Shelter from the Holocaust
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I

A Different Silence

The Survival of More than 200,000 Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during World War II as a Case Study in Cultural Amnesia

JOHN GOLDLUST

Some of it was truly bizarre. They were on this train which arrives out in the middle of central Asia where Stalin had earlier sent a whole bunch of Jews and these Jews who’d settled there before all came out to the station and asked them to get off and settle there too.

—From interview with “Abe” quoted in Ruth Wajnryb, The Silence

In The Silence, Ruth Wajnryb explores the multilayered and sometimes fraught, intergenerational dynamics experienced by many in Australia growing up as children of Jewish immigrants from Europe whose lives had been “dislocated or traumatised during the twelve-year period of the Third Reich.”1 The vignette above recounted by Abe—one of the twenty-seven adult children of Holocaust survivors she interviewed in the course

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of her research—is presented in her book to illustrate Wajnryb’s point that we might best characterize the way some children hear their parents’ experiences of “The War” as a kind of “leaking out.” By this she means that over many years, during their childhood and even beyond, they tend to catch on to, but only partially absorb, numerous unanchored events that come to them in the form of disparate, hazy, and disjointed bits of information. It is not surprising, then, that when they later try to recall or retell one of these stories, even though they may have heard versions of it many times before, as with Abe, they are still, as Wajnryb puts it, a little “baffled by their own lack of knowledge of their parents’ background” and acutely aware that the “bits don’t compute in your head; they roll around and are unconnected to anything else in your world.”

But this is only one of the reasons I chose to begin with this brief and garbled version of what, for Abe, who grew up in mid-twentieth-century Sydney, was understandably a “truly bizarre” parental wartime story, exotic and distant both in locale and in time. Also, it was his somewhat bemused presentation of the incident—one that placed his parents during the war deep inside the “Asiatic” portion of the Soviet Union—that fortuitously provides a number of useful entry points into the historical events I explore in this chapter.

For one thing, there is Abe’s throwaway reference to this “whole bunch of Jews” whom his parents, while on their train journey, suddenly encountered at some unnamed railway station in “the middle of central Asia.” Who were these Jews? Where did they come from? When and why had Stalin “sent” them there, and why did they want to entice Abe’s parents to join them? In all probability, the event took place at the trans-Siberian railway station in the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan, the tiny, remote area located deep in the far eastern region of Siberia where, in 1934, the authorities had tried to establish their own version of a “national homeland” for the Soviet Jews, with Yiddish as its official “national language.”

But traveling in other parts of Soviet Central Asia, in particular Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the early 1940s, one would have been just as likely to come across a much larger population of mostly Yiddish-speaking Polish Jews who also found themselves in these places as a result of political decisions made by Stalin. While the ultimately unsuccessful
Soviet experiment of “Jewish” Birobidzhan remains an almost forgotten historical curiosity, of greater interest here is why seventy-five years later, for many of us, the probably more significant experiences of this other “bunch” of Polish Jews continue to remain vague, confused, and incompletely documented, to the extent that they have been somewhat reluctantly—and, I would contend, only marginally—incorporated into the broader historical narrative of Jewish wartime experiences.

A subtler, but equally important, consideration is that while Wajnryb’s sample of Australian interviewees included twenty-seven “second-generation” adult children, Abe’s are the only “survivor” parents whose flight to evade the Nazis led into the Soviet Union, and even here they were literally only “passing through.” Yet, for quite some time, it has been widely known, certainly by historians and researchers of the period, that, first, a considerable majority of the several hundred thousand Polish Jews who remained alive when Germany surrendered to the Allies in May 1945 spent most, if not all, of the war years in territory controlled by the Soviet Union and, second, that around half of the European Jewish immigrants who settled in Australia in the late 1940s and early 1950s were Polish Jews. Therefore, statistically—unless this was a very unusual cohort—we would expect that the immigrants who settled in Australia in the immediate postwar years included, at the very least, 4,000–5,000 Polish Jews who had “survived” the war inside the Soviet Union. Yet none of these Polish Jews, or their Australian-reared children, made it into Wajnryb’s sample of “survivor families”—Abe’s parents were only traveling through the USSR on their way to their eventual destination, Shanghai. One could reasonably ask: Does this suggest that there is a broad consensus in place that the term Holocaust survivor should be applied only to those Jews who were liberated from the Nazi concentration and labor camps, or who remained in hiding somewhere in Nazi-occupied Europe, or who found shelter with some anti-Nazi resistance or partisan group?

This thought receives added support when we look more closely at an earlier study of Holocaust survivors carried out in Melbourne, the city in Australia where by far the greatest number of postwar Polish Jews chose to settle. Naomi Rosh White, for her book From Darkness to Light, undertook extensive interviews in the 1980s with eleven Holocaust survivors—five women and six men—all Polish Jews who were in Nazi-occupied
Europe between 1939 and 1945. Among the eleven she selected for her study, and whose stories make up the bulk of the book’s narrative, she included only one male survivor who spent any period of the war years inside the Soviet Union.\(^7\)

In this chapter I endeavor to provide a broader political and sociological context for why and how the geographical trajectories, personal experiences, and stories of survival of the large number of Polish Jews who escaped probable extermination only because they chose to flee “eastward” have remained, for a variety of confluent reasons, a largely under-examined and shadowy presence within the larger Holocaust narrative. One might suggest further that, as a consequence, in the absence of a contextualized and more coherent understanding of these events, the particular family histories of many thousands of children and later descendants of these Polish Jews, now resident in Australia and elsewhere, will remain, at best, impoverished and, at worst, in danger of being relegated to a rapidly vanishing trace within Jewish cultural memory and collective history.

**SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND DATA**

My aim is to contextualize the private, often fragmentary and skeletal, family stories of refuge and exile of Polish Jews inside the Soviet Union and thereby to locate them within a broader political and sociological narrative. In so doing, I also draw attention to a number of loosely connected but also clearly differentiated geographical and situational trajectories taken by different “subgroups” among Polish Jews who, by choice or circumstance, spent much of the war in the Soviet Union.\(^8\) I draw on two different but complementary sources of information and data.

**Published Academic Articles and Books**

The suggestion is not that the “story” has remained completely untold but rather that, for a variety of reasons I discuss more fully below, it has gradually receded further into the background and, therefore, much of the complexity and detail surrounding these experiences is no longer widely known or coherently understood. There has been a small but steady stream of academic essays, from the earliest overview in 1953 right
up to the present day; as chapters in edited books that deal more generally with aspects of the Second World War, the Holocaust, or Eastern Europe; and also in a wide range of academic journals. There is also one edited volume, published in 1991, that collects together fourteen academic essays by specialist authors on the general theme of Polish Jews under Soviet authority over the entire period of the Second World War.

Published Memoirs
Autobiographical memoirs by Polish Jews who had spent the war years inside the Soviet Union were already appearing by the late 1940s, although most of the early ones were in Yiddish, and many still remain untranslated. By the 1970s a few more, now in English as well as other languages, slowly started to trickle out, but there has been a noticeable increase in the publication of these personal memoirs over the past two decades, as the growing impetus for Holocaust survivors to “tell their stories,” together with their advancing age, has encouraged many Jews of this generation and background (including some who had spent the war inside the Soviet Union) to write autobiographical works.

Some are quite modest in scope, taking the form of a straightforward, chronological retelling of significant biographical events, often put down at the urging of children or grandchildren, and therefore including personal stories and details that are of most relevance and interest to family and friends. However, within the autobiographical narratives of this generation of Polish Jews, growing up in Poland in the first decades of the twentieth century followed by what happened to them in the years before and during the Second World War invariably carries a significantly heavy weight and emphasis. A few memoirs were written by “professional” writers and therefore often exhibit considerable literary skills, notably well-developed descriptive qualities and a fluid and engaging prose style.

From my reading of fourteen of these published autobiographies, the majority by Polish Jews who later settled in Australia, each includes at least a few fascinating and often insightful anecdotes, observations, descriptions, and details. These both complement and, I would argue, greatly enhance the broader historical narrative, adding the qualitative richness and ethnographic texture we tend to associate with unique lived experience.
THE DECISION TO MOVE EASTWARD, 1939–1940

The invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany on 1 September 1939 was preceded a few days earlier by the signing of a non-aggression treaty between Germany and the Soviet Union. This agreement included a secret protocol that specified the projected borders that would soon divide Poland. The German army overcame most of the Polish military resistance within the first few weeks, while Soviet forces moved into Poland from the east on 17 September 1939 to take up positions on the newly defined border (see map 1).

It is difficult, almost eight decades later, to recapture the widespread confusion, chaos, apprehension, and fear that would have confronted the more than 3 million Polish Jews in the weeks that followed the German army’s crossing the Polish frontier in those first days of September 1939. The legal and physical persecution of Jews already instituted by the Nazi regime, first in Germany in 1933 and, by the late 1930s, across the expanding areas of Central Europe over which they had gained political control, was already widely known. But events were moving so quickly that it seemed impossible that the Jews in Poland could now find a way to evade any “special treatment” that might await them as a visible and vulnerable minority within a Polish nation whose military resistance had been overwhelmed in the space of only a few weeks.

However, the entry of the Soviets into the picture, and their very rapid movement into administrative control of eastern Poland, introduced one of the few available alternative scenarios—but it also posed some imponderable questions. Was it possible for Polish Jews to rationally determine whether it was preferable for them to stay where they were or, for those now under German authority, to seek a way somehow to move themselves into the Soviet sphere of control? Within the first few days after the Germans began their invasion, an increasing number of Jews from the western and central areas of Poland began to leave their homes and move in an easterly direction. As a result, some of these “refugees,” as they came to be known, were already in eastern Poland by the time the Soviet troops took possession of these areas. In addition, for several periods during the first few months after the new border between the German- and Soviet-occupied territories of Poland was established—that
German General Gouvernement
Incorporated into the German Reich
Ribbentrop-Molotov Line
Annexed by the Soviet Union as Western Belarus
Annexed by the Soviet Union as Western Ukraine
Administered by Lithuania

Map 1. Poland under German and Soviet occupation, 1939–1941
is, until late in December 1939—movement between the two zones was relatively open.¹⁴

Notwithstanding considerable apprehensions and doubts, some Jews, particularly young single males—less burdened by work and family obligations and sometimes encouraged by their families, many of whom had kin or close contacts inside the eastern regions—very quickly began to look for a safe route into Soviet-occupied Poland, making use of any available means, contacts, and resources. There were restrictions in place at various times, and there was some level of danger involved, but a considerable number who set out with the intention of relocating to the east managed to do so without too much difficulty. It is estimated that by early 1940, as many as 300,000 Jews from the German-occupied sections of Poland had moved into the Soviet-controlled zone, adding to the more than 1 million Jews already living there.¹⁵

