A community in exile. Polish Displaced Persons in the camp "Pułaski" in Weiden/Oberpfalz, 1945 or 1946. Private collection E. Hejka, Australia. [Free access - no reuse](#)

Many displaced persons were also unsettled by the destruction caused by the war, the lack of

economic prospects, and political developments. They believed there would be another war, this time between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union. Polish citizens in particular, who made up around 60 percent of the displaced persons at the turn of 1945/1946,<sup>7</sup> found themselves at the center of ideological conflicts and the beginning of the Cold War.<sup>8</sup> The cultural, moral and financial “backbone” of Polish displaced persons was the Polish exile army, which had not only fought on the side of the Western Allies against the terror of the National Socialists, but also against that of the Soviets. Their efforts were dedicated to establishing an independent Poland within its pre-war borders and were also directed against Bolshevism.<sup>9</sup>

One of these exiled soldiers was Alfons Borowski. Before the war, he had lived in eastern Poland, which was occupied by the Soviet Union

### Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

also: Nazi–Soviet Alliance, Nazi–Soviet Pact, Hitler–Stalin Pact, Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics., German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, Hitler-Stalin Pact

The Hitler–Stalin Pact, also known as the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact or Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was concluded in 1939 and divided Europe into two "spheres of interest" – in simple terms, the German Reich and the Soviet Union divided Europe between themselves into territories that they wanted to conquer or leave to the other. Among other things, the treaty provided for the partition of Poland and thus also provided the basis for the German invasion of Poland.

in 1939. As a result, Borowski was deported to Siberia. After Germany attacked the Soviet Union, he joined the Polish military units formed in the USSR under General Władysław Anders in 1941 and was among the 70,000 Polish citizens allowed to leave the Soviet Union. Now a soldier in the exiled 2nd Polish Corps, Borowski took part in the Italian campaign alongside the Western Allies in 1944. His military unit was affiliated with the Polish government-in-exile in London. Eventually, he met his partner, Stanisława, in a DP camp in Austria and decided to stay with her. As a result, he, too, was classified as a displaced person.



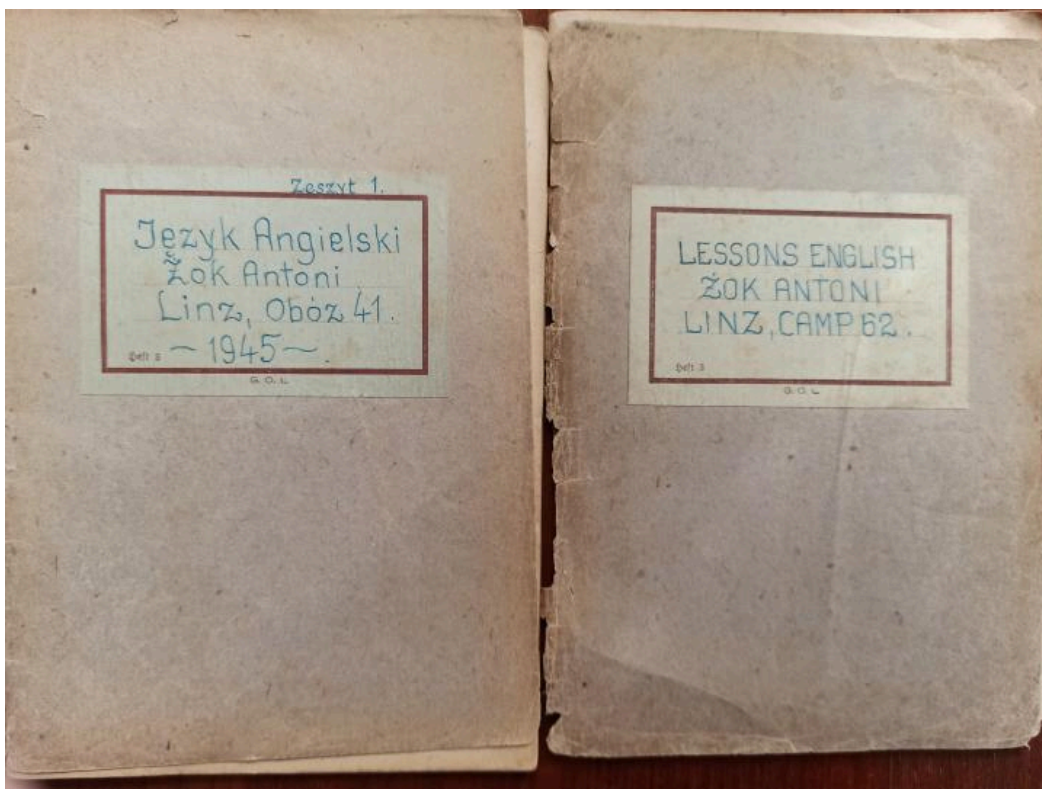
Alfons Borowski (far right) with other soldiers of the 2nd Polish Corps in Rome, summer 1944. Private collection, Stacey K. [Name anonymized upon request], USA. [Free access - no reuse](#)

