



A Brief History of Polish Immigration to Australia



POLISH CLUB SIKORSKI
60TH ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION
1966 - 2026



A BRIEF HISTORY OF POLISH IMMIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA



HISTORY OF POLISH IMMIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA

Polish contact with Australia dates as early as 1696 when a number of Polish crew members were on board the Dutch naval expedition which explored the coastline of Western Australia. Polish settlement in Australia dates to the early 19th century when a Polish convict by the name of Joseph Potaski (originally Potowski) arrived in the colony of Port Phillip. The party moved on to Hobart and the same Polish convict went on to become one of Tasmania's earliest and most successful wheat farmers.

Over the next forty years, about a dozen persons of Polish origin settled in Australia, mainly Polish nobility and army officers. Of the most eminent was Sir Paul Edmund Strzelecki who arrived in Sydney in 1839. Explorer, cartographer and scientist, he, among other contributors, explored the Snowy mountains in 1840, published the first map of Gippsland, named Australia's highest peak Mount Kosciuszko after the great Polish freedom fighter, Tadeusz Kosciuszko, who organised an armed insurrection against the Russians in 1795. There are about 20 geographical features in Australia bearing his name including the Strzelecki Ranges.

A significant settlement was established north of Adelaide, in the 1850s known as Polish Hill River. By the 1880s, there was an established Polish colony made up of 400 people, who maintained Polish language, customs and traditions. In 1870, a Polish priest, Fr Rogalski made a significant contribution to the settlement. A Polish church was established and Polish was taught at the local school.

Following his death in 1906, the community gradually integrated into the wider community, losing its distinct Polish traits.

POST SECOND WORLD WAR IMMIGRATION

On 21 July 1947, the Australian government signed a major agreement with the Preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organisation (PCIRO) in Geneva, Switzerland, formally initiating the Displaced Persons Program.

This agreement, often referred to as the "21 July 1947 agreement", marked the beginning of large-scale, non-British post-war migration to Australia, with the government agreeing to accept 4,000 displaced persons from Europe initially.

In 1947 Arthur Calwell met with officials from the International Refugee Organisation in London.

Key details of the agreement include:

- Signatories: Signed by Australian Minister for Immigration Arthur Calwell and PCIRO Executive Secretary AJ Altmeyer.
- Purpose: To tackle post-war labour shortages by assisting in the transport, accommodation, and employment of displaced persons (or "refugees") from European camps.
- Obligations: The Australian government guaranteed that these immigrants would be treated without discrimination regarding wages and living conditions compared to Australian workers.
- Worker Commitments: Workers were required to remain in the employment arranged for them by the government for at least one year.
- Scope: While initially for 4,000 people, this program expanded, and Australia accepted over 170,000 refugees over the following seven years.

This meeting was to change the composition of Australian society forever. From 1947-54 Australia received 170,000 displaced persons of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, 60,000 of those were Polish.

Australia needed a strong, young labour force, one that did not differ too much from the local population.

Contextual Factors of 21 July 1947 agreement:

- White Australia Policy: This agreement, which encouraged non-British European migration, marked a significant step in relaxing the strict British-only immigration focus of the time.
- Labour Shortages: The migrants were crucial in addressing post-war labour needs, particularly in key infrastructure industries.
- Regional Significance: This move occurred during the early stages of Australia's post-war reconstruction and the beginning of the Cold War.

Over the next few years, this agreement led to thousands of arrivals, primarily from Poland, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Historical Significance

This "decree" or agreement was the trigger for a large-scale migration program that eventually brought over 170,000 refugees to Australia within seven years. It was a significant shift from the previous focus on British-only immigration, although the National Archives of Australia notes that the government specifically selected "beautiful Balts" (people from Baltic nations) initially to make the concept of non-British European migration more acceptable to the public.

Approximately 60,000 of the 170,000 refugees (displaced persons) who arrived in Australia between 1947 and 1954 were Polish.

The Polish community was the largest single ethnic group within this initial "Displaced Persons" wave, significantly outnumbering other major groups like the "Balts" (who totalled around 30,000).

ARRIVAL AND RECEPTION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Newly arrived Polish migrants typically landed at Fremantle and were immediately transported to reception centres for processing, English classes, and job placement.

- Northam Army Camp: Located about 100km east of Perth, this was the third-largest immigration camp in Australia. Between 1949 and 1951, it housed approximately 15,000 migrants, including a significant Polish contingent.
- Holden Holding Centre: Also in Northam, this centre specifically housed the wives and children of workers while the men were sent to labor assignments across the state.
- Graylands Reception and Training Centre: A primary metropolitan hub in Perth used from 1947 to 1951 for initial intake and training.
- Other Centres: Polish migrants were also processed at Point Walter (Bicton), Swanbourne, and Cunderdin.