Zyga Elton and Felix Rosenbloom, in their published memoirs, provide very similar accounts of the almost total confusion that reigned in Poland’s two largest cities, Warsaw and Lodz, where well over half a million Jews were living in early September 1939. As young men when the Germans invaded, they both were quick to respond to desperate requests for assistance by the Polish military. As Elton writes, public announcements urged “all citizens capable of carrying arms to leave Warsaw and march eastward, toward the Russian border, where they might organize themselves into fighting units.”¹⁶ However, without any real direction or chain of command, many who started to respond very quickly decided to abandon this “leaderless” mob and return to their homes.¹⁷

Soon after, with the Germans now controlling Warsaw and Jews already being rounded up, Elton and his family begin to hear of Jews who had already moved into the Soviet-controlled zone and were now encouraging others to do the same. So Elton, aged nineteen, and his brother take a train to somewhere near the newly defined eastern border. There they negotiate with locals, paying them to take them by cart to the Bug River, which for most of its length has been designated as the de facto border between German and Soviet zones, and they are then able to cross by boat at night. From there they take the train to Bialystok, in the western Belarusian region now occupied by the Soviets.¹⁸

The larger cities, Bialystok in Belarus and Lvov in the western Ukraine region, become the most popular destinations for the Jewish
“refugees” from German-occupied Poland. Both already have sizable Jewish populations, with the number further inflated by at least 30 percent in the last few months of 1939 when the refugees come streaming in.19

In late November 1939, Bialystok is also the destination for Rosenbloom, aged eighteen, who is urged by his father to leave Lodz, where violence against Jews is increasing and a law requiring the wearing of yellow Star of David armbands is about to be introduced. Rosenbloom and a cousin take a train to a small town close to the border, from where they are able to sneak across and proceed on to Bialystok without hindrance.20

In another memoir, the decision to move into the Soviet area is presented as a simple choice with few moral complexities or dangers. When the Germans invade Poland, Toby Klodawska Flam, in her late twenties and living in Lodz, happens to be visiting friends in Warsaw. She decides to remain there, and, by late September 1939, it is apparent to all that Poland’s war had been lost. She writes: “One evening a soldier came to the place where I lived and told us he’d heard on the radio that everybody who didn’t want to be under German occupation was welcome in the USSR: the borders were open for everybody.”21 As she has heard about the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany, she says to herself: “Maybe there is a way. Maybe the USSR will save my life.” So together with some friends and her brother, she decides, as she puts it, to take up the “Russian offer.”22 They leave Warsaw on foot on 28 September. She writes: “The next day we were refugees in the care of the Russian Army in Bialystok. . . . We were well treated and got some food and shelter.”23

In some instances the decision to leave was far from voluntary, but rather was expedited under the authority of the local German military unit controlling the area. In the first few months following their conquest of Poland, the German authorities often applied policies toward Jews that sought to “encourage” their “voluntary emigration” into the Soviet zone. They even helpfully provided a legal document called an Ausweis, which was intended to act as an exit visa. That, for example, was the experience of Fela Steinbock, who was living in the southern Polish town of Sosnowiec, near Krakow, which came under German control on the first day of the war. A few weeks later, in early October, she married her fiancé, and they quickly decided that they should try to leave if possible. The Germans did not seek to prevent them, however: “We had to sign a document
(an Ausweis) stating that we would never return to Sosnowiec again. We were the first to leave town.”

Leo Cooper, not yet eighteen years old, at the urging of his father leaves Warsaw on his own in late 1939, moving eastward toward the Soviet zone. In his memoir, he recalls that after arriving somewhere near the new border, he seeks and received an Ausweis from the local German authorities without any trouble and that this document also permitted him to cross into the Soviet zone unhindered. From there he quickly reached members of his extended family living in Bialystok, which he observes was now filled with refugees.

Felix Rosenbloom writes that he and his cousin were moving cautiously toward the border without any exit papers when they were stopped by a German patrol in an area of “no-man’s-land,” but they were allowed to continue: “It seemed that the German authorities were only too happy to be rid of as many Jews as possible.”

However, in other places, the Germans were neither quite so cordial nor particularly concerned with formalities. Zev Katz was in his mid-teens in 1939 and living with his family in Jaroslaw, a small town in southeastern Poland, halfway between Krakow and Lvov, which was occupied by German forces. Soon afterward, someone from the local Gestapo gave his family an abrupt ultimatum: either leave town within five hours or be shot. Katz records in his memoir: “In an instant we turned from a well-to-do family with a thriving grocery shop and export business into helpless refugees.”

Anna Bruell, then aged nineteen, was already on the move toward the southern section of the Soviet zone when she and her brother found themselves in a town occupied by the German army and with a presence there of the SS. She recalls that a few days after her arrival there, the Sonderkommandos ordered Jews to leave within twenty-four hours, telling them just to “go east.”

