A Polish Christmas

Ritual drama and the experience of the Pahiatua Poles

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The Christmas play that is the focus of this paper belongs to a group of Polish refugee children who came to New Zealand in 1944. The children and their parents were taken from their homes in eastern Poland during the Soviet deportations of 1940-41. They spent the next two years in prison or hard labour camps, mostly in Siberia, until released by an amnesty negotiated between Stalin and General Sikorski, the Polish Prime Minister. The intention was that these released prisoners would form a Polish army on Russian territory. But in 1942 relations between Stalin and Sikorski became so strained that Stalin decided he was best rid of the troublesome Poles. They were evacuated to the Middle East.

Many of the children who came to New Zealand in 1944 were orphans. Their parents died as a result of the appalling conditions of their deportation; some joined the Polish Army, others were left behind in Russia. The children became attached to the army as their parents died or enlisted. They were more or less 'smuggled' out of Russia when the army left for the Middle East. In Persia and Lebanon orphanages were set up for them. It was from these that one group of 700 children and 100 adults were invited to New Zealand.

This nativity play was performed at the refugees' first Christmas in the Polish Children's Camp at Pahiatua. The version I follow was written by Revd Dr Gascoigne, the Director of Catholic Education, and printed in the *New Zealand Tablet* in February 1945.

Clearly moved by what he heard and saw that day, Revd Dr Gascoigne writes with feeling. The cave in Bethlehem, in act two, was so real for the audience that they felt as though they were there — perhaps a tribute to the dramatic intensity with which the children played their parts. This performance was one of the great experiences of his life. He was not alone, others were also moved including the children themselves. One of them told me that the build up of tension at this performance gave her a sense of ominous foreboding. Since the play was performed in Polish someone had clearly translated not only the play's symbols but also their meaning. Dr Gascoigne included this detail in his description, making it a rich source for anthropological analysis.

I am also moved when I read this account, despite a sense of personal discomfort. In the past I attributed this to the play's patriotism and maudlin sentimentality, but as I have explored the ambivalence at the heart of my own Polishness, I realise that this play exposes something in me which I am still coming to terms with. The emotions displayed here are raw and vulnerable; they arouse the pain of the past. This means a sense of wanting to protect these people which is part of being the child of a deportee myself. [1] My ambivalence could have prompted me to give less prominence to this play in my study of Polishness in New Zealand, but for a chance encounter with Joan Metge. When she pointed out that the play was a ritual drama, I saw its potential for telling me about Polish identity and I decided to learn about its symbolic content. As I have explored it more deeply, I have come to realise that its message lies at the heart of the history and identity of the Pahiatua children. Unwrapping the layers of meaning I have arrived at the interpretation which follows.

My interest in this play is its story or underlying myth: both for its New Zealand audience and for the Poles themselves. It was written by Pani Zieciak, [2] the director of the Polish *gimnazjum* (Polish secondary school) in Pahiatua. One of the Pahiatua children described her as a *polonistka*, meaning not only did she specialise in Polish studies, but more importantly, she was both a patriot and someone well-versed in Polish culture. When I first began to unravel the play's symbols for my Ph.D. thesis I knew nothing about this type of play. I discovered almost by chance when I was reading about Christmas custom that such plays, called *jaselka*, were specially written for children and were common in pre-war Poland. Clearly Pani Zieciak wrote her version for performance, but it addressed itself to the experience of the children, not their audience. It is therefore a window into their world view and offers us a unique opportunity to understand its unwritten assumptions. It was performed several times in the camp and once in the Wellington Town Hall in May 1945.

The play opens in a Polish landscape but it is not simply set in Poland; its physical setting is already a conceptual order. Polish space and time is evoked through symbols of Polish history and folk culture. These symbols, woven into a story about being Polish, are at the same time part of a larger drama, the birth of Christ. Thus the play works on several levels and offers the children a universal sense and meaning for their deportation.

In Poland, Christmas is a festival of light in the midst of winter darkness. Among the Polish peasantry, it was not only a great religious festival, but a time of magic, a legacy from older pagan divinities, when spirits roamed abroad and strange happenings occurred.

For the children in Pahiatua camp, who came from the agrarian world of pre-war Poland, [3] the play's Christmas setting evoked images of light, life, hope and plenty in the midst of austerity and death. These images were also metaphors for their experience: the children were still in the 'winter darkness' of the war and exile in New Zealand, looking forward to a 'Polish spring': the rebirth of an independent Polish state and their return home.

Christmas, sets the play in a region of Polish hopes: what does this look like?