## Camp life – between hope and monotony

Antoni Żok's previously unpublished diary offers an insight into the experiences and feelings of displaced persons at the end of the war. Żok wrote about the great feeling of happiness that "this magic word 'freedom' [had become] reality".<sup>10</sup> "There is immeasurable joy in the hearts of all Poles. Only the matter with Poland is not yet clear," he noted on 8 May 1945. The unclear political situation there was wearing him down:



*This is the difficult fate we must bear, the fate of the Poles; we were among the first to lose our freedom and independence, and we will be the last to regain it. I often think about home, about my mother (...) and find myself wondering whether there was anything left of our farms and houses after the German and Russian armies passed through the whole of Poland (...).<sup>11</sup>*



Diaries of Antoni Żok, Private collection Dominika N. [Name anonymized upon request], Poland. [Free access - no reuse](#)

Żok arrived at a DP camp, immediately after his liberation from the Linz III concentration camp, with “a feeling of genuine contentment, joy and relief”.<sup>12</sup> He was particularly moved by the experience of meeting other Poles. “Once again, after so many years, Polish colors, the Polish language – you just can’t believe that this is reality (...). The most moving moment after these five years of war was singing the national anthem together.”<sup>13</sup> With tears in his eyes, he sang: “Poland is Not Yet Lost.” He likened the coming weeks to a stay at a health resort. He

enjoyed exuberant evenings of dancing and revues, even though he was unable to dance himself due to a foot injury.



Polish national holiday, May 3, 1946, in the DP camp "Pułaski" in Weiden/Oberpfalz. Shared celebrations played an important role in building a sense of community. Private collection E. Hejka, Australia. [Free access - no reuse](#)

Attending a Catholic mass about a week after the liberation also left a deep impression: "This is the first time I've been to church since my arrest in August '43. For me, this is a great and sublime moment. (...) I knelt in front of the small altar in the side aisle and immersed myself in a fervent prayer of thanksgiving. (...) The beasts in human form, these hyenas of the Germanic tribe, did not drink my blood. (...) Instead, the Nazi Moloch died (...)." <sup>14</sup>

At the end of June 1945, the first transport from Żok's camp departed for Poland. Due to his injury, he was unable to travel with them. "After yesterday's transport departed, our camp became deserted, life disappeared (...), loneliness and some unspeakable longing has overwhelmed me as never before since leaving home. Before, there was movement and bustle and activity everywhere – cooking all day until late in the evening in the barracks and outside, singing and music. Now – only this emptiness." <sup>15</sup> Żok's writings from the following months are filled with a deep sense of homesickness. Adding to his sorrow was the uncertainty about what had happened to his family <sup>16</sup> – it appears he had no contact with home at all. At first, he spent his days doing nothing, going for walks, and swimming. <sup>17</sup> Eventually, he took up work in the DP camp. Keeping displaced persons occupied and preventing boredom was a clear

priority for the U.S. military administration and the international aid organization UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration). The UNRRA was primarily responsible for providing for the displaced persons and organizing their return home. A UNRRA newspaper article described work as an essential part of rebuilding civilian life for the displaced: “They are becoming individuals again – these people who were herded like cattle for six years. Gradually, they are adjusting to an orderly life within a community, where honest work brings satisfaction and reward and where food and shelter can be shared without fear.”<sup>18</sup>



Membership in scout organizations was an important part of the lives of many DP children. Private collection E. Hejka, Australia. [Free access - no reuse](#)

Both UNRRA staff and the displaced persons themselves worked hard to make life in the camps more bearable. However, this was a slow process. In Žok's camp, it was not until the spring of 1946 – nine months after the war had ended in Austria – that wooden planks were finally delivered, allowing the barracks to be divided into smaller rooms, creating at least a semblance of privacy.

Beyond simply doing repairs, camp residents busied themselves establishing a new kind of temporary daily life: newspapers were founded, recreational programs were introduced, and exile communities formed. Many sought to enjoy their newfound freedom. Excessive drinking, smoking, and sex became significant aspects of daily life and frequent topics of conversation.<sup>19</sup> Before long, there was a marriage and baby boom among the communities of displaced

persons.