KEY STATISTICS

Peak Arrival Year (1950): Records from the Northam Army Camp show that in 1950 alone, 8,236 Polish migrants arrived in Western Australia.

Total Capacity: The Northam Accommodation Centre served as the primary entry point for these groups. By its closure in 1951, it had been the first Australian home for roughly 15,000 immigrants, including significant numbers from Poland, the Baltic States, and Yugoslavia.

Population Growth: The number of Poland-born residents in Perth grew from just 202 in 1947 to many thousands by the end of the scheme in 1954.

NATIONAL CONTEXT (1947-1954)

While WA received a substantial portion, the majority of the 170,000 total Displaced Persons settled in more populous eastern states:

- Total Polish Intake: Roughly 60,000 Polish refugees arrived in Australia during this specific post-war window.
- Comparison: Victoria saw its Polish population increase to over 21,000 during this same period, many of whom worked on the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

Distribution in WA

Once processed through the Northam Army Camp or Cunderdin, Polish workers were typically dispatched to rural and industrial sites for their two-year labor contracts before eventually moving to established communities in Maylands, North Perth, Midland-Bellevue and Highgate.

Types of Work

Under the 1947 agreement, DPs signed a two-year contract to work in government-specified roles. Polish migrants were instrumental in building WA's post-war infrastructure.

- Public Works: Many men worked for the Railways, Water Supply, and Main Roads Department.
- Agriculture: Migrants were often sent to the Wheatbelt for farming or to regional areas for fruit picking (grapes and peas).
- Construction & Heavy Industry: Poles labored in sawmills, brickworks, and large-scale projects like the Mundaring Weir upgrades.
- Women's Roles: Women were frequently assigned to domestic service, nursing, or seasonal agricultural labor.

Major Polish Settlements

Once their two-year contracts ended, many Polish families moved toward metropolitan areas to establish permanent communities.

- Perth (Central & Inner Suburbs): The first major hub was in North Perth and Highgate. In 1953, the community purchased their first headquarters at 189 Brisbane Street, Perth.
- Maylands: This became a significant centre for Polish life; the Polish Centre eventually moved to Eighth Avenue in Maylands.
- Midland – Bellevue: where there were two of the biggest employers in Western Australia, Midland Bricks and Railway Workshops.
- Regional Hubs: While many moved to the city, small communities persisted in Northam and Cunderdin, where they had first arrived.

Interstate Context: Nationally, the largest Polish settlements formed in Melbourne (suburbs like Caulfield and Sunshine) and Adelaide (Polish Hill River), though WA maintained a distinct and highly active community.