The first act takes place in the mountains — a rural domain and the world of the peasantry. Peasants were the most conservative element of pre-war Polish society (Rose, p158). Their presence in this play represents faithfulness to traditional values. The Poles are saying to their New Zealand audience: 'These are the timeless values of Polish culture; this is us'. The mountains of this rural domain have obvious biblical connections but they are also distinctly Polish: the Carpathians in the south. The children came from Poland's eastern borderlands. It is highly unlikely they would have visited this part of the Carpathians. Why does their play begin here and not in their home region? To answer this question we need to look at the conceptual geography of Poland.

Poles are descended from the tribes of western Slavs, who came from an area somewhere in the middle of the North European Plain which extends from present day Germany through to the wider expanses of Russia and central Asia. To see Europe from a Polish perspective the outsider needs to stand on this plain and feel the vulnerability of its openness. Poland has expanded and contracted over it; at times, it has been a great and powerful nation, at others, it has disappeared. However, despite the changing shape of Polish territory, there has always been a heartland of Polish settlement situated between the Odra and the Vistula Rivers. Heartland suggests borderlands, but in fact only the eastern regions are referred to as borderlands. The heart of European civilisation has been its Latin core for Poles who have identified themselves with the west and not the east. Both the eastern and western boundaries of Poland have been contested and Poles have been in conflict with both Germany and Russia. Concepts of a Polish heartland and Poland's relationships with Germany and Russia are central to an understanding of Polish culture. The insecure hold Poles have had over their territory means not only have their boundaries physically moved many times in the past thousand years, but as issues of national sovereignty have come to the fore in this century, populations have been forced to move to conform to boundary changes. This makes life very difficult if one's sense of identity is rooted in the landscape. One consequence of the loss of Polish control over Polish places is that ideas of the polity: kingdom, state, nation, motherland, fatherland, have been separated from geographical territory in the Polish world view.[4]

From the natural limits for Poland's expansion and protection on this plain: the Baltic coast in the north, the Odra-Nysa River valleys in the west, and the Pripet marshes (Polesie) in the east, the mountains in southern Poland are a safe place to be. The Christmas play has deliberately not been set in the contentious borderlands of the children's experience, but in a place of Polish safety.

One region of the Carpathians is the home of the highlanders, or *Gorale*. A pre-war Polish ethnographer writes that the *Gorale* are noted for being particularly Polish in both language and tradition (Czaplicka, p365). The most romantic of all Poles in both temperament and appearance,

A brief synopsis of the Jaselka performed in Pahiatua

as described by Revd Dr Gascoigne

ACT ONE

In the mountains in Poland. Shepherds sit around their camp fire. Their conversation dies down and they begin to sing of their love for their native mountains. Their melodies change and become lamentations of the cruel fate which has overtaken their country.

A rugged mountaineer interrupts their singing. He brings bad news. The Germans have taken a group of Polish boys and girls to forced labour in Germany and are now on the way to their village. The shepherds decide to flee into the mountains. The whole company kneels and with outstretched hands implores God's protection as they set out on their journey. The air fills with heavenly music and six angels in shimmering white surround them. The angels deliver a message: God's protection is with them, peace will come to the world, and Poland will be free. The shepherds rejoice. Townspeople from Krakow, in folk dress, come on stage and the whole company dances in celebration. They decide to go to the cave of Bethlehem and offer their gratitude to the Christ-Child.

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ACT TWO

The cave of Bethlehem.

As the mountaineers enter, Mary is sitting with her child and Joseph stands beside her. Angels sing the joyous hymns of Christmas. The mountaineers come forward, kneel, and express gratitude for their deliverance. They also remind the Madonna and her child that their native land continues to suffer. They request mercy and justice for Poland. The citizens of Krakow follow.

Then come the Magi and Polish saints. The saints bring with them refugees from the deserts and the steppes of Siberia: 'poor, dishevelled figures, clad in rags and tatters they limp their way to the Christ-Child'. The refugees move to one side, kneel and four soldiers arrive, packs on their shoulders. They drape a Polish flag about the cradle and place the laurel wreath won on Monte Cassino beside the gifts of the Magi.

A stream of pilgrims follows. The bereaved women of Poland, wearing the black crepe of mourning, come with a tiny child who moves towards the crib and shows its bloody, tortured hands first to the Christ-Child, and then, to the Madonna.

A knight in shining armour arrives. Beneath his mail he wears a garment the colour of blood. He bears the arms of Warsaw and wields a sword. He reminds the Madonna how fitting is his blood-red tunic and black cloak.

