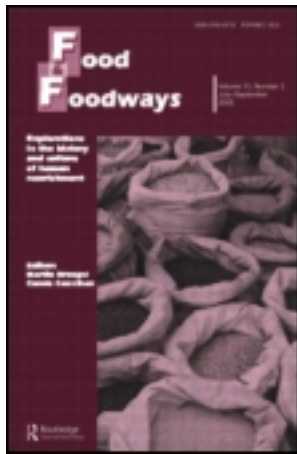


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## Food and Foodways: Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gfof20>

### Food in Traumatic Times: Women, Foodways and 'Polishness' During a Wartime 'Odyssey'

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Version of record first published: 09 Oct 2012.

To cite this article: Monica Janowski (2012): Food in Traumatic Times: Women, Foodways and 'Polishness' During a Wartime 'Odyssey', *Food and Foodways: Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment*, 20:3-4, 326-349

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2012.715969>

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## **Food in Traumatic Times: Women, Foodways and ‘Polishness’ During a Wartime ‘Odyssey’**

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*In this article I explore the pivotal role of food in holding together, projecting and re-imagining a lost world and identity in the context of extreme trauma and dislocation. I do this through the story of seven women deported by the Soviet Union from the eastern borderlands of Poland in 1940, who experienced an ‘odyssey’ through Russia, the Middle East, and Africa which ended in London in the late 1940s. I explore how for them, their success in approximating ‘proper’ food in this context acted as a kind of barometer indicating their success in maintaining identity, social life and kinship. In this traumatic context the connection between the way in which food is prepared and consumed and the maintenance of social and kin structure comes through very clearly, including in particular the role of bread as the central food symbolising ‘proper’ life. The nature of kinship as not only centred on the family which eats ‘proper meals’ together but as something ‘nested’ and culminating symbolically in the imagined community of the Polish nation is demonstrated in the consumption of food in larger-scale contexts, in army and refugee camps and in other communal contexts during the war and afterwards in the UK. I explore how snack foods, on the other hand, served to generate ‘identity extensions’ through eating new foods with people outside the Polish community. Finally, I explore the way in which food reflects the sometimes uneasy sense of identity experienced by younger deportees and second generation Poles in the UK, including the creation of new kinds of identity which are both founded in and expressed through new, hybrid ways of eating.*

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*‘...when we were starving in Russia and there was absolutely nothing to eat ... I remember we lived in a hut with another big family of boys ... And they remember picking the green sort of salad—it’s called in Polish lebioda—it’s like salad thing, green. And they chopped, without eggs, nothing. But they made it into kotlety [normally made of onions, egg, breadcrumbs, minced meat] and fried it and ate it like that. I wonder what English would have made into, chips or ...’ (laughs) (Regina Dyszynska, 29 November 2008)*

In this paper I explore the pivotal role of food in holding together, projecting and re-imagining a lost world and identity, through the story of seven women deported by the Soviet Union from the eastern borderlands of Poland in 1940. The women on whom I focus in this article—Danuta Gradosielska, Michalina Płuciennik, Regina Dyszynska, Jadzia Osostowicz, Irena Miluska, Aniela Polnik, and my own mother-in-law Aniela Janowska—experienced what is often described by them and their relatives as an ‘odyssey’<sup>1</sup>, travelling through the Middle East and then Africa before finally coming to rest in the UK in the late 1940s. During this journey, and in their lives in the UK, they have fought to hold on to their Polish identity, expressing and confirming this to a large extent though what, how and with whom they have eaten.

I am using an approach which resonates with Carole Counihan’s food-centred life history methodology (Counihan 2007). I focus on women because food is largely prepared and associated with women (e.g. see Counihan 2002; Carsten 1997; van Esterik and Coynihan 1997; Harbottle 2004; Janowski and Kerlogue 2007; Weismantel 1988). My data underline the validity of this approach; I hope to demonstrate that food provides a unique means of comprehending the experiences of those deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan, and makes clear the centrality of the female role, not only in the domestic sphere but in a wider social context.

Whilst there is some material available from studies on the role of food in the context of migration (e.g. Ray 2004, Buckser 1999, and the other articles in this collection), these are not of the type of situation described here, where war has led to violent disruption and deportation. Polish attempts to ‘act out’, maintain, and manipulate identity and social and kin structure in this context are therefore of interest, not only in relation to this particular situation but potentially also in relation to understanding how people react to other extreme situations, where it is likely that food is also used to help negotiate traumatic change and disruption.

My interest in the experiences of these women began with the story of my mother-in-law. In 1940 she was deported, like all the other women I focus on, from what was then Eastern Poland into the depths of the Soviet Union, and eventually left the Soviet Union with the Polish army formed by General Anders in 1942 near Tashkent in Uzbekistan. She, like these women, spent the rest of the war under British auspices, in her case in a camp in

Masindi in Uganda. All of the other women to whom I talked about their experiences travelled through different versions of the 'odyssey' before they all came to rest within the same Polish Catholic parish centred on the Polish 'parish house' (*dom parafialny*) in Goodmayes, Essex.

I have had a long-term association with the Polish parish to which the women belong. My husband, daughter, and I lived with my mother-in-law Aniela Janowska from 1988 until her death in 2000, in the house to which her extended family moved in 1959. She died in 2000 and I never interviewed her in a formal way about her experiences during the war, but learnt a good deal through informal conversation about what she had experienced—and through watching her cooking, discussing food, and cooking with her. Using a mixture of Polish and English depending on the preference of the interviewee (it was common for them to switch between languages within the interview) I interviewed all the other women in late 2008 and 2009, recording the interviews. I speak and understand Polish quite well, having lived in Poland for two years in the 1970s (when no-one spoke English there!). I had already interviewed all except Regina Dyszynska in a focus group discussion early in 2007, and had also carried out individual interviews with Danuta Gradosielska and Jadzia Osostowicz at that time about their experiences during the war. I have also had regular social interaction and casual discussions with many of the women through my participation in parish-based activities, including my membership of the Polish parish choir.