A few of the memoirs point to a relative ease, at least in the early months, with which it was possible to move in both directions across the border between the two zones. At the outbreak of the war, Arthur Spindler is twenty-three years old and living in Tarnow in Galicia, which is quickly occupied by the Germans. At his father’s recommendation, Spindler and four friends begin their journey toward Lvov in Soviet-occupied Ukraine, taking about a week to arrive at the border. They cross by night and manage to arrive in Lvov, but not long after, at the request of his
family, he recrosses the border in the other direction and returns to Tar-
now, where, as a qualified electrician, he was regularly employed over the
next few years by the German military. Among Naomi Rosh White’s
eleven interviewees, four mentioned that, at least once, they had moved
in both directions across the German-Soviet Polish border. One infor-
mant, “Wladek,” even reported that, as an adolescent, he “used to cross
the border between east and west Poland once a week,” moving back and
forth between his mother’s home in the German-occupied zone and his
girlfriend’s in the Soviet-controlled area.

The movement into the Soviet-occupied zone slowed down dramati-
cally in the first few months of 1940, when stricter border controls were put
in place by both sides. However, refugees from German-occupied
Poland, albeit in much smaller numbers, continued to find ways of slip-
ning into eastern Poland right up to June 1941, when the German army in-
vaded this area. There was no particular refugee profile, but the external
circumstances tended to favor older adolescents, young married couples,
and small groups of peers or similar-aged kin traveling into the Soviet zone
together. In the early months, there was also a pattern of husbands first
making the trip into eastern Poland and later calling for their wives to join
them. There were small extended family groups as well, not usually larger
than five or six persons, who made the journey together. However, almost
all who became refugees had to make a wrenchingly difficult decision: to
separate themselves from families left at home—from siblings, parents,
grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—many of whom, as it turned out,
they were never to see again.

LIFE UNDER THE SOVIETS, 1939–1941

Jews actively moved into the Soviet zone, but for a much larger number
already resident in these areas, it was the Soviets who came to them, as,
for example, in Moshe Ajzenbud’s autobiographical novel, where the young
protagonist was living in a town in Belarus occupied by “the Russians”
on 17 September 1939: “The young folk watching felt distinct relief: they
had at last been freed from the anti-Semitic Poles and if the Russians
were here, the Germans would not come. They greeted the Russian sol-
diers joyfully.” Anna Bruell, who was able to cross the border into a
town in southern Ukraine, writes in her memoir of a similar response
there to the entry of Soviet troops: “They were an unforgettable sight. This was a regiment of Cossacks all on beautiful horses, dressed in long fur-lined capes and tall fur hats. They rode slowly through the streets and were greeted with cheers and flowers, mostly by Jewish people.”

Bernard Weinryb, writing in the early 1950s, quotes from an oral testimony gathered very soon after the end of the war: “It is easy to imagine with what great delight the Jews of Lvov met the Red Army which saved them . . . from the Germans almost at the last moment.”

These brief passages highlight one widely cited reason for the heightened tension between the Jews and their “ethnic” Polish neighbors. The relationship between the two groups had already become increasingly volatile in the late 1930s, further sharpened by the growth in electoral support for antisemitic political parties in Poland. Another contributing factor was a significant Jewish presence within the Polish Communist Party. And now, for many nationalistic Poles, the Soviet Union was the hated partner of Germany in their joint destruction of the Polish state. Therefore, observing Jews who, for a variety of perfectly understandable reasons, now appeared to welcome the “Russian” occupiers, confirmed what many Poles already believed, that Jews as a group had little identification with or loyalty to the Polish nation.

But political and social differentiation within the Jewish population was an important determinant in how the Soviets responded to the Polish Jews and vice versa. As the Soviet troops took control of eastern Poland, their political and administrative authorities were intent on quickly identifying and neutralizing perceived “class enemies” among the local population. High on their lists were persons active in local political parties, members of the intelligentsia, religious authorities, and the group they called the kulaki, which included major landowners and leading businessmen and merchants. Jews were to be found in all of these groups. David Kay was only a young boy in 1939 when the Soviets occupied his hometown of Slonim in Western Belarus. Because his father was a prominent local property owner and merchant, he was immediately identified as a kulak and arrested by the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), the Soviet security agency. The rest of the family, consisting of David, his mother, and one of his two older brothers, was exiled soon after to a small town in Siberia.
This pattern was consistent with the general policy followed by the Soviets, whereby the head of a “class enemy” family was usually arrested and sent to a prison, often in one of the Soviet gulags, while the rest of the family was relocated to some isolated “place of exile” deep within the USSR. In a historical time and place, where the particular intersection of external forces and individual circumstances often yielded the most unpredictable of outcomes, it is perhaps one of the blackest of ironies that of the more than 1 million Jews permanently resident in eastern Poland in 1939, most were to meet their deaths as victims of the ghoulish Nazi extermination policies soon after the German armies invaded these territories in June 1941; while, by comparison, of the Jews previously arrested by the Soviets as “class enemies,” who along with other members of their immediate families were incarcerated or deported inside the USSR, many were destined to survive.

In this regard, the latter were joined by many among the larger group of Jewish refugees from German-occupied Poland who, by 1940, were increasingly becoming a “political, administrative and economic problem” for the Soviets in eastern Poland. Finding work was difficult, particularly in the larger cities to which the Jewish refugees gravitated. One attempt by the authorities to deal with this problem was to offer the refugees jobs inside the Soviet Union. Zev Katz reports that, among those who accepted, skilled workers such as tailors or shoemakers “who could produce goods in the ‘Western style’” often managed to settle quite well. Leo Cooper, who registered himself for work in his trade as a turner was provided with free transport to travel to his assigned location inside the USSR and later given a Soviet “passport” that listed his status as “resettled” person as distinct from “refugee.” Zyga Elton accepted Soviet citizenship, moved to a small town in Soviet Ukraine, and later was able to take up a scholarship at a teachers college there. He completed one year of his course, but his studies were then interrupted by the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Toby Klodawska Flam initially took up a job offer in Soviet Belarus, later found other work there as a dressmaker, and in the summer of 1940 was accepted as a student in a technical training school in Minsk, in Ukraine. All four write of this early period of their stay in the USSR in a tone that is generally appreciative of the opportunities for training that opened up for them and the positive stimulation
associated with the experience of learning a new language and adapting to the Russian people and Soviet culture.

