

# Polish cemetery in Tehran

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Polish refugee section of the Catholic cemetery in Tehran

When [Kimie Takahashi](#) and myself interviewed participants for *Japanese on the Move*, our video exhibition of transnational life-stories, one of our interviewees, [artist Mayu Kanamori](#), asked to conduct [the interview](#) in Sydney's [Rookwood Cemetery](#), where she wanted to show us the final resting place of the first known Japanese settler in Australia. Mayu raised a number of questions about the spiritual belonging of transnationals and about 'death on the move.' I was reminded of [that conversation with Mayu](#) during my visit to Tehran's Christian [Doulab Cemetery](#).

## Death far from home

The Polish section occupies about three quarters of the Catholic cemetery and constitutes the final resting place of almost 2,000 men, women and children who died in Tehran between 1942-1945.

The story of the Poles lying in Iranian soil is one of the less well-known tragedies of World War II. As part of the [Hitler-Stalin Pact](#) what was then Eastern Poland (and is today part of Belarus and Ukraine) was annexed by the Soviets in 1939. Around 1.5 million Poles were deported from the area to camps in Siberia. The vast majority of these died in the following months under horrific circumstances. Only around 250,000 of the deported Poles are known to have survived in Siberia. The survivors were released in 1941 when Germany attacked the Soviet Union so that they could join in the war effort against the Nazis. However, many of these survivors chose to flee instead and around 115,000 managed to reach Allied-occupied Iran.

Making it to Iran was like reaching the Promised Land for the evacuees, as one of them recalls in her memoirs:

*Exhausted by hard labor, disease and starvation – barely recognizable as human beings – we disembarked at the port of Pahlavi [present-day Bandar-e Anzali]. There, we knelt down together in our thousands along the sandy shoreline to kiss the soil of Persia. We had escaped Siberia and were free at last. We had reached our longed-for Promised Land. (quoted from [Ryszard Antolak, "Iran and the Polish Exodus from Russia 1942." ParsTimes](#))*

For a few years, the Polish community flourished in Tehran:

*Something more than food and clothing are necessary for the human spirit to survive and grow. Art and Culture are antibodies to feelings of despondency and decay, and within a few months of their arrival, the exiles had set up their own theatres, art galleries, study circles, and radio stations all over the city. Artists and craftsmen began to give exhibitions. Polish newspapers began to spring up; and restaurants began to display Polish flags on the streets.*



Two of the headstones in the Polish refugee section

*Among the organizations formed to care for the educational and cultural needs of the exiles was the influential Institute of Iranian Studies begun by a small group of Polish academicians. In three years from 1943 to 1945 this group published three scholarly volumes and scores of other articles on Polish-Iranian affairs. (Ryszard Antolak, "Iran and the Polish Exodus from Russia 1942." ParsTimes)*



Memorial stone at the center of the Polish refugee section: French-Persian plaque (the Polish version is on the other side of the monument)

However, death was ever-present in this group of weakened survivors, as the Catholic cemetery in Doulab vividly demonstrates. Each of the small 1,869 refugee graves ([see here for a map of the cemetery](#)) has an identical headstone inscribed with a number, the Polish abbreviation 'S.P.' ('*swieterj pamieci*,' 'in memory of'), a name, the year of birth and the year of death, and the Latin abbreviation 'R.I.P.' ('*requiescat in pace*,' 'may s/he rest in peace').

In the center of the Polish refugee section are two memorial stones, one with a trilingual inscription in Polish, French and Persian and the other bilingual in Polish and English. The trilingual one is roughly similar in the three languages and the Polish version reads as follows:

*PAMIECI /WYGNANCOW/POLSKICH /KTORZY /W DRODZE DO OJCZYZNY /W BOGU SPOCZELI /NA WIEKI. 1942-1944*

*To the memory of the Polish exiles who, on their return journey to their homeland, found the peace of God, 1942-1944 (my translation from the French and Persian inscriptions)*

The English version of the bilingual memorial stone, which looks more recent than the trilingual one, is similar in content but provides more detail and reads as follows:

*IN COMMEMORATION /OF THOUSANDS /OF POLES THE SOLDIERS /OF THE POLISH ARMY /IN THE EAST /OF GENERAL /WLADYSLAW ANDERS /AND CIVILIANS /THE FORMER /PRISONERS OF WAR /AND CAPTIVES /OF THE SOVIET CAMPS /WHO DIED IN 1942 /ON THE WAY /TO THEIR HOMETLAND /PEACE TO THEIR MEMORY*

As it so happens, the inscriptions on both these monuments are historically incorrect: the Polish refugees were not on their way “to their homeland” because – [also in Tehran in 1943 but worlds away from the refugees](#) – Churchill and Roosevelt conceded what had been Eastern Poland to Stalin’s USSR and the remainder of Poland to the Soviet sphere of influence.

### Death in a new home

For the majority of the survivors, their stay in Iran was temporary and they later resettled in the UK, the Americas, Africa and Australasia. However, some also chose to stay and to rebuild their shattered lives in Iran as is evidenced by the graves in the far corner of the Polish section. There, a number of larger and personalized tombstones have been erected to the memory of people born in Poland who died in Tehran as recently as 2002. Most of these commemorate women who married Iranian men as is evidenced by their Persian surnames.