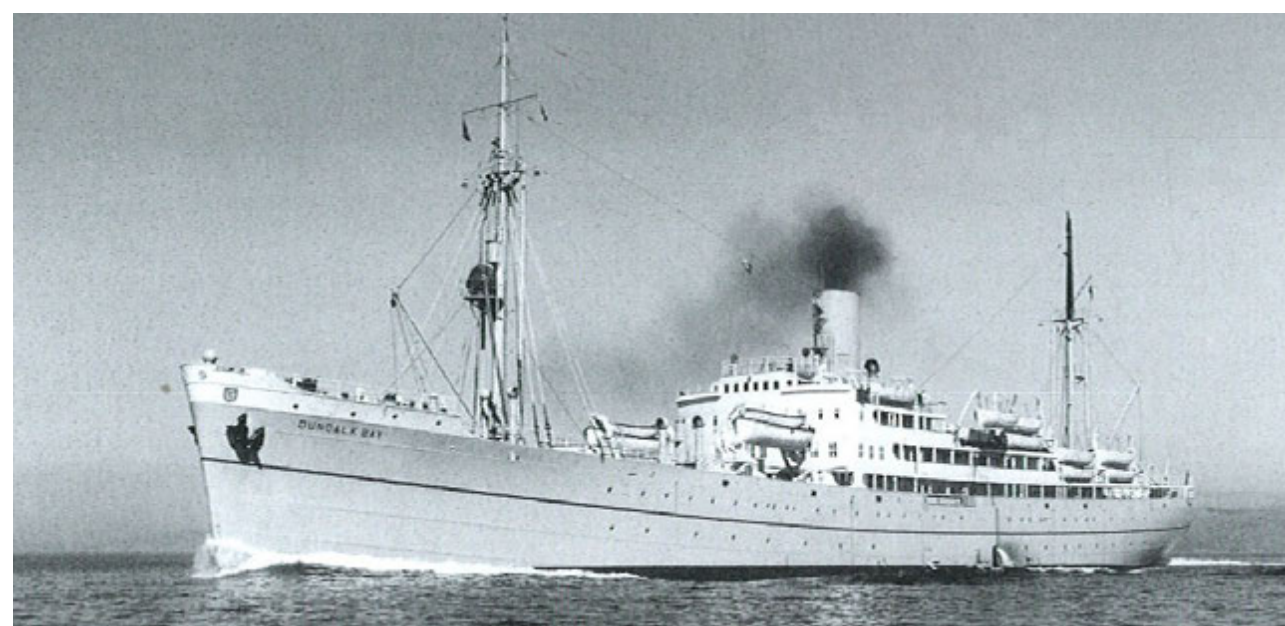
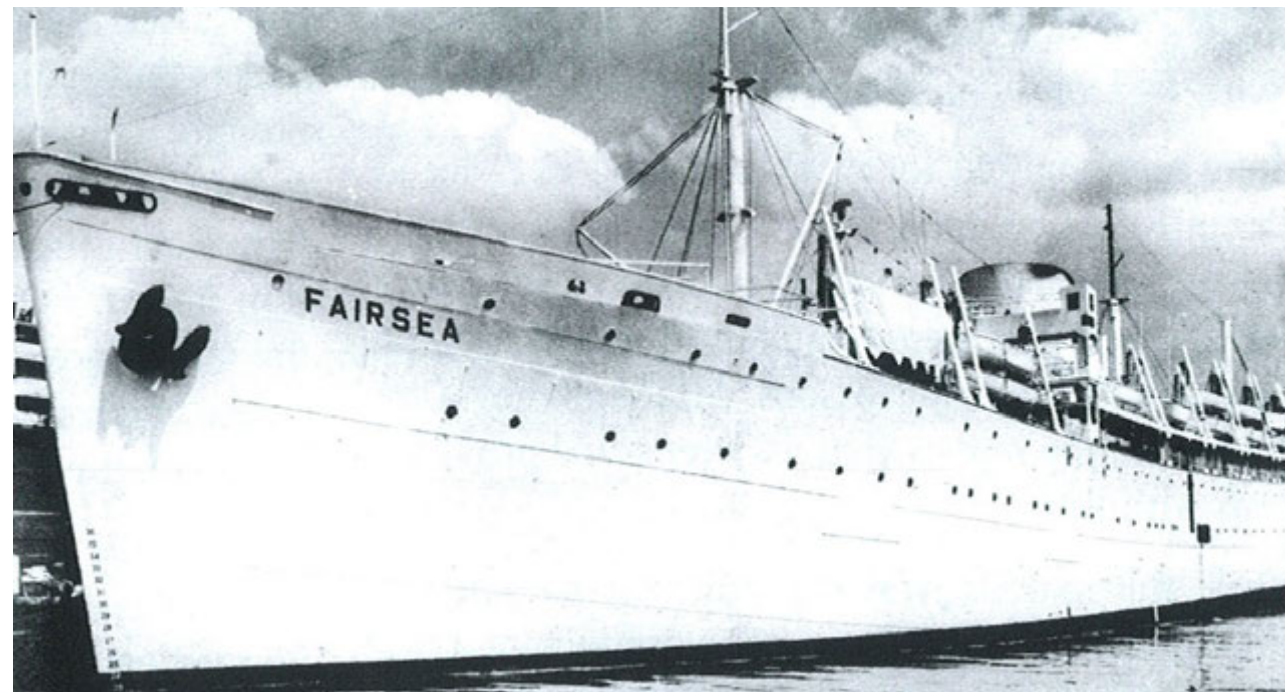
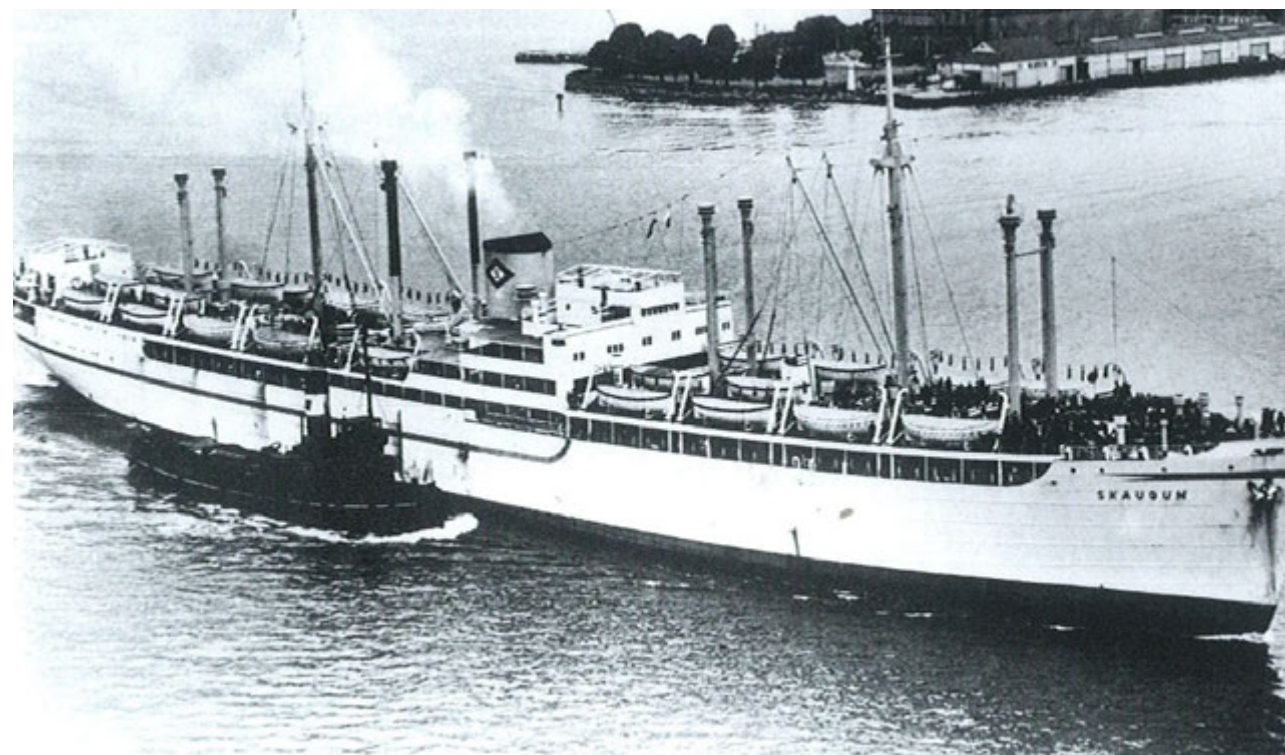
ABOUT POST WAR IMMIGRATION

