

Ballarat Community's Book Launch Event

On Sunday afternoon, on 24th March, I had the great honour of being a guest, representing the PCA, at the Ballarat Polish community's official launch of their book, "*History of the Polish Association of Ballarat*", which, like the Book we launched two years ago, relates the personal immigration stories of Poles living in Ballarat and their Polish organisations. The Ballarat Book also records the interesting and very rich history of their Polish community and their proud achievements during the last seven decades. It is a book worth reading, especially if you had friends living in Ballarat in that period.

I wrote personally to congratulate **Wanda Mann** (Skirzynski), who compiled these personal stories of Polish migrants and presented a detailed history of all the different organisations which existed in Ballarat between 1952-2018. I was also impressed with **Marian (Mac) Rynkiewicz's** IT skills, embedding the wonderful array of photos within the text. This book will be a great legacy for the Poles of Ballarat, a legacy, which one day, their grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be proud to read about.

When I arrived at the Webbcona Bowling Club, in Wendouree (Ballarat), there were already many people at there. Majority of the people in the room were around my age and to my surprise, everyone was speaking English, I did not hear a word of Polish or even a Polish accent. At first, I thought I entered the wrong room, but the warmth of the people, who approached to welcome me, re-assured me that I was among Polish people whose preferred language was English. This initial experience was quite different to what I experience at the White Eagle House in Geelong, where the main language one hears at all Polish function is Polish. I was also so-what surprised that a majority of people I was introduced to had Anglo surnames – obviously, many of the Ballarat Polish girls married Australian boys!

There were no special seating arrangements, but I was pleased to have sat at a table with Elżbieta Clark (ne Cham), her husband Sebastian (Baz) Clark, son of the well-known Australian Historian, Manning Clark, Irena Goltz, Valdi (Władysława) Cham and daughter, Emma. All are no longer Ballarat residents. Also, at our table were invited guests, Elżbieta Drożd, CEO of Australian Multicultural Community Services, and Elżbieta's friend, Monika Wiench.

Even before I had a chance to read the Book, I learnt a lot about the Ballarat community from the discussions with the people at our table. It was very pleasing to see the adult children, and grandchildren of the one hundred and thirty original Polish migrants who settles in Ballarat 73 years ago, come together to celebrate and honour the accomplishments of their parents and grandparents.

The 300-strong Polish Ballarat community took on a significant project in the early 1970s, when it decided to build the Nicholas Copernicus Hall in Sebastopol. It turned out that this Building was exactly what was needed to bring the people of the community together. It became a gathering place for their Polish Scout group, the Kościuszko Soccer Club, Polish Youth Club, and the Women's Association.

The Polish community was also grateful that, from 1952-2014, the Ballarat community enjoyed having a resident Polish priest to minister to the spiritual needs of their small community. However, as the number of members of the Polish congregation declined to a level that made it impossible to support a resident priest in the small community, the

religious needs of the Ballarat Polish community had to be met by visiting priests, predominantly from Geelong.

The Polish population continued its decline when many of the younger generation began to leave Ballarat to pursue their career goals, and, sadly, many of the first generation of adult migrants of the 1950s passed away. This decline resulted in less people participating in Polish activities and functions. The Nicholas Copernicus Hall, which was once a popular hub for Poles for over forty years, was now underutilised. So, in 2017, the Polish Association of Ballarat had no other option but to make the difficult, but inevitable, decision to begin the process of selling their Nicholas Copernicus Hall. The Polish Association sold this asset in 2018. The Ballarat Polish Association was an Incorporated Entity, hence, under the Incorporation Act, it was incumbent on the Association to donate its assets to incorporated organisations/charities. The Association decided to distribute the proceeds of the sale between seven organisations, including Ballarat Health, social and cultural organisations in Ballarat and The Polish Community Association, "Syrena" in Rowville.

Driving back to Geelong from Ballarat, I could not help but envisage a similar scenario developing in our Geelong Polish community. Unless I am mistaken, I am sure that most of the adult Polish migrants who arrived in Geelong in 1951/52 have now passed away. We sold our SPK Hall in Ryrie St in 2016 because the SPK membership decreased dramatically, and the facility was underutilised. The building required major maintenance, the cost of which was financially prohibitive at the time.

After seventy-two years of having the spiritual needs of the Polish community in Geelong ministered by its own priest, living in our community, ended in 2019, when Geelong had to begin sharing a priest with Polish parishes in Melbourne.

Fortunately, we were in better starting position in the 1950s compared to the Ballarat community. The population of Poles in Geelong peaked at around 4,000, compared to a population of only around three hundred in Ballarat at that time. Also, unlike Ballarat, Geelong was fortunate to receive an influx of migrants in the 1980s during Solidarity Union uprising against the former Communist regime in Poland, Ballarat did not share in this influx.

I hope that when the time does come, in a decade or two, that our future Polish generations will also meet together (hopefully at the White Eagle House) to celebrate the legacy that we will hopefully leave for them to be proud of, in the same way as the current generation of Poles in Ballarat came together on Sunday, 24th March at their Book Launch to celebrate the achievements of their Polish ancestors of the 1950s.

Henry Szkuta

President

Polish Community Association in Geelong Inc.