There is movement among the mourners: the black-draped women bowed in unutterable suffering come forward again. They offer a goblet of blood and a handful of soil from the battlefields of Poland, both are laid at the feet of the Christ-Child. The injured child moves forward, again she lifts her bloody, torn hands and whispers that her brothers and sisters are being murdered. She speaks of her parents, who are dead and tells the Christ-Child that now that she too has lost her home, she also has nowhere to lay her head.

Finally, representatives of the whole Polish nation come into the cave, they fall on their knees asking for mercy and break into a song of supplication. The Madonna rises, goes to the child, kneels at his feet and asks for mercy for the Polish nation. The curtain falls as they sing 'Lift your hand, Holy Child, and bless our country'.

their name was associated with pride, dash, courage and honour — and independence (Benet, pp130-134). Their presence here describes a Polish place of safety as one of freedom, independence, and romance.

It is interesting that the threat to this Polish realm should come from Germany. An eastern invader would have been more true to the children's experience. Krakow and the Tatras became part of the Nazi-occupied territories. The infamous concentration camp of Auschwitz was in this region. However, when this play was performed the Soviet Union was New Zealand's ally and the fact that the children were deported was not openly acknowledged either by the press in New Zealand or the government.[5]

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As their journey of flight begins, the Poles ask for protection. The angels arrive as a sign that God's protection is assured although its exact nature is not clear.

What are they asking for? Possibly a miracle, but more likely, protection from a loss of faith that freedom will be theirs despite the bleakness of the present. Such faith is essential to their struggle in exile and this play aims to build that in the children. Poles regard some events of Polish history as miraculous. And it is worth considering the stories of these in some detail for the light they shed on the world view of the Pahiatua Poles.

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Firstly, when the Swedes invaded Poland in the seventeenth century, the country was completely overrun except for the fortified monastery at Czestochowa. Among its treasures was the famous icon of the Black Madonna said to have been painted by St. Luke. The monastery was defended against an army of 10,000 Swedes, by 68 monks, 50 knights, 160 soldiers and the Black Madonna (Newman, pp122-123). At the height of the siege, it is said she projected herself on a great cloud and the terrified Swedes retreated. The king, who had dedicated Poland to the Virgin as he went to battle, proclaimed her Queen of Poland and later, the icon was ceremonially consecrated. To this day, the icon of the Black Madonna represents the power of the Virgin in Polish life and unites under one image her political and religious roles of queen and spiritual mother.

The second miracle is the so-called 'Miracle of the Vistula' (*Cud nad Visla*), when the Poles defeated the Red Army in August 1920. The reborn Polish Republic of the inter-war period emerged more as a result of the collapse of all established order in Central and Eastern Europe than as a consequence of the Treaty of Versailles. In the colourful language of historian Norman Davies, this condemned the infant Republic to a series of nursery brawls, the most serious of which was the Polish-Soviet war of 1919-1920 (see Davies, Vol 1, pp393-402). The Bolsheviks saw Poland as their Red Bridge into revolutionary Germany. Their unexpected defeat by a daring Polish manoeuvre became the Miracle of the Vistula and gave Poles a role as the saviours of Western Europe.[6]

These two 'miracles' have an important place in the romantic interpretation of Polish history; an interpretation profoundly influenced by Polish messianism, it is also part of the world view implicit in this *jaselka*.

The plea for protection is a plea against a loss of faith in Poland's resurrection. This play is itself an expression of that, one that assures that a meaning for Polish suffering can be found in Catholic belief.

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After two years in prison and hard-labour camps in the USSR, and evacuation to the Middle East, 800 polish refugees, mostly children, arrive in New Zealand.

Opposite above: A New Zealand soldier returning home holds a Polish child, on board the 'General Randall', October 1944.

Opposite below: On board the train bound for Pahiatua, a Polish woman and three children share food prepared by Red Cross volunteers.

Above: At Palmerston North, the train stopped in the square and the whole city turned out to greet the children.

Below: Pahiatua Station, army personnel waiting to take the children to the Polish Children's Camp.

The angels arrive and the hope for freedom and peace is assured. The townspeople of Krakow join those gathered on stage and they celebrate their deliverance.

Why was the folk culture of the Krakow region chosen for this celebration rather than the folk culture of the regions from which the children came? It is likely that Pani Zieciak chose Krakow for its symbolic value as a repository of Polish culture. Unlike many other Polish cities which are located more centrally on the North European Plain, it has been spared the ravages of war since the Middle Ages, giving it a quality which has come to epitomise Poland's history (Benes & Pounds, p107). As one of Poland's most ancient cities — the former capital, site of the first university, and the King's palace — its historical associations are many and provide a rich source for symbolic representation. The dancers from Krakow draw the focus of the play back into the Polish heartland, and a realm of cultural stability that the borderlands of eastern Poland rarely experienced. The Krakovians bring with them aspects of the past of which Poles are most proud. Their presence testifies to moments of freedom and peace when culture flourished.