Interestingly, in the main, the Polish refugees made few connections with the Russian-speaking Jews, of whom there were many living in the Soviet Union. As Cooper explains: “The Jews of Minsk, or for that matter of any other city in the Soviet Union, did not constitute a separate entity. The Jews were in the process of being assimilated and did not, therefore, make any attempt to identify themselves with the newcomers. It was probably fear of entertaining relations with foreigners . . . rather than lack of feeling towards a fellow Jew that kept them apart from us.”

However, a number of the memoirs tell of the author, or someone they knew, taking up the offer of a job inside the USSR and very quickly becoming disillusioned with the working and living conditions they encountered. According to Moshe Ajzenbud’s novelistic account, some who enlisted for work in coal mines, ironworks, and building projects soon returned, complaining that the conditions specified in the contract were “one big lie.” Larry Wenig tells a similar story about laborers recruited for the Donbas coal mines. The young men who went “soon found that they had been duped,” and “they sent back letters telling of miserable working conditions.”

One quite spectacular exception emerges in the autobiographical memoir by Ruth Turkow Kaminska. As a third-generation actress in one of the most illustrious Jewish theatrical families of Eastern Europe, still in her late teens and already an established “star” of stage and screen, Turkow Kaminska’s introduction to life and work under the Soviets is characterized more by ease and luxury than by misery and deprivation. Soon after the Germans invade, following the familiar path taken by the Polish refugees, Turkow Kaminska together with other members of her family—her mother, Ida Kaminska, one of the most celebrated stars of Yiddish theater; her stepfather; and her flamboyant, German Jewish, jazz trumpet-playing husband, Adi Rosner—hastily depart Warsaw and make their way to Bialystok in Soviet-occupied eastern Poland. Once there, both Turkow Kaminska and her husband are quick to take up the offer of Soviet citizenship, and within a few weeks, under the “auspices of the Belarusian People’s Commissar,” Rosner is offered the leadership of a local jazz orchestra, with Turkow Kaminska to be employed as one of the band’s vocalists. They sign a contract for a substantial sum of money that
includes extra provision for costumes, sets, and other necessary expenses, with the understanding, at the request of local party functionaries, that they organize an extensive USSR-wide tour for the band, performing mostly Western-style jazz. They then embark on an extremely affluent lifestyle, staying in the best hotels and, with the money they earned, purchasing food, clothing, and other provisions available only to the Soviet elite. This extends to Rosner buying Turkow Kaminska fur coats, a luxurious mink and a second sable, as well as expensive jewelry. Their tour opens to great acclaim, first playing dates in Belarus and then, in late 1939 and early 1940, moving on to extended seasons in both Leningrad and Moscow, before traveling to some of the more remote areas of the USSR.

But the easy acceptance of Soviet citizenship, which presented little problem to Turkow Kaminska and her husband, was not a choice favored by the majority of the Jewish refugees now in eastern Poland. Also, an important condition attached to Soviet citizenship was the requirement for the refugees to then move from the cities to smaller urban centers, which most were loath to do. Very soon the “ambiguous” citizenship status of the Polish refugees became of major concern to Soviet authorities. In November 1939, with the Soviet Citizenship Law extended to the occupied areas of eastern Poland, all permanent residents were now declared Soviet citizens. In the early months of 1940, it was decided that the offer of a Soviet “passport” (the terminology used in the USSR for the required document of identity) could also be taken up by the refugees from “western” Poland. However, given the growing general dissatisfaction within the refugee community, highlighted by the widespread disdain shown by many who had taken work in the USSR only to choose to leave their jobs and return to the large cities, the Soviets were becoming increasingly wary and suspicious of exactly where the refugees’ ultimate “loyalties” might lie.

By March 1940, the authorities came up with what they thought would prove to be an effective (but in its level of deviousness and deception also an exceptionally cruel) strategy to test whether the refugees’ “true” commitment and “loyalties” were to Soviet or German interests. While this response may now appear extremely paranoid, given the Nazis’ well-known views toward Jews, not to mention their past policies and action, some of the memoir writers confirm the ambivalence ex-
pressed by many Jews about precisely this dilemma. When Toby Klodawska Flam is about to flee from Warsaw to eastern Poland, a friend tries to dissuade her, telling her: “You will see, the Germans are not so bad.”

Chaim Künstlich’s mother, still living in German-occupied Krakow, wrote to him (by then he was already inside the USSR) suggesting that he return, as she thought it “better to live with the Germans than to stay in Russia.” Late in 1939, in Minsk, Leo Cooper was just one of “a crowd of refugees who . . . were trying to return to Nazi-occupied Poland.” In various parts of eastern Poland, some Jews even tried, unsuccessfully, to register with German commissions (set up there as diplomatic “consulates”) for “repatriation” back to their homes in German-controlled areas of Poland.

