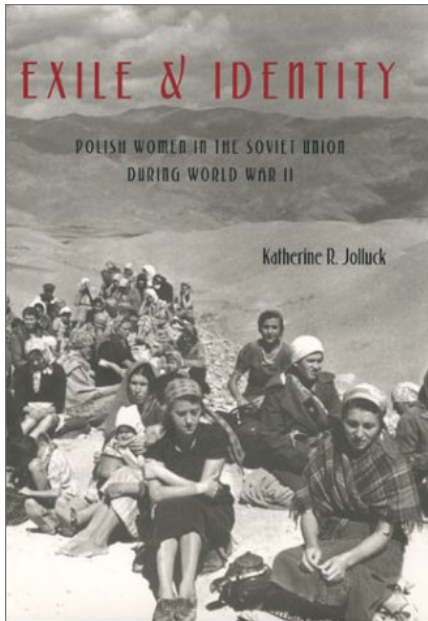

***Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union during World War II*, by Katherine P. Jolluck (2002), 156 pages.**



This is a remarkable effort by a Polish American historian who has spent endless days researching materials made available to her at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University in California and was ably assisted by her family and friends in North Carolina. As her colleague Dr. Beth Holmgren states, this is a compassionate recall of testimonials written by Polish women who were ruthlessly expelled from their homes in Eastern Poland at the beginning of World War II and found themselves and their children trapped in the alien lands of Central Asia. They were actually never charged with any crime: upon conclusion of the military campaign of 1939, the Soviet Union simply annexed 51 percent of Poland's territory, and those individuals who did not fit the profile of a model Soviet citizen were displaced, and very often their families were ruthlessly broken up. Quoted statistics indicate that a million persons were mistreated in this manner. Huge transports carried the victims east in the early part of 1940 and again in the spring of 1941, shortly before the onset of the German-Soviet war.

This book is based on one aspect of this misery as attested to by the unusual archives. In 1942 a most important event took place: suddenly it became feasible to evacuate about 115,000 Poles to Persia, and here the assistance of the Western Powers was crucial. Gen. W. Anders was in charge of this movement that included 45,000 civilians, many of them women refugee and children. Every refugee was invited to fill out a questionnaire, and many took advantage of this opportunity by submitting virtual memoirs. Responsible officials made sure that these precious documents were preserved, and thousands of them made their way to California. In her painstaking research the author selected two thousand of them. Thus we are in possession of a unique collection, a true litany of terrible experiences but for the saving grace that the period was relatively short and had a happy ending. Sadly, this cannot be said of the multitudes who stayed behind and were never able to share their memories with us. In fact, a great many simply perished.

These scribbled notes depict terrible predicaments, assembled here in distinct chapters. They begin with the uprooting from ancestral homes; as the transports head east, it becomes evident with every passing day or week that the previously peaceful life is gone forever. The loss is compounded by a total lack of communication with other loved ones. Most women ended up in Central Asia, serving as slave labor on vast farms. They were not alone as they worked side by side with Kazakhs, Kirghizians, Uzbeks and others. The cultural chasm between them was enormous, the language barrier complete, the animosity constant. Add to the barbaric living conditions an awful sanitary situation and, naturally, the pervasive pessimism as to the ultimate outcome of their misery. Thus the reader turns the pages with a heavy heart.

It is to the great credit of the author that she understood this task. Equally, one should be grateful to the University of Pittsburgh Press and to various foundations who ensured that this book was published. It is a worthy monument also to those women who did not survive the ordeal.

George Suboczewski