

## **Poland**

Poland is a large country in the heart of Europe between Baltic Sea and Carpathian Mountains along Vistula River.

Poles accepted Christianity in 10<sup>th</sup> century. Poland was declared an independent State in 1918.

In 1939 Germany and USSR invaded half of Poland each. Later Germans invaded the whole of Poland until Soviet army troops drove them out in 1945.

After the war Poland became soviet style people's democracy. The solidarity union movement forced the political change in Poland from 1981 until the first free election in 1989 when solidarity leader Lech Walesa became a president.

## Włodzimierz Merta

Australians could not pronounce my name so I made it easier for them by changing my name into Vodek as soon as I came to Australia in 1982.

I was born in 1953 in a small Polish village. My mother was a teacher and my father was a coal miner. I had two sisters. My mother was a practising Catholic and my father was a practising communist.

I consider myself lucky because I never experienced the suffering of the war. I always had enough of everything.

I finished the agricultural college but I began a career as a dancer and singer with a professional folk dancing and singing group. I travelled and performed around the world for ten years. Singing was my life. I was doing what I enjoyed.

I met Roma who was also a member of the performing group. We got married and have a daughter.

In 1981 there was a great political unrest in Poland. Solidarity movement was reaching a point of no return. It became inevitable that they will overturn the government. People were afraid that Russian troops would invade Poland. This would create bloodshed and uncertainty. I was afraid for my daughter and did not see a good future in Poland for my family. I also wanted to change my career. Travelling and performing every day was a very hard job. We have been to many countries but we have seen very little because we travelled at night mostly from one city to another to work. I would have to retire from the performing group at 42 so I needed some other experience.

Roma and I sang all through Canada. We loved the country and wanted to live there. We applied for a visa to go on holidays to Austria and from the refugee camp near Vienna we applied to migrate to Canada. We waited for nine months but no answer came. Then we decided to go to Australia. Our two and a half years old daughter, my sister and her boyfriend also came with us.

The committee of Polish women in Perth sponsored us to come and teach Polish migrants to dance and sing old Polish folk songs. We stayed for six months but there was little demand for our work. Perth was a slow, backward city, and there were no opportunities for us to continue our professional careers.

We moved to Sydney, rented a caravan and tried for three months to find work in our profession. The clubs invited us to work for free but we needed to earn our wages.

I realised how hard it will be to continue our career without the knowledge of English. I was in shock and could not see myself staying in Australia. Roma and I became very frustrated and disappointed. There was nothing left to sing about.

We decided to return to Perth but we stopped in Melbourne where my sister settled. We were receiving refugee social security payments. My wife met a prosperous Polish man who promised her a comfortable glamorous life. I wanted to stay close to my daughter so I stayed in Melbourne and took a job in a printing factory. Work was still easy to find in those days. Later I started a cleaning business and also worked as a taxi driver. I simply realised that I

have to lower my standards, step down from the cloud and secure my survival.

I used to smoke a lot but I quit in one go. I did not feel any better for it though. In fact I still feel sick, I have every imaginable complaint. Perhaps I need something to give me a reason to live.

It was well known among my friends that I am a bush loving person so in 1986 an opal miner offered me a trip to Mintabie opal fields. He talked about the treasures of the opal mines and the adventure of the bush life. I had nothing to lose so I packed my van and followed him. I had no money for equipment; I lived on a claim in my van. I looked for someone with equipment to work for. A Polish man offered me a job in Coober Pedy. After a year with him I became very sick and had to go to Melbourne for the hospital treatment. I stayed over hot summer months with my sister so I could be close to my daughter. When I returned to Coober Pedy I found that my Polish friend had thrown all my belongings on the tip. I never asked him why and I never spoke to him again.

I started mining on my own but it was hard without any financial support. I opened a small restaurant in 1989 just before the war in Iraq. While Desert Storm was fighting Iraq people were scared of travelling and stopped going on holidays. I was losing business so I quit.

I was always fascinated by opal so I travelled to Lightning Ridge. Compared to Coober Pedy Lightning Ridge seemed a paradise with magnificent green bush and rivers. The town itself is just a convenience for me but the bush life is magnificent. I love to go down the river in my little boat. I always dreamed of a place like Lightning Ridge away from the rat race of the city life with all the stresses and pressures and frustration. This is a paradise of peace and quiet for me.

I was an angry, impatient man in the city but in the bush I found calm, beauty and tranquillity. I find bits of opal to keep me going. I have everything I need. I don't sing any more. I simply can not sing. In some ways I feel like I died twenty years ago. I have no ambition to do anything, I wish I could find an aim in life again, something to look forward to and forget that I am waiting for death. Something in me died when my wife left. I wanted to return to Poland but I didn't want to be away from my daughter.

I am 48 years old without a proper job and without a proper home. I suppose I became more and more comfortable living from day to day. I got used to not having a commitment to anything and anybody.

I am comfortable the way I am but I miss the relationship with a woman. I believe that a woman my age would look for security and money and I can not offer that.

I returned to Poland for my sister's funeral. I realised that I never really wanted to leave Poland. I only hoped that we would become more successful in Australia. I considered staying in Poland but it felt like being in jail after the freedom of living on Lightning Ridge opal fields. I also want to live where my daughter is.

I intend to stay in Lightning Ridge. There are another half a dozen Polish men but no women. I don't know why but Polish people never get along well with each other. We are not enemies but we are not close friends either.

I am always busy. I like to occupy my mind and my body. I like a good discussion about politics, current affairs and news. I am interested in folk

singing and dancing of other cultures. I love reading anything I get hold of. I attend educational courses to keep my mind working.

My relationship with my daughter is very important to me and I spend time with her at Gold coast where I stay with my sister during hot summer.

Although we are all the family to each other my daughter and I can not live together. Maybe we both need someone to blame for our misspent lives and we are the only people each of us can blame and hurt. Maybe that is love.

## **Alex Szperlak**

My story is written in the cement steps of the Bush Universe Observatory I built from 1983 until 1998. I also wrote the stories of astronomers who were persecuted and wrongfully punished like myself.

I was born in Jablonka, Poland in 1933. I migrated to Australia in 1970. In 1978 I was robbed and bashed. The police found me with the dead woman in my flat. I had no money, did not speak English and had no one who could speak for me. I was found guilty of murder and was sentenced to eight years imprisonment, which I began to serve in Boggo Road prison in Queensland. After a couple of years a journalist became interested in my case. After four years and six months he proved my innocence and I was released.

I came to Lightning Ridge to get away from people. I grow my fruit and vegetables and build the monument to those who, like myself have been wrongfully prosecuted. I was always interested in astronomy but had no opportunity to study at home. I have lots of books about astronomers who were persecuted and prosecuted for their beliefs and for daring to tell the truth. I am no longer alone because I know that they also suffered.

I wrote in cement what I know about the sky and universe and about the people who also loved to study the Universe.

I created my own oasis in the desert because I needed a place where nothing would disturb me.

PS

Alex died on 17.4.98 when the gas fridge exploded in his caravan.

His story written in the broken English tells the reader more about Alex than any elegant, eloquent phrases could.

Migrants from non-English background feel less alone when they read his story.