The interviews were only lightly structured and were not based on specific questions. The aim was to maintain a real conversation and interaction. To provide a framework for discussion, I drew on the food diaries which I had previously asked all of the women to keep for a few months; and on requesting that they tell their stories from the war. The interviews were allowed to proceed as normal conversations, with occasional direction-changing questions from me, particularly in relation to focusing the conversation on the significance of food. I recorded and transcribed the whole of the interviews.

I have found that talking about food is an effective way of developing relationships 'woman-to-woman', and of establishing shared perceptions and experiences. While what the women spoke of—deportation, exile and trauma—was beyond my direct comprehension, approaching this through the lens of food meant that I could empathize with much of what they said. While I could not imagine not having enough to eat, I could imagine not being able to give a child the food it requests; the problems associated with not having the right festive foods for Christmas; and trying to cobble together a dish with the 'wrong' ingredients. This demonstrates how food acts as a distinctive 'women's voice', setting up a particular kind of communicative situation between women, something also demonstrated by Annie Hauck-Lawson, talking to immigrant Polish women in New York City; and Meredith Abarca, chatting about food with working class Mexican and Mexican-American women (Abarca 2001, 2004, 2006; Hauck-Lawson 1998).

I am entangled with the data I am presenting here. I cannot pretend a distance from it. Is this a problem? There has been debate in recent years about the 'reflexivity' of anthropology. In a positivist context, there is a sense in which the anthropologist, as 'scientist', is supposed to remain separate and unengaged with those whom s/he is studying. However, it is arguable that all anthropology is essentially reflexive (Okely 1992: 24). In recent years, there has been a growing acceptance of the impossibility of avoiding reflexivity within social research; 'Is knowledge of anything other than knowledge of reflexivity possible?' as Charlotte Aull Davies puts it (Davies 1999; 10). My own position, entangled in a very overt way with my data, is not, then, essentially different from any other anthropologist's position; it only makes explicit what is veiled over in the context of more 'traditional' anthropological fieldwork, including my own fieldwork in my other field site, the Kelabit Highlands in Borneo.

#### DEPORTEE VIGNETTES

*Aniela Janowska.* Born 1913 in Wędzirz (now Szewczenko) near Dolina south of Lwów, now in Ukraine. Deported with her mother, brother, sister, two nieces, and one nephew. Her family all survived but she was pregnant when she was deported and the baby she gave birth to in Kazakhstan died at the age of 8 months. After leaving the Soviet Union, sent to Masindi camp, Uganda.

*Danuta Gradosielska.* Born in 1925 in Osada Krechowicka, near Równe (now Rivne), Wołyń Province, NE of Lwów, now in Ukraine. Deported with her sister, her brother, her stepmother, and her father. One sister died of meningitis in Russia. After leaving the Soviet Union, joined the Polish Second Corps as a driver.

*Irena Miluska.* Born in 1938 in Arsenowicze between Przemsyl & Rzeszów, now in Ukraine. Deported with her mother, father, brother, and two sisters. All survived. After leaving the Soviet Union, sent to Masindi camp, Uganda.

*Michalina Płuciennik.* Born in 1922 in Lipowiec (now Wróblewice) near Lwów, now in Ukraine. Deported with her mother, father, and brother. All survived. After leaving the Soviet Union, sent to Tenggeru camp, Tanganyika (Tanzania).

*Jadzia Osostowicz.* Born in 1925 in Krzemeniec (now Kremenetz) east of Lwów, now in Ukraine. Deported with one brother and her mother and father. All survived. After leaving the Soviet Union, spent the rest of the war in Palestine with her parents, who worked at Polish schools.

*Aniela Polnik.* Born in 1937 in Niedzwiedzie SE of Lwów, now in Ukraine. Deported with her two older sisters and her older brother and both of her parents. One sister starved to death in Russia, her brother was beaten to death for killing a dog for food, and her mother died of sickness and a

'broken heart' on the lorry from Pahlevi to Tehran. After leaving the Soviet Union, sent to Lusaka camp, Northern Rhodesia (Zambia).

*Regina Dyszynska*. Born in 1932 in Volkovisk, Białystok, now in Belarus. Deported with her mother, father and brother. All survived, although her mother did not manage to leave Russia with the rest of the family and they were only reunited many years later, in Scotland. After leaving the Soviet Union, sent to Polish orphanage/boarding school in Palestine.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE DEPORTATIONS

On September 17, 1939 the Soviet Union invaded Poland, two weeks after Germany had invaded from the west. They deported large numbers of ethnic Poles (the numbers are unclear and vary a good deal depending on source; Wikipedia estimates 4.5 million—[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population\\_transfer\\_in\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Union](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population_transfer_in_the_Soviet_Union)) to Siberia and Kazakhstan, including the women who are the subject of this article. This included Polish military settlers (*osadniki*) who had been granted land by the Polish government in the eastern areas in the 1920s because of their service in the Polish-Russian war in 1918–1921. A decree was passed by the Russians on December 29, 1939 allowing for deportations of *osadniki* east into European Russia, Siberia and the Urals. On February 10, 1940 a mass deportation of *osadniki*, and also of the families of foresters (possibly with the aim of preventing partisan activity in the forests) took place. Irena Miluska, Danuta Gradosielska, Michalina Płuciennik, and Regina Dyszynska were among these deportees, all because their families were *osadniki* except for Regina, whose father was a forester. A further wave of deportations, this time of the families of soldiers and leading citizens, took place on April 13, 1940, and this is when Aniela Polnik, as well as my mother-in-law and her family, were deported, as her husband, my father-in-law, was a soldier. Another deportation took place on June 29, 1940 when Jadzia Osostowicz was deported from Lwów, where she and her family had fled from their home in Krzemeniec east of the city. One more deportation took place the following year, between June 14–20, 1941.

For many years the deportations and the subsequent experiences of the deportees went largely unreported, with few personal accounts written (although see Wasilewska 1970; Porajska 1988) but since 1990 and particularly since 2000, as it has become easier to publish privately, many more personal accounts have been published (e.g. see Rawicz 1956; Ognowska-Coates 1992; Krawecka 1994; Edwards 2002; Krajewski 2002; Topolski 2002; Tomaszuk 2004; Pavlovich 2006; Rohan 2007; Kowalski and Kowalski Everist 2009).