During the nineteenth century when Poland was partitioned, Krakovians (under Austrian jurisdiction) 'were free from the atmosphere of deprivation and harassment induced by Tsardom; and they were free from the rapid social changes, and the mania for self-improvement, which beset the Poles in Prussia' (Davies, Vol 2, p161). In the relatively tolerant and liberal atmosphere of the Austrian Partition, Poles were still free to build upon the educational and cultural achievements of earlier centuries and the Catholic Church was permitted to develop Polish schools. So that, despite foreign domination, Krakow retained its place as a centre of Polish cultural and intellectual life (see Davies, Vol 1, pp155-157).

Krakow has also had a long association with those who lived and died for the cause of Polish freedom and nationhood. It is a city of Polish heroes: intellectual, artistic, military or religious. From this perspective, the men and women of Krakow are 'true Poles'. in today's jargon, we would say they were 'role models' for the children's Polishness which, in a sense, was being artificially created in Pahiatua camp.

So as the Krakovians enter and dance we witness a celebration both literally and metaphorically of all that is best in their culture. Coming from the heartland, the Krakovians and *Gorale* are reminders of what has been preserved through other periods of darkness in Poland's history.

The first act of the play is a search for hope. Images of Polish culture and history which offer encouragement to Poles are remembered and with these firmly in focus the

play turns towards the horror and despair of the deportation. In act two, the world of Polish culture is opened out into a broader Christian context.

Poland adopted Christianity in the tenth century, since then, it has been drawn into the politics of western Christendom often to its own detriment. Thus the Christian setting of this play has both a spiritual and a political dimension. Poland's eastern Slavic neighbours (not only Russians) embraced Byzantine Christianity, and religion became both a marker of identity, and a source of conflict between them. In the centuries of conflict between Poles and Russians, Poles have seen themselves as the last bulwark of Christendom and adopted the title of *antemurale Christianitatis*. Clearly the Poles were not the last bulwark, but Orthodox spirituality and its submission to autocracy have been regarded as alien. The Christian setting of this play draws on this history and the Poles are implicitly saying to their audience: 'We Poles like you are Christian people, we share your inheritance of western spirituality and culture and despite our recent encounter with "Asia"[7] we are cultured people not eastern barbarians'.

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Before we look at the symbols of the second act in more detail I would like to say a few words about the biblical setting.

Of the four gospels of the New Testament only two have infancy narratives: *Matthew* and *Luke*. The first act of this play draws on the imagery of *Luke* where we find the familiar iconography of Christmas: the miraculous conception of a saviour-hero who will bring light, joy, and hope to the world, and a birth attended by angels and shepherds. The imagery of Polish hope is supported by the Christian message of *hope* from this gospel.

Matthew's text is sinister by comparison. There we have the visit of the Magi, Herod's fear and jealousy, the Massacre of the Innocents and the flight into exile. There is little to celebrate in this story: no angels, no glorias and no visions. Its iconography prefigures the difficulties of the saviour-hero's journey and the price he must pay to bring redemption to others.

The second act of the play opens in Bethlehem. By expanding the visitation of the Shepherds and the Magi to include all the suffering of Poland, the theme of Matthew's gospel presents the children with an image of their own journey and an understanding of their destiny as 'true Poles'.

And so the Polish saints enter the stage. Unlike the representatives of the folk culture, the saints are all in some way connected with the borderlands from which the children came. The first is Queen Jadwiga. In 1376, when only eleven years old, she was pressed to reject her fiancé, a Hapsburg prince, to marry the Lithuanian prince, Jogaila,

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The Weekly News

Life in the Pahiatua Camp.

Opposite above: A younger group of boys with their Polish caregiver queue outside one of the dining halls.

Opposite below: New Zealand army personnel serve food to the children on their first day at the Pahiatua camp.

Above: A group of younger children and their caregivers in their dormitory.

Bellow: Polish children, Pahiatua camp; the swings in their play area had to be mended after the first fortnight, they had worn them out.

a man more than three times her age. In return for her hand, Jogaila acceded to several demands from the Polish barons, among them was his baptism and the conversion of all his pagan subjects to Christianity. The marriage duly took place and brought about the union of the kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania which was to last four centuries. This political alliance created a vast Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania whose influence extended far into the eastern lands. As a result of the union Lithuania was polonised and its capital Vilnius became a city as important to Polish culture as Krakow. But the beginning of this great alliance was created at great personal cost to Jadwiga (see Davies, Vol 1, p118).

