



The Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum



Why does the world need the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum?

The year 2009 will mark the 70th anniversary of the beginning of World War 2 in Poland. Yet one aspect of Poland's wartime history is hardly known to most people – the deportation, imprisonment, and other repression of the inhabitants of the Kresy, or Eastern Borderlands, on Josef Stalin's orders to Soviet slave labor camps and GULAGs in Siberia, Kazakhstan and eastern Asia. Almost 2 million Polish Citizens suffered this "Gehenna". Many, including children, died in the camps from cold exposure, lack of nutrition, or diseases like typhoid or malaria. Others survived to join the Polish Forces under Allied command battling Nazi Germany in Africa and Europe, or to see out the war in refugee camps in the Middle East, Africa, India, New Zealand and Mexico. Most never returned to their fatherland because it was occupied or annexed by the repressive Soviet regime after the war.

The Kresy-Siberia Group is "dedicated to researching, remembering and recognizing the Polish citizens deported, enslaved and killed by the Soviet Union during World War Two". It was established by a number of survivors and their descendants to tell the stories of the "Polish Gehenna" to the world. The group has grown in membership from just a few people in 2001 to over seven hundred from all around the world, with more joining every week. We have a robust discussion group, a website, memorial wall and online gallery containing thousands of photographs and documents posted by our members. With the extent of the electronic documentation we have in our possession, it deserves to be displayed in a way that would be an asset to those studying Polish history, as well to educate others willing to learn about our families' plight.

However, our collection is getting very large and increasingly difficult to access – the information could be far better presented to the world. In addition, other historical sources of images and information, such as the Karta Centre in Warsaw, the Hoover Institution in California and the Sikorski Institute in London, also remain stored in archives and not as accessible as they could be for study and display. In the meantime, the last of the survivors are aging and dying out – and with them the memories and testimonies about their historic and heroic experiences. In the absence of a physical museum commemorating this history, and to harness modern information and communication technology, our solution is to work with key partners to create a virtual museum on the internet and make it accessible to the world.

What is the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum?

Although our virtual museum is still in the planning stage, there are certain elements we are sure must be included to shape the visitor's experience in learning about an almost unknown part of World War 2 history. Since we think it is high time the world learns about the "Polish Gehenna", we have given this a lot of thought. Ideally, we feel there should be established a physical museum, similar to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, or the Museum of Polish Jewish History in Warsaw, to display our families' documents and possessions. However, a virtual museum is a more practical undertaking and will actually be more effective in reaching people throughout the world.

The museum will have separate "wings" for various topics related to our families' sagas. For example, one wing may include documentation about the deportations to forced labor camps in Siberia or Kazakhstan. Once in the wing, there will be a search option, as well an index of camp names and/or other criteria. Another wing may contain documentation about Anders Army. The number of wings is not pre-determined, as we hope it will be an ongoing project with unlimited growth as we add more and more documents from various sources. Our desire is to join forces with organizations that possess documents related to the "Polish Gehenna" and the Polish Armies in Exile of World War 2. We also plan to create educational modules, conduct seminars and exhibits, and feature music as well as Flash animation to showcase film clips of survivors telling their stories.

How will we "build" the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum?

We will require a range of technical and archival skills to create and maintain the Virtual Museum, which will be sought from key partners in Poland and elsewhere. We will also establish a Foundation to fund the work and ongoing operation of the Virtual Museum. This will be a huge undertaking, but a greatly important historical one, requiring the financial assistance, time and energy of many groups. Organizations that share common goals with the Kresy-Siberia Group will join us in reaching these goals. We also plan to attract generous benefactors to contribute to making the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum a reality.

What comes next for the Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum?

A working group has been formed from the Kresy-Siberia Group to work with foundation partner organizations and to prepare a development plan for this project. The group includes Stefan Wisniowski (Sydney), Aleksander Domaradzki (Warsaw), Aneta Hoffmann (Warsaw), Lynda Kraar (New Jersey), Witold Lukaszewski (Texas), Aneta Naszynska (London), Jerzy Neisser (Manchester), Elzunia Olsson (Stockholm), Barbara Soja Revoet (Connecticut), Henry Sokolowski (Toronto), George Slawek (San Francisco) and Martin Stepek (Glasgow). For further information, please contact one of the team at the e-mail below.