The deportees were taken from their homes in the dead of night, loaded onto cattle trucks on trains which transported them east for many

weeks. The February 1940 transports were mainly directed to Siberia, to mining and forestry camps, where the deportees were set to work; the April 1940 transports mainly went to Kazakhstan, where the deportees were dumped in state and collective farms and had to find accommodation and work themselves; and some transports went much further, beyond the Ural mountains.

On June 22, 1941 Germany attacked Russia and this led eventually to an agreement on July 30, 1941 between the Polish Government in Exile, Stalin, Churchill and Eden that the Russians would release the Poles who had been deported. General Anders was appointed by General Sikorski, Polish military leader of the government in exile in London, to form an army of men released from the camps. He himself was in a Soviet prison; after his release recruitment began in early 1942 in Uzbekistan. Women and children, as well as military-age men, sought to find the army, hoping that it would be a means of escape from Russia. However, many wandered for many months before finding it; and many never did. Eventually, between August 8 and 30, 1942, not only those who had signed on as soldiers (both men and women) but also many civilians related to them were taken out with the Anders Army, crossing the Caspian Sea from Krasnovotsk to Pahlevi in Persia (Iran). In Tehran the Anders Army became the Polish Second Corps and passed under British control.

A number of young Polish women, including Danuta Gradosielska, joined the Second Corps as drivers and nurses. There remained many children and elderly civilians. Some of these remained in Iran, and others were sent to the Lebanon; some were sent to India; a large number, including Michalina Płuciennik, Irena Miluska, and Aniela Polnik, were sent to camps in Africa. Those arriving in Pahlevi included a large number of children who left the Soviet Union as orphans because they had been separated from their families, their families had died, or their mothers had placed them in the orphanages set up by the Polish authorities in Uzbekistan, so that they would be fed. Regina Dyszynska was among these children; her mother was unable to leave Russia with the army and gave her daughter to one of the orphanages so that she would leave with the army. Fortunately, she herself eventually found her way back to Poland and eventually her husband was able to arrange for her to join the family in the UK in 1949.

## FOOD AND ORIGINS

As I discuss in my introduction to this collection, food is a potent mnemonic for remembering the past and for attempting to recreate it. Where migration is sudden, involuntary and traumatic, as in the case of people deported from Eastern Poland in 1940, food takes on a very special role in ‘standing for’ a past life—a normal, happy life, but also an idealized life.

With the exception of my mother-in-law, who was twenty-seven at the time, the other women were quite young when they were deported, ranging from two to eighteen years of age. It is not surprising, therefore, that they talked about their homeland or *ojczyzna* in idyllic terms. The idea of *ojczyzna* is a central one for Poles, reflecting a strong sense of nationalism that survived 125 years of partitioning (by neighbouring Russia, Prussia and Austria) when Poland as a nation-state did not exist, that fuelled an independent Poland during the interwar era, and that helped shape the extensive resistance movement during the Nazi occupation. For Poles who were forced to leave their homeland during WWII, and who after the war were not able (or chose not) to return to a communist-led country, *ojczyzna* took on yet another set of meanings. For these women it brings together a patriotic concept and their memories of their personal places of origin. During the decades during which they have lived in exile, their own loss of their homes appears to have been conflated with the loss of the homeland in a more general sense under communism.

The *gospodarstwa* (partly self-sufficient small farms) from which most of the deportees came are portrayed as close to paradise. They are a context of sufficiency, happiness and autonomy. There are very few deportees left now (2012) who were adults at the time of the deportation, and the problems and difficulties of running a relatively new *gospodarstwo* (since many of the deportees were recent settlers) are something of which the women we focus on would not be fully aware. They remember a world where all was provided for them.

Food memories are central to memories of the lost homeland, and the women remember a pattern of meals which structured time and social/kin relations. This pattern is seen as particularly Polish, although it is probably very close to that of other ethnic groups living in this multi-ethnic area. They remember their mothers as the pivot of the family's food consumption—as co-worker on the farm, food-preserver, and cook-general. Jadzia Osostowicz described her mother as the 'mastermind' in relation to food. As women and mothers of families themselves, they explicitly or implicitly model themselves now on their own mothers. Many still grow food in their back gardens. For each of them, being able to do this, and to provide proper Polish food for the family of which she is the female head, is part of her identity as a Polish woman, a *Polka*. It is part of 'Polishness', *Polskość*.

Two characteristics stand out in descriptions of food in the homeland which are relevant to the subsequent journey: the importance of the one central cooked meal (*obiad*), shared by the whole family; and the central role of bread (*chleb*). *Obiad* has a clear structure, consisting of three courses: soup; a starch-based course, with vegetables and dairy-based protein or meat; and stewed fruit (*kompot*). The homeland Sunday meal is said to have been particularly important, included meat, and was eaten in a formalized way, with the food laid out nicely and everyone eating together. This meal



represented the togetherness of the family. For me, clear parallels arise with the role of the rice meal in the building of kinship and social bonds, which I have focused on in my research in Borneo (Janowski 1995, 2007b). The centrality of bread echoes the widespread cultural, social and cosmological centrality of bread throughout wheat-growing regions in Europe and Asia (e.g. see Camporesi 1989; Douglas 1975; Smith 1984; Jacob 1997). Bread is central to Catholicism, the religion of the Poles, and its consumption is experienced as a religious act; my mother in law saw it as a sin to throw away bread, always feeding leftover bread to animals or burying it carefully.

### LOSING FOOD, LOSING BEARINGS

The journey of deportation lasted a number of weeks, there was very minimal provision of food for the deportees, and conditions were very poor. Many old people and small children died of cold and starvation and were thrown out of the trucks. Depending on the soldiers who came to their houses to deport them, some women were allowed to take supplies and personal possessions while others had nothing to eat other than what they were given on the journey and what other deportees on the train shared with them. Michalina Płuciennik remembers that her family was able to take a lot of food with them, as they were taken from their farm and the soldiers were kind; while Jadzia Osostowicz remembers that they had absolutely nothing, as she was deported from the city of Lwów.