In fact, as Cooper writes: “Many managed to cross the demarcation line and re-enter Nazi-occupied Poland, even as many others were still fleeing the Nazi occupation into the Russian zone.” He retells the widely circulated story of two trains going in opposite directions meeting at the border. Jews from the one traveling into the Russian zone shout: “Where are you going? You must be mad.” But they are met by those in the other train shouting back at them: “You must be insane! Where are you going?”

In March 1940, the Soviets began to require Polish refugees to register themselves with the NKVD and to nominate one of two alternatives: “either to become Soviet citizens or to declare that they were ready to return to their former homes, now under Nazi occupation.” Faced with this choice, most were wary of opting for Soviet citizenship, fearing that such a step would mean they would never be able to return to their former homes and families.

As a consequence, the Soviet authorities chose to initiate a dramatic and somewhat draconian course of action: they already considered the refugees a security risk and likely candidates for espionage, since they showed a particular interest in developments in the German area, had family connections across the border, made repeated attempts to sneak through the frontier to visit relatives, and had often expressed the desire to emigrate overseas. The distrust was further increased by the refusal of most to accept Soviet citizenship, coupled with a preference to be returned to German-occupied Poland, and drove the Soviet authorities to a radical resolution of the problem—massive deportation of the refugees.
DEPORTATION AND “HARD LABOR,” 1940–1941

The operation to “clear” the Polish refugees from the former Polish territories of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus, at first occupied and more recently annexed by the Soviets, began slowly in the spring of 1940. Not only Jews were targeted, as a considerably larger number of ethnic Poles had also moved from German- into Soviet-controlled areas after September 1939. The arrests and deportations reached their peak on the “night of June 29 when hundreds of thousands of people were arrested, most of whom were Jewish and the rest [ethnic] Poles.” They were taken from their homes or sometimes straight off the street. Even some refugees who had taken up Soviet-sponsored jobs, and some who had accepted Soviet citizenship, were caught up in the swift and efficient roundup operations and summarily deported on the trains with the rest.

The suddenness of their arrest by Soviet authorities and the rapid events that followed—being herded into overcrowded railcars for a lengthy train journey eastward, often lasting weeks and into parts unknown—is described in detail and sometimes at considerable length in a number of the memoirs. Fela Steinbock tells of being arrested while pregnant and, together with her husband (who was not even one of the “refugees” but a permanent resident of Soviet-occupied Poland), being deported by train to a remote barracks camp in the general vicinity of Krasnoyarsk in central Siberia. All the firsthand reports are consistent in mentioning the severe discomforts experienced during the journey, in particular the extreme overcrowding in the locked “cattle cars,” the appalling sanitary conditions, and the minimal food and water available. All traveled for lengthy periods, but Anna Bruell’s journey of five weeks on the train before arriving at Tynda, located in the far east of the USSR, seems especially grueling.

Zev Katz and his family were arrested and deported in late June 1940. He writes that the guards on the train informed the deportees that they were being “resettled” in big cities inside the USSR, where they “would be able to live quite comfortably.” He captures very evocatively how, on the long journey eastward, after some time on the train, the atmosphere between guards and deportees became more relaxed and the overall mood improved considerably:
By then we knew each of our guards quite well and on occasion engaged them in long talks. Some of them were very curious to hear about life in Poland and Europe before the war. Some of our “passengers” had travelled widely, even to America. As Soviet people, isolated from the outside world, the guards were fascinated to hear from people who had seen it with their own eyes. The weather was summery, not too hot, and as we travelled through the huge stretches of Russia, the Ural mountains with their breathtaking views and then through the vast lands of Siberia, we could not help being deeply impressed. It was like a holiday in the middle of a nightmare journey. . . . The train journey was to most of us something of an adventure, since we had not previously travelled beyond our immediate surroundings. Also, travelling on this train was like being in an eerie, suspended time-capsule: we could do nothing but live from day to day and wait to see what would happen.64

Within the existing Soviet system of incarceration there were three types of custody to which detainees could be assigned.65 The most severe and tightly controlled were the “regular” prisons, where all inmates—usually both the criminal and the political—were confined by walls, fences, and guards; were kept in cells or primitive huts; “rarely worked”; and “were often kept in strict isolation.”66 At the next level were the “labor camps” and “labor colonies,” invariably in remote and desolate locations, where there was some form of control over the movement of inmates and they were assigned to labor duties, but where, due to the isolated locations, walls and fences were unnecessary since escape was virtually impossible. At the lowest level of external control were the “places of exile,” to which those who were “banished” were sent and expected to find work to sustain themselves; persons sent to such locations were deemed to be under some form of geographic confinement and subject to other forms of monitoring and restrictions but were free to live their own lives in these places for as long as determined by the authorities. This third category might also include specified remote urban settlements, kolkhozy (collective farms) and sovkhozy (state-owned agricultural settlements).67 It was to the second-level “labor camps” and “labor colonies” that most of the Polish deportees were first assigned. Many were located in central
and eastern Siberia and northern Kazakhstan, but there were also some in the far northern, subarctic regions of Russia.

For example, Larry Wenig and his family were taken from their home at midnight and then transported for two weeks by train before arriving in “Gulag 149” near Morki (about 1,000 kilometers northeast of Moscow) in the Mari Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the homeland of the “Finno-Ugrian” people known as the Mari. They were informed that they were now classified as “special settlers,” a category applied to “capitalists or members of political parties” who were “enemies of the Soviet State.” Wenig assumed that his family was marked for harsher treatment because when his father registered as a refugee in Lvov and the Soviet officer asked where he would prefer to go, he replied “to the USA.”