Despite these attempts at normalcy, camp life remained unpredictable. DP camps were rarely permanent, and Żok's was no exception. Less than a year later, in April 1946, his camp was relocated – this time to Flossenbürg, where displaced persons were housed in the barracks of a former concentration camp. Żok described this as a period of constant "wandering" from camp to camp. What frustrated him most, however, was the uncertainty of the future. Moving from one "waiting room"<sup>20</sup> to the next was an experience shared by many people.

## New beginnings

Life as a displaced person was marked by experiences of intense pressure and exposure to deep-seated prejudice. The Soviet Union, for instance, almost universally discredited displaced persons, labeling them Nazi collaborators, nationalists, criminals, and traitors. While it is true that some among them had committed war crimes or aided the Nazi regime, such accusations did not apply to all. Nonetheless, displaced persons found themselves under suspicion and feared political persecution if they returned home. Rumors circulated about deportations to Siberia, making the prospect of staying in the West seem far safer.

Among German speakers, displaced persons were often regarded as criminal foreigners. Meanwhile, the Western Allies increased pressure on non-Jewish displaced persons to return to their countries of origin as quickly as possible.

Given these circumstances, many altered their personal information – sometimes due to misunderstandings, but often deliberately to gain some advantage or avoid forced repatriation to the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup> One such case was that of Micha(e)l Tichon. Born in what is now Belarus, he served in the Soviet army before being taken prisoner of war and later forced into labor in Austria. After the war, he was classified as a displaced person. Initially recorded as "W. Russian" (likely an abbreviation for "White Russian"), his identity was later changed twice – once to "Ukrainian" and another time to "Polish." In 1948, Tichon emigrated to Australia, where immigration records listed him as an Orthodox Polish Belarusian.<sup>22</sup>

A.E.F. D.P. REGISTRATION RECORD											
For coding purposes											
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J		
(1) REGISTRATION No. <b>325037</b> <span style="float: right;">372702 L 853707</span>											
Original <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Duplicate <input type="checkbox"/>											
M. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Single <input type="checkbox"/> Married <input type="checkbox"/>											
F. <input type="checkbox"/> Widowed <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced <input type="checkbox"/>											
(2) Family Name <b>TICHON MICHAEL</b>											
(6) Birthdate <b>18-9-1919</b> Birthplace <b>Astrow-Ginsk</b> Province <b>Polen</b> Country <b>Polen</b>											
(9) Number of Dependents: <b>Tichon Aleks.</b> (10) Full Name of Father <b>Hananowski Tekla</b> (11) Full Maiden Name of Mother											
(12) DESIRED DESTINATION <b>U.S.A.</b> (13) LAST PERMANENT RESIDENCE OR RESIDENCE JANUARY 1, 1938. <b>Astrow-Ginsk-Polen</b>											
(14) Usual Trade, Occupation or Profession <b>Farmer</b> (15) Performed in What Kind of Establishment (16) Other Trades or Occupations											
(17) Languages Spoken in Order of Fluency <b>a. Polish b. Russian c. German</b> (18) Do You Claim to be a Prisoner of War <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No											
(20) Signature of Registrant: <b>Tichon Michael</b> (21) Signature of Registrar: <b>10/6 48 E. George Smith</b> Date: <b>7-2-46</b> Assembly Center No <b>93/396</b>											
(22) Destination or Reception Center:											
(23) Code for Issue											
(24) REMARKS											

DP registration card of Micha(e)l Tichon. The "Claimed Nationality" is noted in the upper right corner, and emigration to Australia is recorded in the center bottom section. Arolsen Archives, Bad Arolsen, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Over a million displaced persons received visas from 1947/48 onwards and emigrated primarily to the United States, Australia, and Canada.<sup>23</sup> For Jewish survivors, Palestine – and, from 1948, the newly founded state of Israel – was also a key destination. Others remained in Germany. Franz L., for instance, deliberately cut ties with his family in Poland and married a German woman. After that, he was considered dead by his Polish relatives.<sup>24</sup> In 1951, his official residency status in West Germany changed: the category of "Displaced Person" no longer existed, and he was now classified as a "stateless foreigner."

By that time, Antoni Żok was living in the People's Republic of Poland. In 1947, he had chosen repatriation and continued to keep a diary. However, he never spoke to his family about his experiences – either about his time in the concentration camp or his life in the DP camps.<sup>25</sup> Many descendants of displaced persons have reported similar silences. For many who experienced the camps and displacement, this period of their lives seemed to be a mere "afterwards" — after the war, after survival. Their desire for a fresh start was so strong that they rarely spoke about the past. In Eastern Europe, the topic of displaced persons remained politically taboo. Many former DPs were particularly fearful of being asked the uncomfortable question: why had they not returned immediately? As a result, years – often decades – of silence followed.