Either before the deportations or upon arrival in Siberia or Kazakhstan, most men were taken to prison camps. In labour camps on state and collective farms, the women and children were fed centrally, but more was given to those who were working. In state and collective farms only those who worked were paid, in kind or in money. In either context, the amounts of food available were much too little. Due to the shortage of food, the women's memories from Russia are focused almost entirely on food. 'I dreamt about bread every night . . . we would go several kilometers away to pick raspberries . . . So we had the raspberries (sighs). We would then pick some nettles, and cook them. But there was hardly anything else, Monica, hardly anything else.' (Jadzia Osostowicz, November 28, 2008). The hunger experienced by deportees is depicted poignantly in the painting 'Hunger' by Alicja Edwards, who was herself deported to Siberia as a child (Figure 1).

The deportees supplemented the food they were given and had brought with them by various means. Some, like my mother-in-law, were able to barter craftwork; she exchanged embroidery for food. People from the countryside were more likely to survive than townspeople, as they had skills in finding wild foods and had been able to bring stores of food. 'Those ones from town, they maybe were clever, but they just didn't know anything, anything . . . they had such a hard time' (Michalina Płuciennik December 5,



**FIGURE 1** Hunger in Siberia. Painting by Alicja Edwards. Copyright Alicja Edwards (Color figure available online).

2008). ‘We were lucky ... we were able to bring a lot with us—sacks of flour, we killed some chickens, we had things to trade ... others weren’t so lucky’ (Danuta Gradosielska December 1, 2008). The resourcefulness of family members, mothers in particular, was an important factor in determining how families fared. However, resourcefulness shaded into desperation, with considerable risks taken at times. Aniela Polnik’s brother, with some other boys, stole and killed a dog belonging to one of the Russian soldiers to butcher for food: ‘[T]hey put him in the corner ... and every time a soldier or a policeman or an NKVD walked past, they would kick him ... and the third day he just collapsed and died. He was 16.’ (Aniela Polnik January 26, 2009).

### TRYING TO RECRAFT FAMILY THROUGH FOOD

In Siberia or Kazakhstan, there was a sense that society had disintegrated. ‘That wasn’t proper life. Our beautiful childhood was replaced with a nightmare’, as Danuta Gradosielska put it (December 1, 2008). Families were split up, and many had members who died. Some families were destroyed, with children left to fend for themselves without parents<sup>2</sup>. Family breakdown was seen as mirrored in the breakdown of food habits. ‘It was not a normal life

at all ... there was no structure to meals. It was more like animals' type of feeding. You were hungry, you ate what you found.' (Regina Dyszynska November 12, 2008). As Jadzia Osostowicz told me: 'Later, of course, in Palestine, things became more normal and my mother did her best to keep up the standards. But there [in Siberia] it was just impossible, impossible (November 28, 2008)'. People ate things normally considered inedible, such as dogs and steppe rats. Russian food itself, despite being quite similar to Polish food, was seen as not properly edible. Michalina Płuciennik described Russian soup as 'dirty' by contrast to the good, 'clean' soup made by a Polish cook in the forest where she worked (December 5, 2008). Russian bread was described to me by all the women as being like clay, heavy and black. The loss of 'proper' bread was, because of the iconic role of bread, very hard to take.

The women emphasised to me the efforts made in Russia to maintain family structure and to eat meals which were structured in a way vaguely resembling 'proper' meals. Surrounded by food which they saw as non-food or not-quite-food, the Poles tried to transform the inedible into the edible. They tried to place strange foods into familiar categories, for example making *kotlety* (meatballs) out of greenstuffs, as described to me by Michalina Płuciennik in the quote at the beginning of this paper. With the mother of the family usually having to work, teenage girls like Jadzia Osostowicz cooked and searched for foodstuffs, gathering wild foods and carrying water to sell for food. She described to me the efforts she made to keep up a semblance of family meals, particularly on Sunday—she used to buy a small amount of barley for the family every day, which came with a bit of oil, and she kept the oil for a special meal on Sundays.

These efforts to maintain a family were essential both psychologically and physically. Children who lost their parents were very unlikely to survive. Regina Dyszynska's mother, who lost the ability to support her family in the Soviet Union and was also forced, in order to get her children out of the Soviet Union, to declare them orphans, became disturbed in later life. Aniela Polnik's mother died on the lorry to Tehran, at least partly, Aniela believes, of a broken heart, after her son was beaten to death for killing a dog and one daughter starved to death. Danuta Gradosielska and Michalina Płuciennik's families fared much better physically and psychologically, and this was rooted to the fact that their mothers managed to hold their families together and feed them more effectively.

### BREAD, LIFE AND TOGETHERNESS

Bread, the symbol of home, became particularly poignant away from home. Michalina Płuciennik told me, in tears, of how their neighbour in Poland had given them all the bread his wife had just baked to take with them to Russia

when they were deported. In Russia, bread represented both home and life. It became the central, even the only, food which mattered. As Aleksandr Topolski says: 'Bread was life. All other things were mere embellishment.' If someone had given him a wish while he was in the Soviet Union, he would, he declares, have asked for a chunk of bread that would last forever (Topolski 2002, p. 340).

At Christmas Eve, the Polish *wigilia*, communion wafer (*oplatek*) is broken and shared within the family. It is, symbolically, super-bread, Christ's body. *Wigilia* symbolises togetherness and unity. Alicja Edwards describes *wigilia* in Siberia (Edwards 2002). Relatives back in Poland had sent *oplatki*: 'The breaking of holy bread was very emotional and the fragile white *oplatki* brought nostalgic memories and tears to many of us ... It was the true meaning of Christmas for us at that time ... to rise above the continuous struggle, to bring back some sign of life as we had known it before (Edwards 2002, p. 76–7). Danuta Gradosielska also remembers that they had *oplatki* which relatives from Poland sent to them for Christmas Eve in Russia, and how she and her father took some to her sister who was in hospital—her sister who shortly after this died. Eating *oplatki*, and the holding of the *wigilia* meal itself, symbolised the successful maintenance of proper life and family structure.

