

THE PROBLEMATIC FIGURE OF JOSEPH POTASKI, AUSTRALIA'S FIRST POLISH SETTLER¹

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On October 9th 2003, it will be 200 years since the first Polish settler, the convict Joseph Potaski, arrived in Australia, firstly, at the aborted Sorrento settlement at Sullivan Bay in Port Phillip Bay, and then, at the Hobart settlement in Van Dieman's Land, where he lived from 1804 until his death in 1824. The Polish presence in Australia throughout the 19th century was an illustrious one with distinguished Poles such as Lhostky and Strzelecki making significant contributions. The naming of Australia's highest mountain by Strzelecki has ensured that the Polish contribution and the Polish Australian heritage cannot be forgotten. In that sense, the Polish Australian community is more fortunate than most other immigrant communities. Since World War II, the various subsequent waves of Poles have, in their individual ways, made an immense collective contribution to Australia's social and economic capital with their tenacity, hard work, family life and religious faith. Yet, the history of Polish Australian settlement did not have an auspicious beginning, and the story lies buried in Australia's convict past.

Until 1802, little is known about Joseph Potaski, Australia's first Polish settler. There is little agreement on the spelling of his surname (Patoskey, Potaskee, Potasky, Potocki etc.), and there is disagreement about his birth details. His family in the gravestone on his burial place in St. David's churchyard in central Hobart at the head of Salamanca Place suggest he was born in 1774 whereas other, perhaps stronger, evidence from the English records suggests it is 1762, perhaps 1764. He could speak some Russian but seemingly not well – the famous Russian navigator, Captain Andrei Lazarov, met him in 1823 and described him as an 'aging native of Belorussia'². Earlier on, John Fawkner, the co-founder with John Batman of Melbourne much later, had travelled with him in 1804 as the eleven-year son of a convict on the boat to Tasmania as an eleven year-old and clearly knew him, as we shall see, quite well as a fellow member of the small colony of Van Dieman's Land. Fawkner says that he was Polish³. Certainly, the weight of evidence suggests that Potaski identified with Poland.

Elena Govor in an online paper on Russian convicts in Australia suggests he may have been connected with the aristocratic family of Potockis who were strong supporters of the 1793 national-liberation rebellion. Whatever his date of birth, he was born and raised in a very troubled Poland that was heading towards the catastrophe that almost certainly triggered Potaski's flight from a homeland to which he never returned.

¹ The author wishes to thank the family historian, Gerard English, for his assistance in collecting data for this article.

² Govor, E (2003) Russian convicts in Australia. <http://argo.net.au/andre/RussianconvictsENFIN.htm>, downloaded 23rd May, 2003

³ Cotter, R. (ed.) (2003) *John Pascoe Fawkner Sullivan Bay Reminiscences*. Available at <http://www.collinssettlement.org.au/doc/fawkner.pdt>, downloaded 23rd May 2003.

The Polish Catastrophe of the Late 1700s⁴

After the earlier War of the Polish Succession (1733 – 1735), Poland increasingly became a victim of Russian expansionism which eventually drew in the other powers. In 1764, Russian troops invaded Catholic Poland and placed on the Polish throne Stanislas Poniatowski, known as Stanislas II Augustus, a onetime lover of Catherine the Great, who endeavoured to be a reformer but always within the limits of Russian control. This expansionism alarmed the other great European powers, and the Turkish Ottomans also declared war on Russia. Austria and Prussia each had their own malicious designs on Polish territory. As Potaski was growing up, negotiations which were finalized at St. Petersburg in 1772 were going on to partition the country with the three external powers seizing about 30 per cent of Polish territory and forming the Polish Commonwealth with the remainder. Its new constitution contained safeguards to prevent Polish resurgence which the accommodationist Polish nobility in any case did its best to prevent. As Potaski reached adulthood, according to Lazarev, he served in the Russian army but it seems he switched sides to fight with Kosciuszko's army.

Tadeusz Andrzej Kosciuszko, born into a family of minor nobility near Novogradok in 1746 within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania under the nominal control of the Polish king, was educated at military schools in Poland and France. However, upon his return from Paris in 1774, there was no place in the Polish army for Kosciuszko after both the 1772 partition and a failed love affair with a general's daughter. He then went to America to fight in the War of Independence where his brilliant military and defence skills were used to great advantage against the British from 1776 to 1784. Upon his return to Poland, he was again unable to gain a commission in the Polish army and he languished on his small family estate where he freed many of his serfs from their servitude. He had been inspired by American liberal ideals which were to govern his subsequent actions.