English translation: [William Connor ↗](#)

## Footnotes

1. Diary of Antoni Żok, 3.5.1946, privately owned by Dominika N. [name anonymized] (Poland). The English version is based on the German translation of the Polish original by Sarah Grandke and Rainer Bobon. [↑](#)
2. Jacobmeyer, Wolfgang: Vom Zwangsarbeiter zum Heimatlosen Ausländer. Göttingen 1985, p. 23f. [↑](#)
3. Diary of Antoni Żok, 5.5.1946. [↑](#)
4. Fitzpatrick, Sheila: Lost Souls. Soviet Displaced Persons and the Birth of the Cold War. Princeton, Oxford 2024. [↑](#)
5. Tens of thousands of Jewish DPs continued to arrive in the western occupation zones after 1946. Pogroms such as the one in Kielce in July 1946 were the decisive factor. More on this, e.g. Person, Katarzyna: *Dipisi: Żydzi polscy w amerykańskiej i brytyjskiej strefach okupacyjnych Niemiec, 1945–1948*. Warszawa 2019. [↑](#)
6. E.g. Antons, Jan-Hinnerk: The Nation in a Nutshell? Ukrainian Displaced Persons Camps in Postwar Germany. In: *Havard Ukrainian Studies* 37,1–2 (2020), pp. 177–211. [↑](#)
7. Vgl. *Displaced Persons by Nationality Receiving UNRRA Assistance in the Western Zones of Germany, Austria, Italy, China, and the Middle East, December 1945 to June 1947*. In: Proudfoot, Malcolm J.: *European Refugees 1939–52. A Study in Forced Population Movement*. London 1957, S. 259; Jacobmeyer, *Zwangsarbeiter*, S. 82–84. [↑](#)
8. E.g. Nowak, Katarzyna: *Kingdom of Barracks: Polish Displaced Persons in Allied-Occupied Germany and Austria*. Montreal u. a. 2023. [↑](#)
9. E.g. Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann, Anna: *The Exile Mission. The Polish Political Diaspora and Polish Americans, 1939–1956*. Athen 2004. [↑](#)
10. Diary of Antoni Żok, 5.5.1945. [↑](#)
11. Diary of Antoni Żok, 20./25.5.1945. [↑](#)
12. Diary of Antoni Żok, 7.5.1945. [↑](#)
13. Diary of Antoni Żok, 7.5.1945. [↑](#)
14. Diary of Antoni Żok, 13.5.1945. [↑](#)
15. Diary of Antoni Żok, 28.6.1945. [↑](#)
16. Diary of Antoni Żok, 27.6.1945–26.4.1946. [↑](#)
17. Diary of Antoni Żok, 18.5./17.6.1945. [↑](#)
18. Dora Easto, *Settlement 56 Canteen Keeps D.P.'s Diligent*, in: *Austro-UNRRA Beacon*, 15.2.1946, p. 3. [↑](#)
19. Nowak, Katarzyna: *A Gloomy Carnival of Freedom. Sex, Gender, and Emotions among Polish Displaced Persons in the Aftermath of World War II*, in: *aspasia* 13 (2019), 113–134. Internet address: <https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2019.130108> (last accessed: 2024-04-29). [↑](#)
20. Königseder, Angelika/Wetzel, Juliane: *Lebensmut im Wartesaal. Die jüdischen DPs (Displaced Persons) im Nachkriegsdeutschland*. Frankfurt am Main 2004. [↑](#)
21. Cf. inter alia Huhn, Sebastian: *Negotiating Forced Migration in the IRO's 'Care and Maintenance' (CM/1) Files. One Setting, Three Underlying Aims, (at Least) Four Actors, and Multiple Forms of Human Agency*. IMIS Working Paper 12/2021, Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS) at the University of Osnabrück. [↑](#)
22. Archives of Flossenbürg Memorial (AGFL), Memorial Archives, non-public database Displaced Persons (DPs), Michael Tichon, 13.5.2021. [↑](#)
23. Storymap: *Getting Away from War and Communism. The Journey of Displaced Persons to Australia*. Internet address: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/c6c1ddb45572418ca47ad33f7c58d6fa> (last accessed: 29-04-2025). [↑](#)

24. The name has been anonymized for data and archival reasons. For further family history and how the descendants dealt with it: Grandke, Sarah: *Monika, Franz und ein Familiengeheimnis* [Monika, Franz and a family secret], Internet address: <https://reflections.news/de/monikafranz- und-ein-familiengeheimnis/> (last accessed 2025-04-29). [↑](#)
25. Dominika N., 6.4.2021, email to Sarah Grandke. [↑](#)

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