#### LEAVING THE SOVIET UNION: STRANGE FOODS

After the 'amnesty' in 1942, many Poles wandered south to search for Anders' army. They travelled by train, and had very little to eat so tried to buy or barter for food when the train stopped briefly; many were left behind when the train started. Once they reached Tashkent, their numbers were too great to enable the army to take them all in and they were redirected to collective and state farms.

As they travelled south to Uzbekistan, the Poles encountered strange foods. In Siberia and even in Kazakhstan food had not been entirely foreign to them. Jadzia Osostowicz remembers a grain called *jugara*, and the women all talked of the flat bread cooked on the interior walls of ovens. However, they had very little of any food, strange or otherwise, to eat. Here, as in Russia, many people became quite desperate for food; Jadzia Osostowicz remembers a group of young Polish men in the Uzbek farm where she was living killing a dog for food and nearly being killed themselves, as the Muslim Uzbeks saw dogs as unclean. Many people fell ill with malaria and typhus, and many died of a combination of illness and starvation.

Finally, some managed to find and be accepted under the wing of the Anders Army. Those who joined up could take some family members with them across the Caspian Sea to Pahlevi in Iran. For this reason, as well as for patriotic reasons, everyone who could joined the army. sixteen-year-old

Danuta Gradosielska was one of these; she became a driver with the army. My mother-in-law, who had a large family most of whom were not able to join the army, declared herself to be married to another man in order to get out. She never heard the last of this from her husband when they were finally reunited after nine years' separation!

Upon arrival in Pahlevi, after nightmare journeys across the sea in crowded boats—on which many deaths occurred—the Poles were met with a surreal abundance of food. Michalina Pluciennik described it as 'heaven'. 'Oh, so much food, is it possible, can there be so much food in the world?' was Jadzia Osostowicz's reaction to the market. But the food was strange and people were malnourished. Some refused to eat, and died; or ate too much, and also died. Mutton was a strange meat for Poles, and Jadzia felt that 'it was very fat, it was actually quite dangerous'. Bread was finally available again, but it was white bread; Jadzia commented 'who likes white bread, you can only eat it as toast really'. 'Proper' Polish bread is seen as being brown bread—not black, like Russian bread—but not white, either.

#### SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE: POLISH FOOD FOR POLISH CHILDREN

Fighting for a free Poland was coupled with an emphasis on maintaining 'Polishness' (*Polskość*), particularly for the children. Many, like 10-year-old Regina Dyszynska, had come out of the Soviet Union as 'orphans'. Once in Iran and then in Palestine, Polish soldiers gave up some of their pay to fund boarding schools for these children.

A cornerstone of maintaining—and creating—'Polishness' for children was Polish food. Regina Dyszynska was emphatic about the 'proper' Polish nature of the food she ate at the boarding school in which she lived: 'When we moved to Palestine . . . that was proper boarding school, beautifully kept. Proper food we had . . . we sat at the tables properly, matrons looked after us.' (Regina Dyszynska, November 12, 2008). The structure of meals was Polish, with adaptations to transform local ingredients into 'Polish' foods. For example, aubergine and other local vegetables were stuffed instead of cabbage, and lamb and beef was used instead of pork. The children at these schools were not given local foods *per se*, and this emphasises the effort to maintain their identity as little Poles.

#### POLES TOGETHER: 'PROPER' POLISH FOOD IN ARMY AND CAMPS

Those who joined the army, like 16-year-old Danuta Gradosielska, did no cooking throughout the whole course of the war but ate Polish food in Polish army canteens (see Figure 2). This meant that they had no family meals for



**FIGURE 2** Meal to celebrate the end of the course Danuta Gradosielska followed to become an army driver, 13 March 1943. Source: Danuta Gradosielska. Photographer unknown (Color figure available online).

the rest of the war. They were subsumed, in effect, into a broader Polish family and identity.

Jadzia Osostowicz, who was also 16 when she left Russia, stayed with her parents in Palestine, where they were working at Polish boarding schools. She has little memory of where she ate on a daily basis but believes that this must have been in school canteens. As in the army, this generated a sense of belonging to the wider Polish community. However, she clearly remembers that on Sundays her family got together and ate a 'proper' family meal, thus maintaining a sense of family structure and belonging.

The constant emphasis on the part of all of the women on the desirability of eating family meals, and efforts to make these happen as often as possible, expresses the importance placed on the maintenance of family ties and the fact that these were seen as expressed through food consumption. Failure to maintain family meals was seen as regrettable, even though the lost family meals were replaced with meals eaten with the wider Polish family. The close family unit seems to be seen as needing to be regularly united through food, and one gets the impression that this was particularly important in times of such flux as was experienced during the war. At the same time, though, the wider Polish 'family' was also valued, and was underlined by regular shared meals even where kin-based families were able to eat together.

Both communal and family meals were emphasised in the African camps. My mother-in-law Aniela Janowski, Irena Miluska, Aniela Polnik, and Michalina Płuciennik went to live in camps in Africa. In Tenggeru camp in Tanzania and in Masindi camp in Uganda raw food was supplied and families cooked their own meals (my mother-in-law worked in the store, distributing food); while in Lusaka camp in Northern Rhodesia there were communal dining rooms. However, eventually many in Lusaka camp, including Aniela Polnik's aunt with whom she was living by that time, obtained a primus stove and cooked for themselves.