Her presence in this play condenses several symbolic domains. Her reign offers an image of Poland whose territory and influence extend into the eastern lands and include those borderlands from which the children were deported in 1940-41. But she also stands for the sacrifices of youth in a cause for the greater good. A sacrifice that was clearly expected of all Polish children during the war.

Jadwiga is followed by Stanislaw, the patron saint of Poland, and one of the earliest Polish saints. Stanislaw, a Bishop of Krakow, was killed and dismembered at his altar in 1079 for denouncing the king's oppressive rule. 'His dismembered body was seen as the symbol of a divided country; and its miraculous recomposition was taken as prophecy of Poland's eventual resurrection' (Davies, Vol 1, p70). The presence of Stanislaw introduces themes of martyrdom, crucifixion and resurrection which are taken up again and again from now on. We are attendant to a birth, but this part of the play constantly draws us back into the realm of death. The horror of the Soviet camps was more alive to the Poles than their survival and safe passage to New Zealand. St Stanislaw is followed by St Kazimierz (who died in 1484). He is the patron saint of Poland and Lithuania. Son of the king, he refused his father's demand to lead an army against the King of Hungary (in 1471) for which he was banished. Miracles are said to have often taken place at his tomb in Vilnius.

Next comes St Stanislaw Kostka who is the patron saint of young people. He died at eighteen having lived a life of mortification, ecstasies, visions and great devotion to God. Like St Kazimierz he disobeyed his father;

and then walked 350 miles to join the Jesuits.

The last is St Andrzej Bobola also a Jesuit, and martyr, another saint of the eastern lands. St Andrzej was murdered by Cossacks near Pinsk (in 1657).

Pani Zieciak clearly chose these particular saints for their youth, their sacrifice for the Polish cause, and their connections with Poland's eastern lands. They stand for the innocent, the poor, and the suffering, for the rights of the nation or culture against the might of the state, for the idealism of youth against oppressive authority, and for the tragedy of Poland's relationship with Russia for the people of the borderlands (who included Jews, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians).

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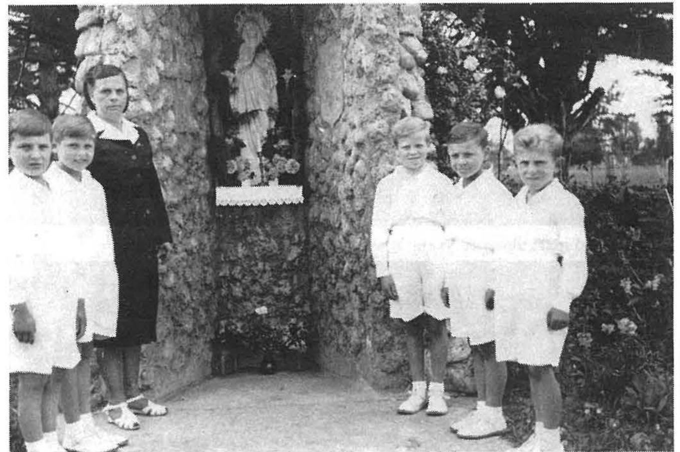
The saints bring with them the refugees who have been stripped of everything they have known and loved: families, homes, livelihood, and way of life. They have become pawns in political machinations beyond their control. Here, loss is becoming spiritualised into sacrifice and as they indicate to the Madonna they are still waiting for liberation.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The soldiers arrive. Revd Dr Gascoigne saw the wreath they laid before the Christ-child as a symbol of the 'blood which from age to age never seems to cease to flow for the redemption of mankind'. This messianic understanding of Polish sacrifice belongs to the nineteenth century tradition of Polish Romantic Nationalism. The greatest exponent of this was poet Adam Mickiewicz, who wrote of Poland as a 'Christ among nations', and drew a parallel between the redemptive suffering of Christ and that of Poland.[8]

The imagery of sacrifice and death continues to build in intensity and the bereaved of Poland now come to the cave — the suffering children and their mourning mothers. They stand before the Madonna.

Then the spirit of Warsaw arrives. If Krakow embodies the essence of Polish culture, then Warsaw is the land's more recent and present heart. This knight does not bring relief from the unrelenting omnipresence of death and suffering. He indicates the devastation of that heart, in the aftermath of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. In terms of culture and identity, the razing of Warsaw to the ground by the Nazis was the most significant blow to the reborn Polish Republic, although it was not the most horrifying event of the war. Warsaw was left a deserted mound of rubble, silent and empty. The Pahiatua Poles recent experience of the system of penal exile in the Soviet Union would have led them to paint the grimmest scenario for Poland as Soviet soldiers entered Warsaw. They would not have imagined the 'cold war', but rather the whole of Poland deported as they had been. We approach the limits of Polish hope in the face of such horror.