Map 3 shows the principal deportation routes for the Polish refugees transported out of eastern Poland in 1940.

Estimates of the overall number of Polish Jewish refugees who were deported in these operations vary considerably, some quoting a figure as high as 200,000, but more recent and probably more reliable sources suggest that it was considerably lower and closer to 70,000.

The camps to which the deportees arrived were invariably in remote locations, with the number incarcerated in each ranging from a few hundred to several thousand. The inmates often included both Jews and ethnic Poles. Anna Bruell writes that she experienced little antisemitism in these circumstances, something she attributes to the fact that “we were all, so to speak, in the same boat.”

In writing about the remote camps, most authors list the numerous hardships they endured: the long hours of labor in forests, mines, and farms; the high work quotas expected and the minimal food rations earned even when these were achieved; the extremes of climate faced, most notably the brutal Russian winter; the serious epidemics, particularly typhoid and malaria, that swept through the camp population; and, as almost everyone mentions, the extreme infestations of bedbugs and lice. With reference to this last difficulty, the following brief anecdote from “Kuba,” the only interviewee in Naomi Rosh White’s study who spent time in a Soviet labor camp, manages to be both richly evocative of the experience and blackly humorous in tone: “One very important feature of our life was to reduce the lice population on our bodies and clothing. We had to
Map 2. Polish Jewish military recruits in the Soviet Union, 1941–1944
do it every night. If we didn’t, we were finished. The first indication of a person who had given up was that he no longer did it. . . . Lice in Russia have been a perennial problem. Lenin said once that either the revolution will kill the lice, or the lice will kill the revolution. From what I saw, the half-time score was one–one.”

Significantly contributing to the anxiety and despair experienced by many of the deportees was the uncertainty about their future: How long would they remain in this place under these conditions? This was not helped when they were repeatedly told by their guards or by Soviet officials that they must accept as reality that they would never be leaving the camp, much less the USSR.

The conditions were certainly harsh and some died of hunger and disease—one recent estimate suggests that 10 percent of the Jewish refugees did not survive the experience. And while the age cohort of the refugees was biased toward young adults, the camp populations also included some adolescents and even young children. Bruell recalls: “Few babies survived in our camp in Siberia. I can only remember a few young children, undernourished and mostly kept indoors because of the freezing weather and lack of warm clothes.”

Chaim Künstlich remembers children old enough to work in the camp he was in, with the youngest around twelve years of age. He recalls that one child died, but overall—unlike some—his memories of the camp experience are relatively benign, adding, “But nobody died from hard work.” In the same vein, he continues: “No one froze to death in their bunks, like in some gulags. We had heaters in our rooms and there was the whole forest to burn for fuel.” Similarly, Bruell, in spite of her lengthy exposition on the numerous difficulties they faced in the camp, concludes: “Yet despite these hard conditions few people got sick in the winter—there was no flu or other contagious diseases. The worst we got was frostbite, sometimes very serious.” Some report that from the labor camps it was even possible to communicate by mail to family and friends back in Poland and also to receive assistance packages of goods and food sent to them.

The Soviets were not renowned for their tolerance toward expressions of religion, and there is certainly a divergence in the memoirs with regard to how the authorities in the labor camps responded to Jews who wished to observe religious rituals. For example, it was difficult for Jews
to keep the Sabbath, as they were not exempted from work on this day, and, according to some, they had to be extremely circumspect about observing religious festivals or holy days.\textsuperscript{81} Larry Wenig, whose family was “traditionally religious,” notes that the officials were “opposed to religious observances of any kind” and “prohibited religious displays and church attendance, and, in fact, tried vigorously to eradicate belief in God.”\textsuperscript{82} However, again, a very different picture is painted by Künstlich, who recalls no restriction on religious practice in his Siberian place of deportation. On the contrary, for the Jews “there was one Torah in the camp and some bar mitzvahs were held.” He writes that there was even a camp \textit{shochet} to supply the necessary kosher meat.\textsuperscript{83}

A few deportees were school-age adolescents and, even while in labor camps, were given the opportunity to continue their education. Wenig, aged sixteen, began attending school at the commencement of the academic year in September; although he does also note that extensive “communist indoctrination” accompanied the lessons and that “dissent” was not well tolerated.\textsuperscript{84}

Zev Katz, of a similar age to Wenig, already had a taste of the Soviet education curriculum while attending school in Western Ukraine, having fled there with his family in 1939. Following their subsequent deportation to a Siberian labor camp, Katz is keen to continue his studies, but there is no school in the camp. Remembering a phrase he had learned earlier from the Soviet constitution, “All citizens of the USSR have the right to an education,” he comes up with the seemingly audacious idea to send a personal letter to Stalin, in which he writes, “I appeal to you to direct the local officials to make it possible for me to go to school for which I shall be very grateful to you.” Some months later, after sending off a second letter, he finally receives a reply from an official in the Kremlin directing those responsible to try to find a school for him. However, in true Soviet style, at the same time he receives another letter from a local official regretfully informing him that there is no suitable school close enough to the camp that he can attend.\textsuperscript{85}

Most of the Polish deportees spent more than a year as involuntary inmates under the strictly controlled regime of these remote labor camps, but their lives took another twist after 22 June 1941 when Germany turned on its former “ally” and mounted a massive military attack on the Soviet Union.
SURVIVING THE WAR UNDER THE SOVIETS, 
1941–1945

The Jews originally from German-occupied Poland were deported, beginning in 1940, from Soviet-controlled Poland and assigned to carry out hard labor in remote camps scattered throughout the Soviet Union. But by the summer of 1941 there were now two other groups of Polish Jews whose circumstances and locations, over the previous two years, had diverged considerably from those of the deportees. These included Polish Jews who had taken the offer of work inside the USSR, some of whom had also accepted Soviet citizenship, and also some among the permanent residents of eastern Poland who, as “class enemies,” had been imprisoned and deported very soon after the Soviets took control of these areas in 1939.