The women who lived in African camps made a clear distinction between African food and Polish, 'proper' food. While in the Middle East there was a willingness to eat local cooked food on occasion, and to eat snack foods with local friends, the Poles never, according to Michalina Płuciennik, ate African cooked food. They saw African foods as very alien; an example Michalina remembers of her response to African foods was looking into cooking pots in the market with whole heads of animals in them, and how strange and shocking this seemed to her. '*Kto by to zjaki?*' ('Who would have eaten that?') she commented (Michalina Płuciennik, December 5, 2008) There were initially no potatoes, as these were not eaten by the Africans, and only sweet potatoes were available; however, the Poles soon had potatoes growing after a few were eventually distributed, which could be used as seed potatoes. In fact, all families began growing vegetables and kept chickens, and some kept pigs, recreating a farming way of life from the homeland. Meat, whether from domestic animals, distributed by the camp store or bought, was transformed into familiar forms. Michalina described to me how she would walk to Arusha, the nearest town to the camp at Tenggeru, buy meat there and take it home and make sausage. With potatoes, Polish-style meat and vegetables which they grew or bought, meals which were relatively similar to 'proper Polish' meals could be recreated.

There was little bread in Africa. As Michalina Płuciennik said: '*... there was one baker for five and a half hundred people, he couldn't manage ... We had bread, like you buy Hovis in here [Hovis is a small brown English branded loaf], that much, small, for three people.*' Michalina's family only had enough bread to eat it for breakfast; this meant a departure from the Polish habit, which is to have bread with every meal, even if potatoes are also served. One point in the year when they did eat bread was at Christmas Eve, at the *wigilia* meal. At this meal, bread should be in the form of *opłatki* (communion wafers). In Africa, however, Irena Miluska remembers people sharing normal bread at *wigilia*, as they did not have *opłatki*.

In the African camps, there was a great emphasis on maintaining 'Polishness' and in nurturing this among the children (see Figure 3), and this was expressed through the preparation of foods seen as iconic of 'Polishness' for communal meals on special occasions, something which continued later in the UK. One of these foods is dumplings, *pierogi*. Aniela Polnik,



**FIGURE 3** Little girls in Polish costumes outside the mud huts which were their homes at Lusaka camp in Zambia. Source: Aniela Polnik. Photographer unknown (Color figure available online).

Michalina Płuciennik, and Irena Miluska all remember that these were made communally at *akademia* patriotic performances on occasions such as 3rd May, Polish national day; they remembered that they were otherwise not made often, as they required scarce flour. In Poland, these had been simple everyday fare; in exile, they became iconic, special, requiring resources which were not easily available. The preparation and consumption together of foods like these on special occasions meals came to symbolise, outside Poland, the kinship of all Poles, as one big family.

### SNACKING: BONDS BEYOND THE POLISH COMMUNITY

While meals were emblematic of Polish society and kinship, snacks allowed for bonds to be created with the local environment. A freedom, a lack of Polish social commitment, was associated with eating snack foods. They allowed bonds to be forged with non-Poles. Regina told me how she used to eat dates, spring onions and olives when she visited Christian Arab friends in Jerusalem from her boarding school/orphanage there. She remembers a meal at a monastery up a mountain: ‘... monks gave us ... still remember that meal, because it was very hot, very difficult to get to the top of the mountain, and we climbed, and this monastery was absolutely stuck to the mountain, and we went into such a cold place, and it was really cold, and benches and so on, and they gave us this meal. And it was spring onion ... we had two spring onions on a plate, some olives—I love olives now, absolutely love olives, again, probably influenced—and few dates, that was our lunch.’ (Regina Dyszynska, November 28, 2008). Regina remembers buying food



from local shops in Palestine and visiting Arab friends and eating with them. Thus in practice, at a submerged level, the 'Polish' identity which these children developed was different from that which they would have had in Poland—they themselves saw it as Polish, but it was not 'grounded' in the physical place called Poland. The fact that they liked foods which were not Polish, eaten with Arab friends, arguably built 'extensions' to what they saw as their core Polish identity, not overtly acknowledged but nevertheless valued.

Fruit is a particularly important snack food remembered from the Middle East and Africa. All the women remembered fruit clearly. Aniela Polnik, who was very fussy about food as a child in Africa, seems to have survived mainly on fruit. Irena Miluska also has strong memories of fruit: *'I remember lots of fruit, we had. Because they were very cheap. My mother would buy bananas, the whole . . . thing. And I like them very small, they were yellow and small and they were very sweet, I remember. And loads of oranges, tangerines and lemons . . . Loads of papaya . . . And like coconuts, they had, at the top . . . papayas. And when they were very ripe, I saw them drop them and go crash on the ground. So you had to pick them before they fell, because when they fell they were not edible. And we had also in the garden bananas . . . pineapples.. and mangoes.'* (Irena Miluska November 19, 2008). Regina Dyszynska still loves the fruit she ate in Palestine, since it evokes her friendships there. She described to me how strongly the smell and taste of the fruit she ate at that time still affects her. *'Whenever we went to Yugoslavia—we went place like that where figs were growing, wild figs—I just couldn't resist it, I have to go and pick some and eat it, because it was just unbelievable (laughs), just reminded me of my childhood, you know!'* (Regina Dyszynska, November 12, 2008).

But fruit could also evoke the lost homeland. Irena Miluska remembers vividly the arrival of apples on one occasion in Masindi: *'I remember somebody brought apples and we didn't know what was that . . . we were just looking. My mother of course knew from Poland, and my sister remembered from Poland, she was ten years older, and she said oh jabłka jabłka, that's apples, and she was so pleased. And we had only slices of the apple because I think they only gave two or three for the five of us.'* (Irena Miluska November 18, 2008). For Irena, apples were first encountered in Africa; but she was told that they were part of her 'Polish' identity, building on memories of other family members.

#### LIFE IN THE UK: BUILDING 'PROPER' POLISH FAMILIES THROUGH 'PROPER' POLISH FOOD

After the war the Soviet Union, through the Yalta Agreement, Eastern Poland became part of the Soviet Union. This meant that the women had no home

to which to return, since these were now in the Ukraine or Belarus. The Polish populations of these areas were transported west, to the areas taken from Germany. The UK demobilized the Polish soldiers who had fought with the British Army in the UK, and their dependants in camps, orphanages and schools in the Middle East, India and Africa were brought to the UK in the late 1940s. Here, they were offered places in displaced persons (DP) camps, which were called 'Polish Hostels'. The British government also funded Polish boarding schools. Gradually, people left the camps but the process of assimilation into British society was often difficult (Patterson 1977; Nocon 1996; Stachura 2004; Burrell 2006). A total of about 120,000 Poles eventually settled in the UK after the war.

