

## ***Maria Wodzicka***

*31 of October 1944*

*The USS General Randall arrives in Wellington Harbour. Hundreds of nervous faces are peering over the rails of the huge ship, taking in what will be –at least for most of them– their home for the next 60 years.*

This was largely the work of Maria Wodzicka.

She was an amazing person, and she helped hundreds of other refugees. This is her story, but it is also the story of the Polish refugee children.

Maria Wodzicka was born on the 31st of March, 1901, and her parents were part of the Polish nobility. Where she lived - Klimazowka, eastern Poland - was then part of Russia. She went to school in Kiev. The Russian Revolution happened while she was studying at school, and her parents' estate was destroyed. Her family then moved to Cracow, and she finished her education in Zakopane in the Carpathians, where she became an accomplished mountaineer and skier. But her university studies were interrupted by the Polish–Soviet War of 1919–1920. While it was happening she joined a Polish Red Cross unit serving at the front. After her return she continued her studies, graduating from the Jagiellonian university in 1923 with a master's degree in soil science.

On the 9 February 1928 Maria Borkowska married Kazimierz Antoni z Granowa Wodzicki, a fellow graduate of the Jagiellonian University and member of the Polish nobility. She became Maria Wodzicka. They had two children, and moved to Warsaw. In the summer of 1939, the Soviet invasion happened, and the family decided that it would be safest to move to Nazi occupied Poland. Unfortunately, as they moved, Kazimierz and his parents were captured. She stood up for her beliefs, and joined the Polish underground movement. She used her knowledge of the Carpathians to help

many people to cross the border into Romania. Once she almost got caught, but managed to evade capture. A year later, she travelled with her children and a nanny by train to Paris. She had a happy reunion with Kazimierz there. A few years later Kazimierz was appointed Polish consul general for New Zealand. That led to them moving to Wellington in 1941.

While she travelled around New Zealand, she raised money for Polish refugees. As a delegate of the Polish Red Cross, she wanted to help her homeland as much as possible. A practised speaker of English, she travelled, giving public speeches to raise money to help Polish refugees. With friends in New Zealand she also founded the Polish Army League; they organised pen pals and parcels for Polish servicemen fighting under British command.

In 1943 a troopship bound for Mexico landed in Wellington. On board were a group of children and adults who had been deported from Poland at the beginning of the war. There were 733 children. They had survived deportation to the Soviet Union, hard labour in Siberia, and a terrible journey to the southern Soviet republics. They eventually evacuated to Persia (Iran). They had witnessed the deaths of parents and siblings. They had been through so much.

Maria Wodzicka visited the ship with gifts, and these nervous silent children made a strong impression on her. Most of them had malaria, and some had scurvy from undernourishment. The captain of the ship said “ These children never cry, they cause no trouble on board.” And one of the Polish teachers added “Nor do they laugh. ”

This got Maria thinking. She went to talk to her friend Janet Fraser about it. Together they talked to Peter Fraser ( then Prime Minister of New Zealand, and Janet’s husband) And persuaded him that New Zealand could look after the children. He agreed, and Maria worked as hard as she could to get the children’s camp ready. With the help of New Zealand Red Cross nurses. They made beds, added flowers, and made it as nice as possible. The camp was in Pahiatua. Over 700 children and around one hundred

adults arrived at the camp in 1944. Because Maria and her family were the only people who spoke both languages - Polish and English - they acted as translators. She acted as the advocate between the camp and the governmental and non-governmental agencies involved with their welfare.

We need more people like Maria now. People who help others, selfless people, brave people, people who help their country. Still now we have refugees, risking their lives for a sign of hope. New Zealand has a quota of 1,500 refugees to take in each year, and are taking part in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) regular refugee resettlement programme. New Zealand is one of about 37 countries taking part, which is good, but there are 195 countries in the world, and so many more could be helping.

Sources: [Te Ara](#) ( Te Ara's sources were :‘Escape from Poland’. *New Zealand Listener*. 8 Aug. 1941: 41, Obit. *Evening Post*. 25 July 1968: 15, Sawicka-Brockie, T. ‘Forsaken journeys’. PhD thesis, Auckland, 1987)