The Polish immigrants arrived to Australia from 1947 onwards - it was their escape from war-torn Europe, their journey, and their arrival to a strange and distant land. They found themselves here where they built a new life for themselves, their children and grandchildren.

This is a commemoration to the endurance of the human spirit –the journey was full of trauma, danger, great grief and loss of homeland, family, friends and belongings. The people who arrived here had suffered the consequences of the mass destruction of their homeland. Some had survived concentration camps, many were deported to labour camps in Germany and to Siberia to work in harsh and primitive conditions often confronted by hunger, death of loved ones, death of strangers and witness to human suffering. Others came as ex-service men, many still in uniform who had fought with the allies in various campaigns – Polish airmen who had fought in the battle of Britain, soldiers who fought in Tobruk, took part in the Normandy landings, the battle for Monte Cassino and so on. Others came as children and adolescents, many of whom had been orphaned during the war. These children found themselves in refugee camps in British East Africa, India, Palestine and Iran. The children were part of a significant group who had been released as Polish exiles from Siberia and had travelled through Arkhangelsk, Vorkuta, Kazakhstan, in goods trains, sick, hungry and in rags.

The paths to Australia are as diverse as the stories of people – arriving from Africa, India, Germany, Netherlands, Great Britain, Lebanon, Libya, China. They arrived in Australia with expectations of a new life, hopes for a prosperous future; many wanted to get as far away from death and the destruction they had experienced. This was often mixed with a heavy heart, 'tesknota' for their homeland, family members, their culture, traditions and memories left behind. They arrived to quite primitive conditions, in transit centres such as Bonegilla where husbands were separated from wives and children. Men worked on large projects such as building roads, the hydroelectricity scheme in Tasmania and the Snowy, cane cutting in Queensland, coalminers, fruit pickers and furnace labourers in Victoria. Women worked as domestics and nurses. Many found the work hard and felt isolated. Once free of their contractual obligations they built their first home, celebrated marriages, christenings, founded cultural and religious organisations. The community developed organisational structures which maintained language, culture and religious traditions.

The community welcomed and assist subsequent waves of immigrants, small numbers in the sixties and seventies and the large wave of 1980s 'Solidarity' wave. The political unrest, the implementation of martial law in 1981 and a worsening economic situation resulted in large numbers of Poles leaving Poland and seeking political asylum in western countries, including Australia. During the period 1980-91, approximately 25,000 Polish people arrived in Australia. This wave comprised of young families, mostly people from urban settings, many with professional qualifications.



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THE “SECOND WAVE” OF POLISH IMMIGRATION

It is commonly known as the “Solidarity Wave,” occurred between 1980 and 1991. This movement was driven by intense political unrest and economic decline in Poland, specifically the rise of the Solidarity trade union and the subsequent declaration of martial law in December 1981.