The camps were intense places, where fighting men and women were brought back together with family members from whom they had been separated for many years. There was a strong sense of togetherness, due to having shared similar experiences during the war. This also derived from the strong message from the Polish Government in Exile, based in London, that they would all be returning to Poland to liberate it. This linked back to a history of émigré political migrants from Poland during the period of the Polish Partitions during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Zubrzycki 1956). The Government in Exile refused to accept the British recognition of the new government in Poland after Yalta, and it was not dissolved until 1990, when Communism fell in Poland. Until then, the Poles in the UK maintained—at least on a formal level—a kind of 'frozen' position, refusing to accept the betrayal of Yalta and unwilling to begin any overt process of integration into British society (see Stachura 2004). Many—including my mother-in-law—never took British citizenship. She died stateless.

This sense of being a united group with a mission was expressed through the holding of *akademia* performances at which children presented tableaux, recited poems and acted out plays displaying their patriotism; through religious/patriotic processions; and through a communal approach to food. As in some of the camps in Africa, communal kitchens and dining rooms were set up in the beginning, which again meant that Poles ate together as one large 'family'.

Life had to go on despite the patriotic limbo in which people were living. Couples were reunited or got married and individual homes were set up within the camp. Many couples began to move out into the 'English' world and set up homes there. My mother-in-law was reunited with her husband after nine years. The other women met, courted and married other Poles who had been soldiers or had been in the camps in Africa. All had babies in the 1950s and 1960s.

Those women who were old enough to have clear memories of food in Poland, and to have developed their palates before leaving Poland, yearned to eat 'proper' Polish food, which evoked a homeland they remembered. My mother in law, Aniela Janowska (27 when she was deported), and Michalina

Pluciennik (18 when she was deported) sought out ingredients which would enable them to prepare food which was as close as possible to what they remembered from their childhood in Poland. They served full Polish meals every day to their families; Michalina, now in her mid-80s, still serves her husband, who is in his 90s, such meals. Some adaptations had to be made—for example cheddar cheese was substituted for Polish white cheese for *pierogi* dumplings—but as far as possible the food was authentic to their memories. Their primary aim in doing this was to recreate an identity which they felt was solidly theirs—lost, but able to be recreated because remembered clearly.

However, although they felt strongly impelled to do so, setting up a Polish home presented different questions and challenges for those women who were small children at the time of deportation. They had to learn to run a ‘Polish’ household, to cook ‘Polish’ food and to bring up a ‘Polish’ family without the benefit of remembering what that was supposed to mean, on the basis of what others told them from their own memories. Although their aim was to be Polish mothers and to provide Polish food for their children, and they yearned on a cultural level to be properly Polish, those of the women who were very young when they left Poland had no conscious memories, or only very vague memories, of food in Poland. The food they had eaten all their conscious, remembered lives was from the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Africa. ‘Polish’ meals had been cobbled together using whatever local food was available. For the women, these meals *were* ‘Polish’ meals—they were not local meals. Thus, when I asked Regina Dyszynska if they ever ate any Arab food at the boarding school where she lived near Jerusalem, her response was ‘*No, that was completely not Arab food. We didn’t eat Arab food. As I said, it was proper school, beautifully maintained.*’ (Regina Dyszynska, November 29, 2008). However, the ingredients were undoubtedly local, although they had been transformed into something as closely resembling ‘Polish’ food as possible. It was the structure of dishes and meals rather than the content which was Polish.

Some younger women had little idea how to cook, let alone how to cook Polish food. The amount of contact they had with their own mothers was important in determining how easy the younger women found it to conform to Polish norms. Aniela Polnik had no mother, since she had died just after they arrived in Pahlevi in Persia, and described to me how she had to pick up information on how to cook as she could from other women. Regina Dyszynska, who had been separated from her mother in 1942 near Tashkent, when her mother put her into an orphanage attached to Anders’ army, told me how unsure she had felt about her own ability to cook Polish food: ‘*Because some of young girls lived with their parents, and some of my friends they still cook Polish way. I was brought up in boarding schools without my parents, so I never learned, so I didn’t have mother or father to teach me to cook.. I used to go to Scotland and visit my father. He was living*

*on his own in a camp. And I had to cook something, so I remember trying to cook borszcz. I even now can't cook borszcz. My daughter in law, she is Polish in Poland, and she usually cooks a nice borszcz. And I tried and tried and tried but my borszcz just doesn't taste as it should.'* (Regina Dyszynska, November 20, 2008).

## MIXED MEMORIES AND HYBRID IDENTITIES IN THE UK

While those women who were older when they were deported were clear that they were 'proper' Poles, the younger women, particularly those who were so young when they were deported that they had no memories at all of their homes, were trying to sort out what their identities actually were. They were not so secure in their sense of being fully 'Polish', because they could not remember Poland. Their memories of being 'Polish' derived from places ranging from Kazakhstan to Persia to Uganda, where miniature copies of 'Poland' had, in effect, been created by the Polish communities in which they had lived. This meant that there was a sense in which they felt that their idea of being 'Polish' was not 'authentic', since it was not associated with the geographical place called 'Poland', inhabited solely or largely by 'Poles'. Their identity was built on bricolage, copying older people within the Polish community and picking up elements from the places through which they had travelled. Consequently, although they did and do feel 'Polish' (what else could they be? They are certainly not British, speaking with strong Polish accents and living entirely within the Polish community), they are not completely secure in this identity. Irena Miluska told me how when she first went to Poland after the war she was delighted when she spoke to someone and he took her for Polish; she clearly didn't truly feel that she could assert that identity.