Images of loss and sacrifice are intensified by the arrival of yet more mourners who offer blood and soil; the message of life and death for Poland is now emphatically spelled out. The land and the people are contained in these two tokens. Implicitly they ask: if land and people are totally destroyed what will be left? How could Poland be reborn? From within the world view of Polish faithfulness to a Christian God (the perspective of the last bulwark of Christendom) and the tradition of Polish romanticism, this play asks that God a question which cannot be articulated directly: what sense does it make for Poland to be given a new role to play on the stage of Europe after World War One, only to be destroyed twenty-five years later? How much do Poles have to suffer before Poland is free? Many of these people had been to the limits of human suffering. These are not idle questions. Almost too black to be contemplated, they are without

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Catholicism was a vital part of the Polish world of the camp; the rhythms of daily life were set by religious ritual and custom. The children's Polishness was supported and nurtured by their Catholicism as much as by their native language.

Opposite above: The interdependence of Polish identity and Catholic ritual is clearly seen in this altar from the camp. Below the Polish emblem of the eagle stands the icon of the Madonna of Czestochowa. Polish colours of red and white stream down from the eagle's over-arching presence, and surround the whole. The flowers and greenery show an altar decorated for the celebration of life.

Opposite below: A First Communion group at the grotto built by the children from riverstones, soon after they arrived. Thirty years later it was the only surviving remnant of the camp and was dismantled and placed in the base of the Polish Memorial, Pahiatua.

Above: Mrs Styglan (nèe Bazgier) kneels during Mass in the Sala odczytowa (auditorium) at the Polish Children's Camp.

answer; and their presence stands as an awesome but silent backdrop to all that takes place beneath it.

It is Mary to whom the second half of this play is addressed. It seems appropriate now to ask who is this woman and who is her son. The Marian cult has long been a feature of Polish religiosity and an outsider to Polish affairs could be forgiven for assuming that Polish Catholicism focuses on Mary and not on Christ.

How has she come to have such a central role in Polish affairs? I have already mentioned the history of the icon of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa as one aspect of her power. The significance of Marian worship to Polish Catholicism may also be partially explained by the descending christology which has dominated western Christianity for so long. Here Jesus' role as son of God is emphasised at the expense of his humanity; as a deity he has become unapproachable and associated with the Father's roles of omnipotent judge and punisher. Thus Mary has taken over the human face of the deity: her humanity is undoubted and her suffering, human suffering. Poles acknowledge this in a common saying: '*Preze serce matki do Chrystusa*' ('through the heart of the mother to Christ'). She becomes the mediator between the supernatural and the merely human, and this is clearly her role in this nativity play. However, her symbolic power stretches far beyond this role.

She is also an image of the motherly aspect of Polish reality which nurtures and produces the Polish person. A sense of Polishness is learned as much as it is a question of ancestry or birthplace. One way of becoming Polish is through the guidance of a Polish mother: this may be a real mother, grandmother, or an even more abstract mother figure. The images of Poland which stand behind this Christmas play are feminine. The Polish word for Poland, *Polska*, is also feminine and connotes far more than a country. Even English writers refer to Poland as 'she'. The social being, the Pole, is not simply born from this motherland, but nurtured as a Pole and created by her. The idea of Poland as a mother figure is found in the concept *macierz* which derives from the Polish word for mother, *matka*.

The foreign domination of Polish territory has determined that Poland is as much a place of the mind as it is an independent polity. *Macierz* describes this Poland. However it is not a word in common usage. Among Poles in New Zealand, I have only heard it used in the context of *macierz szkolna*, literally 'mother school'; it is the name of an émigré school organisation based in London. This particular usage speaks for itself: the maintenance of ethnic identity in exile

is a feminine or motherly kind of education. The older concept, *ojczyzna*, or 'fatherland', is more commonly used but despite being derived from *ojciec* or 'father', it is still a feminine word. Much could be said about the concept of the Polish motherland, but briefly, *macierz* captures something of the role that Polish women have played in educating their children to be Polish during the nineteenth century when Poland was partitioned. In Russian and Prussian Poland, Polish was not to be spoken in schools on pain of expulsion. Polish books were banned and Polish teachers had to speak to the children in Russian or German on pain of dismissal [9] (Davies, Vol. 2, pp99-105,123-127). Polish education went underground: it took place in clandestine meetings or in the home. Polish women and priests became the self-appointed apostles of patriotism, especially among the peasantry, through their teaching of language and literature.