I looked at these graves with mixed feelings: on the one hand, their personalized details, the fact that they were commemorating much older people than the refugee graves, and the names in which Polish and Persian have become mixed speak of lives lived fully in a new home. On the other hand, they are all single graves and the Iranian husbands and families of these women thus must lie elsewhere (maybe in Tehran’s huge [Behest-e Zahra Cemetery](#), where the city’s Muslims find their final resting place). The fact that none of these graves are family graves – despite the fact that the women obviously had new families in Iran – speaks to the fact that faith and nation continue to divide in death those who were joined in life.

### Parceling up the dead

The divisions of faith are made concrete in the architecture of the Doulab cemetery complex, a feature that is, of course, not unique to Iran’s cemeteries. To begin with, Tehran’s dead Christians are physically separated from the city’s Muslims and Jews, who have their own cemeteries elsewhere. Second, even within the Christian complex the various denominations are divided into their own separate compounds: the Catholic cemetery is separated by large walls from the adjoining Armenian and Russian cemeteries (the so-called ‘Russian’ cemetery seems to house all non-Armenian and/or non-Iranian Orthodox Christians).



One of the tombstones of the Poles who settled in Tehran. The mixed name shows that Yanina Kaganowska married into a Persian family



French flag marking a little girl as French national

Divisions of nation of origin also continue to persist within the Catholic cemetery. Although widely known as 'Polish cemetery' because such a large number of Poles are lying there, the cemetery was started in 1855 with a mausoleum for [Dr. Louis André Ernest Cloquet](#), a Frenchman who died prematurely while serving as personal physician to the Shah. The memorial to this Catholic was placed close to – but outside of – the Armenian cemetery. Since then Catholics from most European countries have also found their final resting place there and the cemetery's sections are more or less clearly divided into national sections.

The banal nationalism of death is most obvious in the cases of the French and Italian dead who lie in Doulab: their embassies have taken the trouble of placing little metal French or Italian flags at the foot of each French or Italian grave.

While such flags are absent from the graves of other nationals lying in Doulab, the language of the tombstones is in most cases the language of the country of birth. None of the German graves I visited, for instance, shows any sign that the person lying there must have lived a transnational life and must, to a smaller or larger degree, have been part of the fabric not only of German but also Iranian society during their lives. The inscriptions on the tombstones bear no traces of a life partly lived in Iran: for all that the inscriptions suggest, the graves might have been located in Germany.

How could a tombstone inscription suggest a transnational life? At the Doulab cemetery, I saw two options: a multilingual inscription or a lingua franca inscription.

A multilingual inscription is exemplified by the Polish, French and Persian trilingual memorial discussed above. On individual tombstones in the Catholic section multilingual inscriptions are rare and, unless I overlooked something, absent from the graves of Europeans. The few that I noticed are bilingual in various combinations of Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian, French, Persian and Russian. In some cases, it was impossible to identify the languages other than to say that the inscriptions were both in the Latin and Arabic scripts.

While monolingual tombstones predominate in the Catholic section, over in the Orthodox section the situation is different and tombstones inscribed in multiple languages and scripts – Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian, Georgian, Greek, Latin and Russian – are more frequent there.

As regards lingua franca inscriptions, I consider an inscription as lingua franca if the tombstone is inscribed in a language other than a/the language of the country of origin of the deceased or a language of Iran (in practice, in



This tombstone could be located anywhere in Germany. There is nothing in the inscription that suggests that Franz Säger actually lies in Tehran



A bilingual tombstone in French and Assyrian is suggestive of the complex life that Paul Sarmas must have led

this case, that means Armenian, Assyrian and Persian). The most frequent lingua franca by far is French and one final surprise was the absence of English in this international space: other than in the Polish-English bilingual memorial mentioned above, there was only one single tombstone inscribed in English:

*ANNA MARIA VAN /DEN BRINK-LECKE /BORN HOLLAND  
19.10.1914 /DIED TEHERAN 13.9.1970 /MAY GOD REJOICE HER SOUL*

The nationality of the deceased is listed as German in the cemetery's registry, a country where she was neither born nor died, further illustrating the complexity of transnational life and death.

### Where the spirit rests

Dying away from 'home' is often invested with special

sadness. According to an [overview of Polish cemeteries in Iran](#), a number of the commemorative plaques in other Polish burial sites in Iran stress the fact that these people died "on foreign soil." There is indeed a deep sense of sadness and loss emanating from the refugee graves. However, that is because of the evil that cut short the lives of the people who lie there and that made the circumstances of their final years so horrific.



Keeping the dead within the boundaries imagined by the living: the gate to the walled-in Catholic section of the Doulab Cemetery Complex

By contrast, the graves of those Poles who had decided to stay on in Tehran after the war and to rebuild their lives there and those of the other foreign-born lying there did not move me in this way. What is striking about those is the desire of the living to inscribe the boundaries of faith, nation and language even on those who obviously led lives that transcended those very boundaries.

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