During the war the younger women had, as discussed above, developed 'extensions' to their 'Polish' identity associated with eating non-Polish snack foods. In the immediate post-war period these foods were not easily available in Britain. They were, essentially, lost to their palates. Thus they lost that 'extension' to their 'Polish' identity; but they gained new 'extensions' from their contact with new foods available in the UK. With a set of confused memories and orientations towards food deriving from a childhood in a limbo, and in a British world where foreign foods were gradually being introduced through restaurants and take-aways, the younger women in our group were significantly more open to new foods than the older women, and worked out their own family meals as pastiches of Polish elements, British elements and various other elements, including foods they remembered from the Middle East, Africa and Italy when they could get them. Many favoured Italian elements, perhaps due to the long stay in Italy on the part of the Polish army immediately after the war, before they were demobilized. Aniela Polnik

told me how when she was a girl and had first come to the UK she was living in one of the 'Polish hostels' (camps) with her father and there were a number of Italian girls who had married Polish soldiers. She learnt to cook *lasagne*, *gnocchi*, and *risotto* from them, and included these in her family meals when she married. Irena Miluska told me how she learnt to cook *spaghetti Bolognese* and *lasagne* from other Polish women, who had learnt them from Italians. Besides introducing new elements within meals, the younger women introduced changes in the structure of meals: for example, they did not always make soups for the main meal of the day, and they introduced English desserts (in Poland only *kompot*, a stewed fruit drink was consumed at a meal; cakes, the only other sweet eaten, were eaten separately). Although it was primarily the younger women who introduced these changes, this is not to say that the older women made no changes at all; strawberries and cream were placed on the menu as an occasional dessert even in my mother-in-law's household.

The combination of anxiety about maintaining a Polish identity through eating Polish food combined with a tendency towards bricolage is also visible in the second generation. The second generation, born in the camps or in houses in English streets, were faced with a range of choices in terms of the degree to which they chose to maintain their 'Polishness' (*Polskość*) (Zebrowska 1986). As one would therefore expect, they vary in their eating habits. Few eat 'Polish' food on an everyday basis, but most do so on special occasions, particularly at the *wigilia* Christmas Eve meal and at Easter breakfast. Some place much more emphasis on their 'Polishness' than others; second generation households which adhere explicitly and openly to a 'Polish' identity (belonging to a Polish Catholic parish, going to dances at Polish cultural institutions, sending their children to Polish Saturday schools) also emphasise their adherence to Polish eating customs. When talking to other Poles, such second generation Poles often make statements which display and advertise their family's 'Polish' food habits at home, and there is a certain sense of competition between families as to how willing their children are to eat 'Polish' food. Their anxiety about being truly 'Polish' expresses itself through the projection of a new kind of Polish identity which is counterposed to that of Poles from Poland: that of the 'British Pole'. Indeed, there is arguably a sense in which this is an identity which in some senses is conceived of as being more authentically 'Polish' than that of Poles from Poland (Janowski 2007a).

## CONCLUSION: 'MEMORIES' AND MEMORIES OF FOOD PAST

The experiences and behaviour of Poles deported from eastern Poland by the Soviet Union and their children in the UK reflect the complex interplay between personal memories and 'memories' adopted from others in relation

to food. Those who were deported as children, together with second generation Poles in the UK, are trying to live out a 'Polishness' which is rooted in their own memories mixed with 'memories' which they have taken on from their elders. Foodways are a key part of these memories. The foodways which were 'performed' at Polish tables in the Middle East and in Africa during the war, in the UK in the immediate postwar decades, and which continue regularly in the small remaining number of first generation households and at ritual occasions in second generation households, reflect a sense of belonging to a lost homeland. They are perceived as giving legitimacy to a claim to be 'Polish', since they are a key way of 'performing' 'Polishness' (*Polskość*). This legitimacy is perceived to be rooted long ago in the geographical homeland which their parents left, through memories brought by their parents to the UK. This homeland, although it is termed 'Poland', is a somewhat mythical place since it no longer exists either geographically or in terms of foodways. It is only to a certain degree conflated in the minds of second generation Poles with the living, breathing Poland which they can visit physically. As I have argued elsewhere, there is a sense in which those who came to the UK after the war felt that they had removed the 'homeland' (*ojczyzna*) from the physical land (*krój*) (Janowski 2007a).

Some migration continued from Poland to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s, when there was a trickle of relatives of people who had come immediately after the war. In the Solidarity period in the early 1980s, there was a small burst of 'political' migration. Since the fall of Communism, and particularly since Poland joined the European Union, there has been a veritable flood of migration. The Poles who came immediately after the war and their descendants are now swamped numerically by these new migrants. Linda Coakley shows in her article in this collection how important food is to these new migrants in their struggle to establish a new identity. Their food choices, like other parts of their lives, reflect a desire not only to look to the past by seeking out familiar foods but to look into the future through seeking out new foodways. 'Polish Poles' like those in Cork can return to a pure Polish identity if they wish. Despite their assertions of an authentic 'Polish' identity, the descendants of the women who are the focus of this article, on the other hand, arguably feel themselves to be in a permanent limbo of hybridity. They can never return to the homeland which their mothers tried to bring with them in their cooking pots, but which can never truly belong to their children.

The role of foodways in this type of context, of traumatic deportation and privation, extends our understanding of the role of food in migration. During the wartime 'odyssey' of the women on whom we have focused here, food played a central role, both in holding together families and in attempts to maintain a distinct cultural identity. The relative success of the family in maintaining communal and recognizable foodways contributed to both psychological wellbeing and to chances of emotional as well as

physical survival. The presence of an effective central female figure within a family was key to this. However, Polish mothers have also been the channel through which new foodways, and associated ways of life, have become integrated into families, altering cultural norms and identity. This suggests rich possibilities for further exploration of the way in which foodways, and the role of women in maintaining identity and ensuring physical and cultural survival and adaptation, play themselves out in times of war and trauma.

## NOTES

1. The term was used in the title of a documentary about the deportations, 'A Forgotten Odyssey' (Wright and Naszynska 2001).
2. This was the experience of Janina Kwiatkowska as told in the film *A Forgotten Odyssey* (2001).

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