Scale and Demographics

- **Arrival Numbers:** During this period, Australia granted permanent residency to over 25,000 Poles.
- **Profile:** Unlike the post-WWII wave of “Displaced Persons,” these migrants were typically young, urban-dwelling, and highly educated. Many arrived as young families with tertiary degrees or professional qualifications.
- **Status:** Many arrived as refugees under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP), often spending time in transition camps in Austria before being resettled in Australia.

Differences from the First Wave

The 1980s migrants entered a significantly different Australia than those of the 1940s:

- **Multicultural Policy:** They benefited from established multicultural policies, improved interpreter services, and better initial accommodation compared to post-war camps.
- **Economic Challenges:** Despite being well-qualified, many faced difficulties getting their overseas qualifications recognised, arriving during a decade of high unemployment and interest rates.
- **Community Tensions:** Tensions sometimes developed between the older, more conservative “Displaced Persons” generation and the new, more career-oriented “Solidarity” arrivals, leading to social and ideological divisions within the Polonia (the Polish diaspora).

Settlements and Impact

- **Primary Hubs:** While they settled across the country, Melbourne became the largest center for this wave, particularly in suburbs like Rowville, St Albans, and Sunshine. Significant groups also settled in Sydney, Adelaide, and Perth.
- **Contribution:** These migrants made substantial contributions to Australian academia, the arts, and professional sectors. Organizations like the Australian Institute of Polish Affairs were founded in the early 1990s by members of this wave to strengthen bilateral ties.

Australia-Wide Statistics

According to the 2021 Australian Census.

- **Total Ancestry:** 209,284 people identify as having full or partial Polish heritage.
- **Polish-Born:** 45,884 residents were born in Poland.
- **Language:** Approximately 51,399 people speak Polish at home.

Western Australia Statistics

Western Australia is home to approximately 12.2% of the national Polish-born population. [1]

- **Polish-Born in WA:** There are 5,608 people born in Poland residing in Western Australia.
- **Greater Perth Ancestry:** In the Perth metropolitan area alone, 19,925 people identify with Polish ancestry, making up about 0.9% of the city’s total population.
- **Perth Polish-Born:** Roughly 5,215 of the state’s Polish-born residents live in Greater Perth.