Reform movements were gathering momentum in opposition to King Stanislaus. The time was near when Kosciuszko would step onto the national scene. Some liberal reforms were introduced, and, in 1791 the Polish Diet passed a new constitution, reducing the influence of the Russians and allowing Poland the possibility of becoming a more effective and centralised entity. The Russians were upset, and two Russian armies swept into Poland early in 1792, and Kosciuszko was asked to defend the area between the Wisla and Bug rivers. However, despite his own success in battle which immediately brought him hero status, the Russians eventually won. In January 1793, Poland was again partitioned with Prussia and Russia occupying a further 42 per cent of the Polish Commonwealth's territory. This was too much even for the Polish accommodationists, and throughout 1793, rebellion plans were formed with Kosciuszko being asked to take total command.

The Kosciuszko Rebellion

He gathered together the scattered Polish army and, as well, introduced peasant conscription to form an expeditionary force of *koziniarzy* or scythe-bearers to fight the Russian force. Potaski's role and whereabouts during this period are lost in the mists of history, but he eventually became a member of Kosciuszko's army. After an initial victory at Raclawice, the rebellion ended in disaster with a two-month siege of Warsaw by a combined Prussian and Russian force. A terrible massacre took place in the suburb of Praga, and rebel soldiers were either executed or deported to Siberia. Potaski suffered neither of these fates, but nor could he

⁴ There are many books on Polish history such as Halecki, O. (1983) *A History of Poland* (Routledge & Kegan, London); Zamoyski, A. (1987) *The Polish Way: a Thousand-Year History of the Poles and their Culture* (Murray, London) and Lukowski, J. & Zawadzki, H. *A Concise History of Poland* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge)

stay in decimated Poland. Nor would he have wanted to remain in a land that had become a graveyard for his comrades, and his fate would eventually be worked out as far away as possible on the other side of the world. Perhaps the horror of it all left an indelible scar on his psyche. Perhaps it trained him in taking the criminal short-cut in the face of desperation. Perhaps it haunted him so much that he rarely, if ever, spoke about it with his family – they were even unsure of his birth year. Perhaps he wanted to cast the Polish half of his life far from his mind for Poland meant only disaster and doom. We shall never know.

We do know that, like so many other Poles then and since, he arrived in London, probably a refugee and asylum seeker. Tipping⁵ suggests he may have been a sailor from Danzig. While he was nominally Roman Catholic, religion seems never to have played a part in his life nor that of his immediate family. The Russian captain several years before he died had left him a copy of the New Testament though we are not sure whether he could read or write. The various spellings of his surname suggest a minimal literacy but it may also reflect the Australian difficulty with Polish surnames.

Potaski's Transportation to Van Dieman's Land

Potaski comes into identifiable historical purview on 27th March 1802 when he was arraigned before the Sussex Spring Assizes at Horsham in the United Kingdom for stealing, together with a John O'Brien, a woman's hair shawl from Mrs Pollard's shop at Newhaven. Perhaps he wanted his partner, Catherine O'Sullivan from Connaught in Ireland, to look nice or to protect her hair from the wind and the cold. Perhaps both were destitute. Who knows the reasons for these minor indiscretions? Convicted, he was sentenced by Baron Hotham to seven years' transportation to the Australian gulag. He escaped Siberia, but not Australia.

Much later, Fawkner's opinion of Potaski would be that he was an 'incorrigibly bad man' while his wife was described as a 'lowbred dirty idle Connaught woman', adding that they reared their children in 'filth and ignorance' and 'evil practices'. Marjorie Tipping⁶ who has written the history of the *Calcutta* convicts notes wryly, "other records neither confirm nor deny this less than flattering description".

At the time of their transportation from Portsmouth, they already had one baby son, Joseph, and a baby daughter was conceived on the high seas. They travelled on the *Calcutta* as part of the fleet under the command of Lieutenant Colonel David Collins who was charged with establishing the Sullivan Bay settlement on Port Phillip Bay. They arrived on October 9th 1803; in the words of one convict, it was "a horrid, desolated place". However, for the 467 people, lack of water, absconding convicts, unrest among the soldiers and threatening Aborigines meant it was not tenable to stay⁷. It was decided to go to the future Hobart and, after their departure on 20th January 1804, contrary winds ensured that the miserable journey took many more days than normal.