This sense of the Polish motherland played an important part in the lives of the children in the Pahiatua camp, whose real mothers were absent or dead, and who were brought up in a world largely provided by Polish women. In his magisterial study of loss and attachment in childhood, John Bowlby (pp7-14) points out that grief is not short-lived for children, who will continue to search for absent mothers and mother figures long after their loss. For some children, 'Poland' replaced lost mothers and fathers. In this play, we can begin to see how this happened.

The icon of the madonna and her dying child condenses all the imagery of soil, blood, Polish saints, heroes and martyrs: images of birth in death and death in birth. Since she is both queen and mother, she is also the bearer and nurturer of Polish children, that is the people of Poland, who need to be prepared for their messianic future when as saviour-heroes they may be called to struggle for Polish freedom. These are Polish children with a sense of mission and destiny as part of their identity, and they must prepare for their fight to be Polish. There is a parallel between the children's own experience and the biblical story they are acting out. They had already known the Massacre of the Innocents, the flight and the exile; they had made the hero's sacrifice and undertaken his journey. In the play's realm of religious hope, they are offered the role of saviour-heroes for the new Poland. As the play draws to a close, representa-

Below: Farmgate, Pahiatua Children's Camp. At the threshold of a new life these Polish boys bring with them a worldly and characterful countenance that belies their age, and which contrasts strikingly with their New Zealand peers.

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Above: Despite its bleak setting, the camp had quickly become home, 'a little Poland in the Antipodes' (as it was coined in the press) to its 800 Polish residents. In 1949, shortly after this photo was taken, the Camp was disbanded. Its residents were sent to Catholic boarding schools and hostels country-wide. This was virtually a second exile, a process for many as traumatic as the first.

tives of the entire Polish nation are assembled, we await the final scene of a resurrected Poland.[10]

Polish exiles forced away from Poland search for an understanding of the suffering of being Polish. They turn toward an otherworldly source for hope and comfort, they point to Polish sacrifice throughout the centuries and to the sacrifices of the Polish heroes, saints and martyrs who symbolically represent all Poles. This sacrifice is offered for what they have lost, a free and independent Poland, that it may be regained. It is offered to the Christ-child through Mary. She herself is an image of Poland, but so is her son. This seems contradictory but it is not. For the root story — the one that lies behind the hero-myth of death and resurrection — is the biblical myth of origin, the second story of 'Genesis', in which, in the beginning human beings found themselves, in paradise, in a primordial state of oneness. According to the myth, the paradox of exile is this lost sense of oneness. For Christians the return home occurs in the process of history via the sacrifice of the Messiah, the hero, the Christ, and human life which follows this journey, to that original state of oneness. The parallels with Poland are obvious, Poland is exiled from itself in all the periods of foreign domination. It returns to sovereignty through its sacrificial history.

The biblical story is one of reunion, return, coming home, and so was the children's nativity play. On an individual level it was also an expression of the hope of Poles in New Zealand for their return to Poland at the end of the war. The Madonna takes this message to her son and the play is over.

The interpretation I have offered of this *jaselka* is an insider's view. Now that it no longer seems 'other', I read this play and the fullness of its symbolic world is present to me without analysis. I began my study of Polishness in New Zealand not with the history of the Polish children but with the idea that I was studying a distinct ethnic community. I had not developed a feeling for Polish history then, and my reading of the past did not connect with the people I was meeting and interviewing. My breakthrough to the beginnings of an insider's understanding came with my awareness that Poles used symbols in similar ways to other communities I had studied as an undergraduate in anthropology. I entered Polish history through the symbols I encountered in my fieldwork. Then, I was able to move from looking for Polish groups to trying to understand Polish experience. It was a significant step in the growth of understanding. The symbolic perspective gave me an inroad into Polish history. However, the symbolic imagination is neither logical nor chronological; signifiers bounce off one another in all directions, the heady proliferation of meaning is as disorienting as it is exciting. Analytically you go round in circles. To move out of the tangle of endlessly reflexive interpretation is to move to another level of discourse.

Anthropologists have produced a large body of scholarly literature describing symbols and how they work in human communities. Using this literature it would be possible to describe how the imagery of this play works, and move

analysis to another level of discourse. But this would also take us away from the world of the children. So I would like to take a different tack. One of these anthropologists, Victor Turner, who has made a significant contribution to our understanding of symbols, turned his attention to performance at the end of a long career in studying ritual and social dramas. He argues that:

> ... every type of cultural performance including ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre, poetry is explanation and explication of life itself ... . Through the performance process ... what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning ...is drawn forth. ... A performance then, is the proper finale of an experience ... . (Turner, p.13).