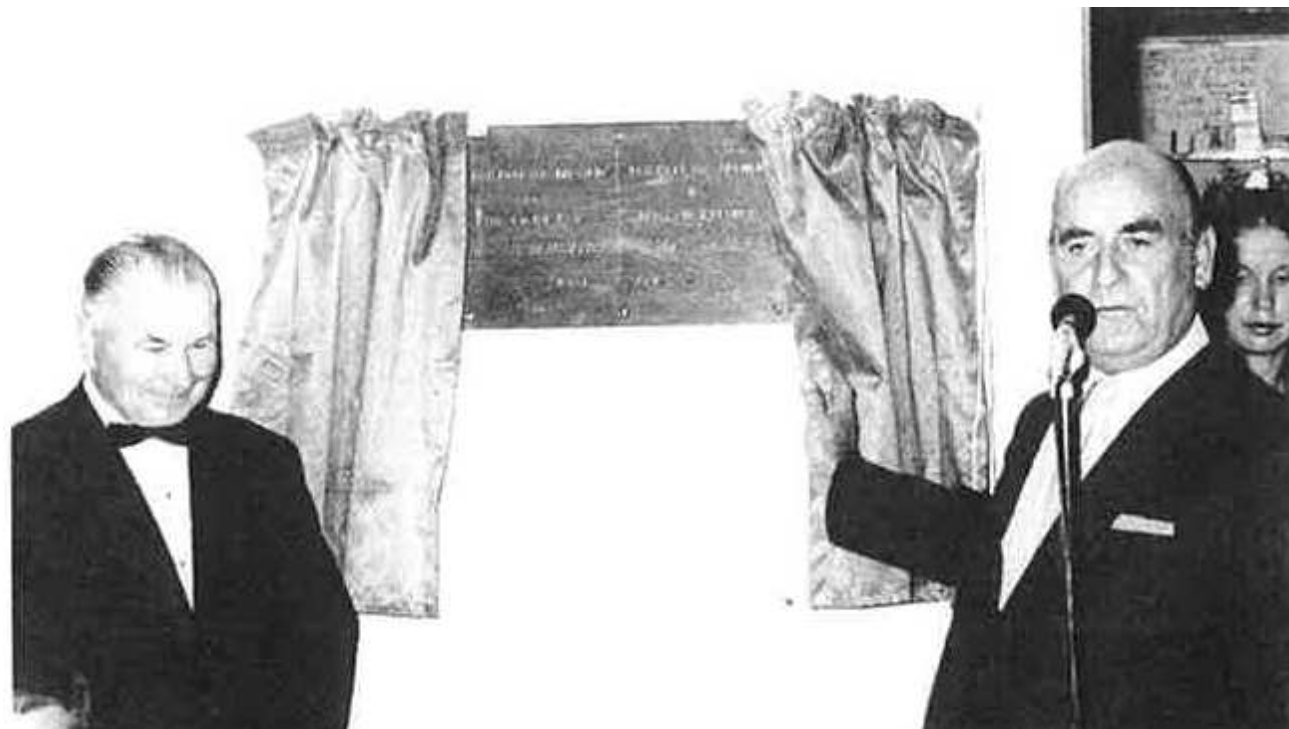
Polish Diaspora

- Victoria - 31.0%
- New South Wales - 30.1%
- Queensland - 12.5%
- Western Australia - 12.2%
- Other - 13.9%

Arrival

- Prior to 1991 - 65.0%
- 1991 – 2000 - 12.1%
- 2001 – 2010 - 10.4%
- 2011 – 2015 - 6.6%
- 2016 – 2021 - 5.9%

Data: 2021 Census ABS.



POLISH CLUB GENERAL W. SIKORSKI WA INC

The Polish Club General W. Sikorski WA Inc., established in 1966 in Bellevue, Western Australia, is one of the leading ethnic community organisations in the State. For nearly six decades, the Club has served as a vibrant cultural hub, community centre, and meeting place for both the Polish community and the wider Australian society.

Founded by post-war Polish migrants, the Club was created to provide a place of connection, support, and cultural continuity for those building new lives in Australia. Since its inception, the Club has been entirely volunteer-run, reflecting a strong tradition of community service, commitment, and civic responsibility.