This time, the Potaskis travelled on the *Ocean*, and just before it berthed, Catherine gave birth to Catherine jnr at Risdon Cove on 17th February, 1804, the first European born and baptised in Tasmania. Landing next day, the Sorrento group were to become the permanent nucleus of the Hobart settlement. The mother was granted a plot of land at Clarence Plains⁸, and the father was freed in 1810. Tipping summarizes, "Her husband was renting farms at Kangaroo Point, Geilston and Risdon by 1816, growing more corn on them than was needed for a year's

⁵ Tipping, M. (1988) *Convicts Unbound: the Story of the Calcutta Convicts and their Settlement* (Penguin, Australia); much of the material for this article is based on Tipping's thorough research.

⁶ Tipping, p. 163

⁷ see Mullen, C (2003) *Victoria's first European settlement: Sullivan Bay 1803 – 1804 Ancestor* 26, 7, 13 – 14.

⁸ Donohoe, J. (1991) *The Forgotten Australians* (North Sydney)

supply in the whole colony, according to Surveyor George Evans. They had a comfortable house at Kangaroo Point. In 1819 he grazed four male and ten female cattle and twenty ewes, while the land his wife owned grew wheat and provided additional pasture. He supplied the Commissariat with wheat".⁹

The Fate of the Potaski Children

Neither child brought credit to Joseph Potaski during his lifetime. Potaski endeavoured to purchase the Geilston property but he was prevented by a new agent, Alfred Thrupp, who chose to take large quantities of wheat instead of rent. Was Thrupp exploiting a man whose English may not have been very good? There were disputes over the rent, especially when Thrupp would not issue receipts for the wheat¹⁰. Whatever the causes for this dispute, it was the context for the son John, together with four others, burgling the Thrupp house during which Mrs Thrupp was raped. John Potaski was taken to Sydney where he was convicted in March 1821 at the approximate age of 20. He was taken back to Hobart and hanged on 28th April 1821¹¹. The execution of this only son ensured the demise of the Potaski surname.

Even before this terrible episode, his sister, Catherine, had been in trouble. At the age of 16, she gave birth to an illegitimate son, William. He was baptised in the Church of England on 17th May, 1820 but died less than three years later on 25th February, 1823. There were allegations of prostitution, and she seemed not to enjoy the favour of the first Catholic chaplain, Fr. Connolly. But she lived to enjoy better times, marrying, again pregnant at the age of 20, Edward McDonald (var. McDonnell) just before her father's death and not long after her son's death. She was married at St. Virgil's church on 29th June 1824. Edward was from Ireland, and together the couple produced three daughters and a son between 1824 and 1833, all born in Hobart. He died in 1868, and Catherine jnr eventually died at Geelong on 30th January 1877,¹² beginning a family legacy that endures until today.

The Potaski Legacy

These series of events probably did not endear the Potaskis to the tightly knit River Derwent communities of the 1820s, and it is likely that life became difficult for the Potaskis, especially in the selling of their produce. In the year before his death, Joseph Potaski was again in trouble with the law for cattle rustling. He died at Hobart on 31st August, 1824, and while the family inscription states that he was 50 when he died, he may have been as old as 62. Eventually both his wife and daughter moved to Geelong, and Catherine snr died on 13 April 1855 at Geelong where she is buried. There is a suggestion she was born in 1759, thus dying at a great age.

Joseph Potaski was always a victim of his historical circumstances though during the best part of his life, the 1810s, he clearly worked hard to establish himself and his family. But his son's outrage probably destroyed it all. Joseph had not moved as far beyond his criminal past as most other ex-convicts did. Perhaps the burden of his personal history, beset by the vicissitudes of Russian, Prussian and British imperialism, was too great. He had floated like flotsam on the waves of an unkind history. Whilst there is nothing great about his life, his progeny have become honourable and contributing citizens of the Australian Commonwealth. Most would not be aware of the Polish beginnings of their family heritage in Australia. Perhaps the lessons of Joseph Potaski's life is that we must live by our decisions, including our mistakes, and that internal division, cynical opportunism and unbridled imperialism,

⁹ Tipping, p. 301

¹⁰ Tipping, p. 301

¹¹ Account in *Hobart Town Gazette*, 28th April, 1821.

¹² Funeral notice in *Geelong Advertiser*, 1st February, 1877.

eventually if not sooner, bring deviancy, defeat and death. Perhaps it shows, yet again, how God can draw good out of evil.

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