If we put the historical and religious symbols of this Christmas drama to one side for a moment, it is clear that this *jaselka* is about the Polish experience of the war, the political-moral arena of which stands as an invisible backdrop to all that takes place on stage. The play's power to communicate with, and give life to, its symbols comes from the rage and grief of what happened to Poles and to Poland. More than a ritual drama, it is a morally charged story (Clifford, p.100). As Turner argues, it attempts to explain, but since its symbols work not with logic but with paradox, finally it can only affirm that to be Polish is to suffer: an assumption that its messianic context begins with. Any meaning beyond this cannot come from within Polish history but is given by its narrative structure.

The sheer ability to turn the chaos of their experience into story – a Polish one and a religious one – and then to act it out (which of course is the essence of ritual) gave the Polish exiles a sense of order to all that had happened to them. One of the most destructive aspects of extreme pain, both mental and physical, is the disorientation and confusion it brings to one's life. Story tames experience. Ritual revisits it. In a recent issue of *Sport* 7(1991), Margaret Mahy says 'we encounter [story] in childhood and live with it all our lives. Without the ability to tell or live by prescribed stories we lose the ability to make sense of our lives'.

I call stories like this Christmas play, 'narratives of remembering'. It has always seemed absurd to me that Poles would want to maintain their identity in exile if their understanding of their Polishness means that they will suffer. Why not have done with it and assimilate as a New Zealander? This seems eminently more practical and sensible. However, it is not quite that simple. Migrants and refugees are faced with a dilemma: they can remember the past, face the pain of loss and retain a sense of continuity and identity; or they can forget the past, and sustain a sense of dislocation. 'Narratives of remembering' avoid this problem and allow the paradox of migration to be present in the migrant's life. With them, identity and experience are maintained, there is a sense of continuity with the past but without the distress of perpetually reviving one's personal loss and the pain associated with it. The symbols of this *jaselka* work with memory: they reminded the Pahiatua Poles of what it means to be Polish. The symbols tethered their experience to a structure,[11] in this case the Christ-story, which gave meaning and vent to the emotions of their grief.[12] As we have seen in this process the pain of political oppression is transformed into spiritual hope, loss becomes sacrifice, and sacrifice the price of liberation.

Looking at Poland today, they would say: 'our hopes have been fulfilled'.

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Footnotes

[1] Although I am not a child of those who came to Pahiatua.

[2] *Pani* means Mrs or Madam. Since Pani Zieciak was always referred to by her Polish title by both Poles and New Zealanders in the camp I continue to do so here.

[3] According to Gross(1979:15), Poland was one of the agricultural countries of Europe, in the inter-war period. Almost 75% of the population of pre-war Poland worked in the agricultural sector, whether as labourers or as peasants. See Davies(1981b:406).

[4] A valuable cultural attribute for maintaining a culture in exile.

[5] See for example the caption under the photographs of the children's arrival printed in *Weekly News* (8 November, 1944), which reads: 'After being driven from their homes in Eastern Poland by the German invasion to temporary asylum in Russia ... '. And Prime Minister Peter Fraser reported in Parliament: 'They escaped from Poland into Russia. They wandered about in all kinds of weather, without sufficient shelter, without sufficient food'(Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1972:79). Both of these reports are distortions of fact.

[6] See Lord D'Abernon's (the British Ambassador in Berlin) comments in Davies (Vol. 2, pp399-401).

[7] A reference to the Polish percepton of the Russian inheritance of the Mongol Yoke.

[8] This tradition continues until the present day. Another romantic poet, Juliusz Slowacki, wrote of a Polish Pope who would cleanse the world's wounds. Karol Wojtyla's papacy appears to have been prefigured in this poem. Poles claim that without a Polish Pope Solidarity would not have established itself to the degree which it did, the socialist government of Poland would not have crumpled, the revolution in eastern Europe would not have taken place, and the major about face in the Soviet Union could not have happened.

[9] See Madame Curie's vivid description quoted by Davies (Volume 2, pp100-101).

[10] Of course in recent years the play's awaited final act has come to pass for those still living in exile; fifty years after the war Poland is once again an independent nation.

[11] An insight of Edward de Bono's on the way symbols work and their usefulness for remembering.

[12] According to Sapir (1934:493) symbols provde a way of releasing emotional tension in a conscious or unconscious form.

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