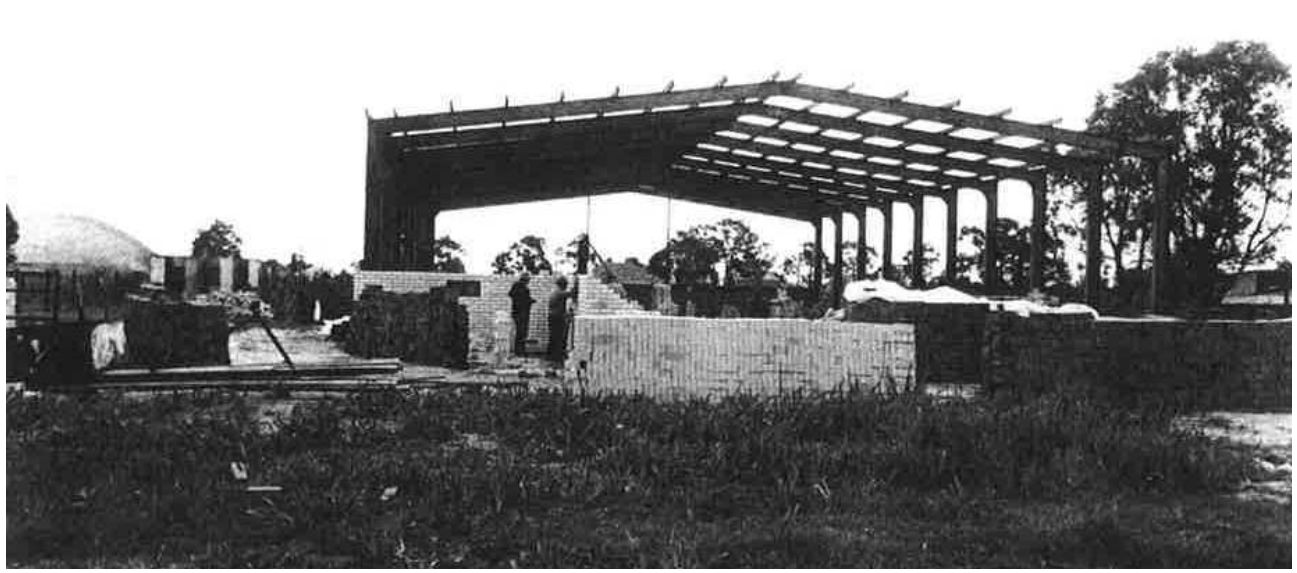
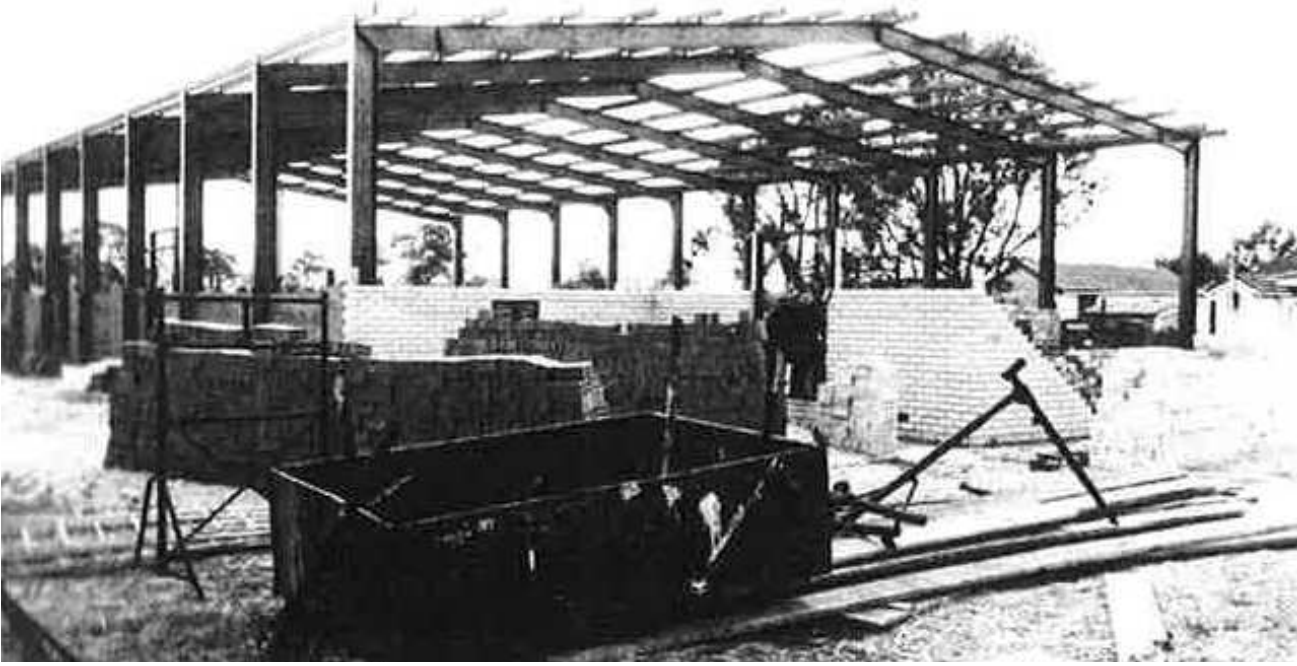
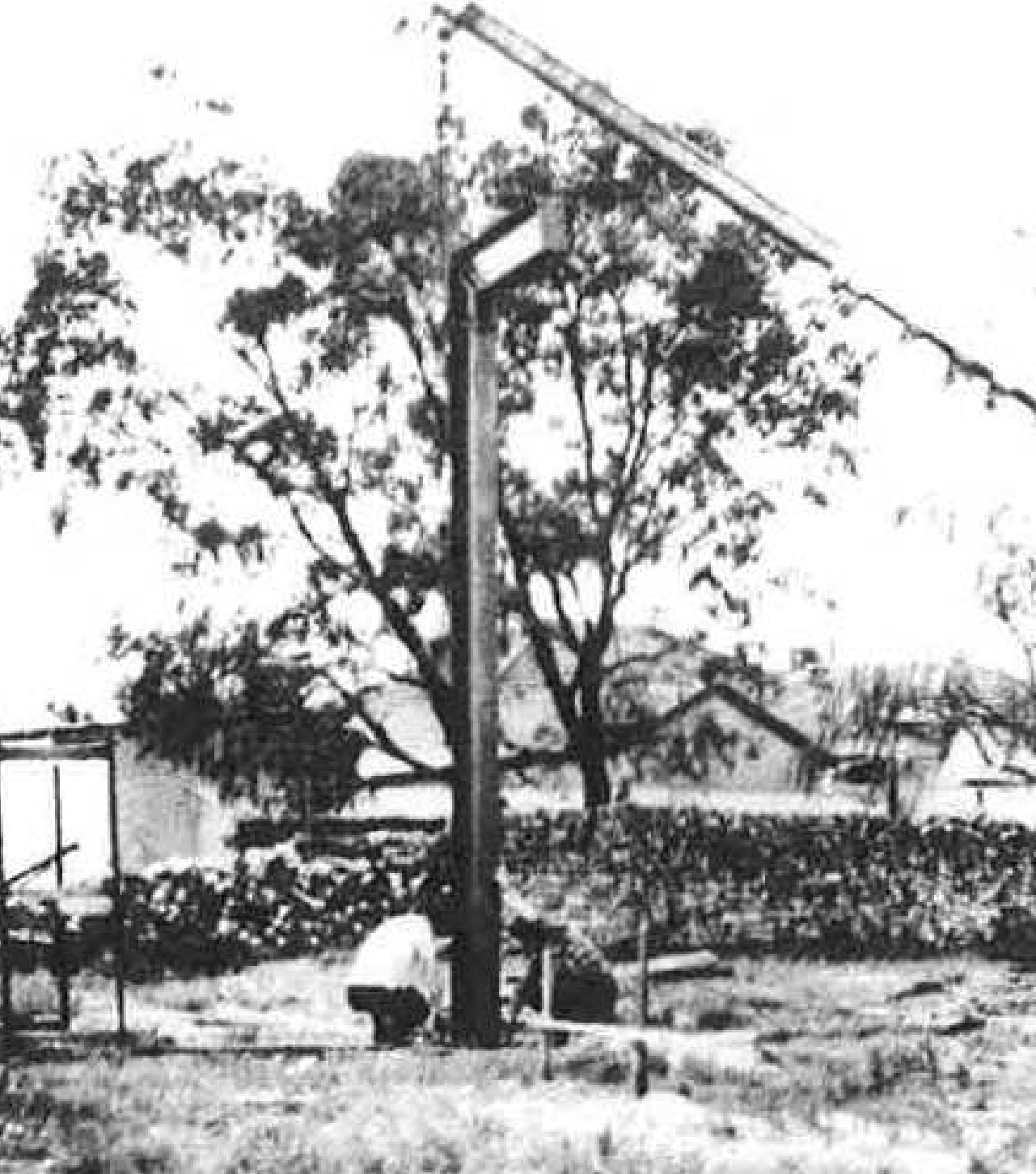
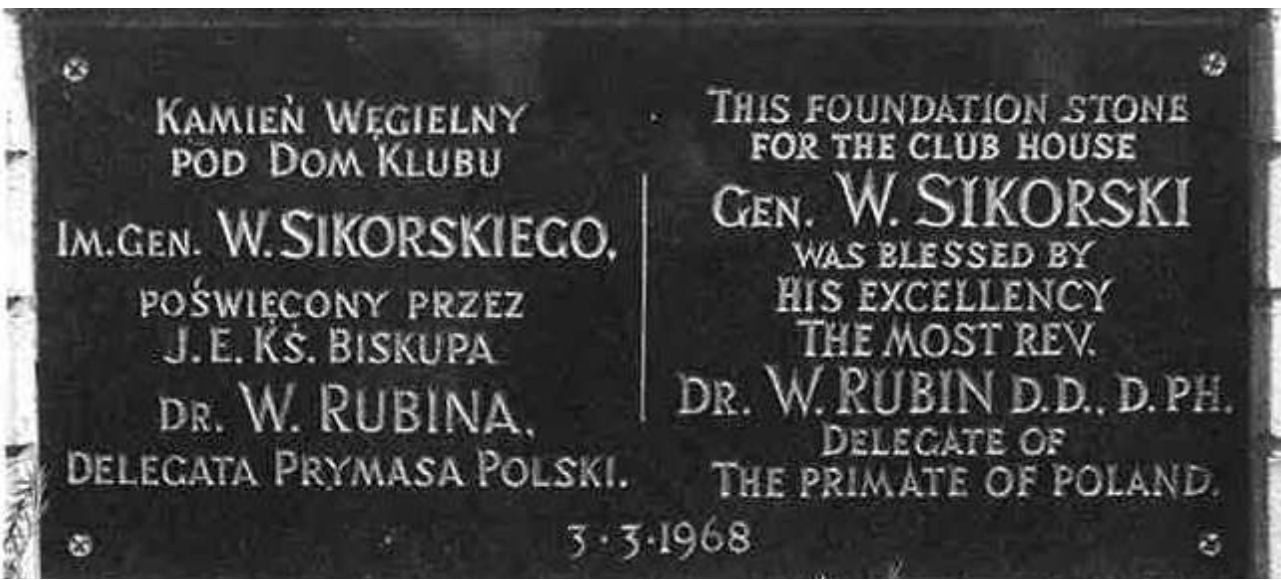
Today, the Club plays a significant role in promoting multiculturalism, social cohesion, and community engagement. It fosters understanding between cultures, promotes tolerance and harmony, and actively supports the integration of new migrants into Australian society.

The Club delivers a diverse program of cultural, educational, and social activities, including festivals, concerts, exhibitions, community events, and educational initiatives. Many of these events are open to the wider public and attract large, diverse audiences, contributing to the cultural life of Western Australia.

A key focus of the Club is the preservation and promotion of Polish heritage—including language, traditions, music, and history—while also showcasing Poland’s achievements and strengthening connections between Poland and Australia.

The organisation works in close collaboration with local government, multicultural institutions, community groups, and partner organisations, playing an active role in the broader CaLD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) community.

Through the dedication of its volunteers and the strength of its community partnerships, the Polish Club Sikorski continues to evolve as a modern, inclusive, and dynamic organisation, proudly contributing to the social and cultural fabric of Western Australia.



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