But when Germany attacked the USSR, the survival options available to all of these groups inside Soviet-controlled territory began to merge together again. The reasons for this had a lot to do with broader geopolitical developments that unfolded as a consequence of the Soviets joining the anti-German coalition and therefore seeking strategic and military assistance from, and coordination with, the Western governments that were now their new allies.

Of particular significance was the signing on 30 July 1941 of a Polish-Soviet agreement, with the Polish side represented by the London-based “government-in-exile” led by General Władysław Sikorski. At the preceding discussions, there was considerable disagreement on a number of issues and particularly on the precise location of a future—meaning postwar—Polish-Soviet frontier. However, with the British applying considerable pressure on both parties to come to some agreement on this and other points in dispute, including the freeing of Polish prisoners and deportees inside the USSR, finally a number of acceptable, if deliberately somewhat ambiguous, compromises were reached.

A short time later, on 12 August 1941, the Soviet government officially declared a general “amnesty” for Polish citizens in the USSR. Most of those detained in prisons and labor camps were to be freed and permitted to resettle in other parts of the Soviet Union, with the exception of the large cities in the west. As these were in the European portion of the USSR already under fierce attack from the German military, they were also
unlikely to be the most desirable locations for those seeking a safe haven from the hostilities. It is not surprising, then, that the path followed by almost all of the newly “amnestied” refugees was in the general direction of the Soviet republics of Central Asia (in particular, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan), where the climate was much more temperate. It was also possible that work might be available there, as, following the German invasion, the Soviets put into place a defense strategy that included moving vital industries into these regions to provide greater protection from enemy attack. For the Polish Jews, another attraction lay in the geographic vicinity of these areas to the Soviet frontiers with India and Iran. Some were hopeful that it would be possible to escape from the USSR across what they assumed, somewhat naively, would be more permeable border areas.

But of considerable importance to most of the refugees was the reinstatement of their Polish citizenship (a status to which they had desperately sought to cling and a major reason behind the earlier Soviet decision to deport them to labor camps). Representatives of the Polish government-in-exile would now be permitted to set up “embassies” throughout the Soviet Union to assist with the process.

As Zev Katz describes, soon after German troops invade the USSR the inmates of his labor camp in the Altai mountains of Siberia are assembled and informed that they are now both “Polish citizens and allies.” Some weeks later they are finally provided with tangible recognition of their reclaimed Polish identity, “a precious piece of paper.” Representatives of the Polish government come to the camp and inform the inmates that soon a special train will be arriving at a nearby station to take them to “the warm lands in Central Asia.” At the station they receive a certificate from the Ministry of Internal Affairs stating that they are “under the auspices of the Embassy of Poland” and “have the right to travel, reside, work, rations etc. much like any other citizen.” Katz and his family chose to settle in Kazakhstan, in the “first major city out of Siberia,” which, although still geographically located in “Asia,” was a “predominantly Russian city” and also had an attractive climate.

When the amnesty is announced, Larry Wenig’s family is in a “gulag-style” camp in Russia’s far north. Camp officials inform them that they are soon to receive “special documents” that will allow them to leave the camp as free people. “We were to select a place where we wanted to settle.
Map 3. Polish Jews deported to the Soviet Union in June 1940
They would make travel arrangements.” The family, still hoping to find a way to the United States, first chooses the far-eastern port of Vladivostok. When this destination is rejected, they settle on Uzbekistan, both for the warmer climate and for the possible chance of escaping across the border and eventually reaching Palestine or America.⁹²

Anna Bruell and most of the fellow “prisoners” in her Siberian camp, on receiving the news that they are free to leave, look to go somewhere in “Soviet South Asia,” even though, as she writes: “Most of us knew nothing about South Asia, just that it was sunny and warm, far from Europe, from the war and from the Germans.”⁹³ After a three-week-long train ride, Bruell settles in a small town in southern Kazakhstan populated by Kazakhs and Russians, where she remains for the next five years.⁹⁴ Similarly, both Fela Steinbock and Chaim Künstlich leave their Siberian labor camps and eventually find homes in different small towns in Kazakhstan for the duration of the war.⁹⁵

As already noted, moving eastward, away from the Soviet-occupied areas now imminently threatened by the rapid German advance and toward the relative safety of Soviet Central Asia, was also, for a brief period, an “escape route” available to some of the Polish Jews. A number, like Moshe Ajzenbud’s alter ego, “Michael,” are among the relatively few who escape the rapid and systematic roundup by the Gestapo and the SS of almost the entire Jewish population of eastern Poland, very soon after the German military quickly gains control of these areas. Michael manages to flee eastward across the old Poland–Soviet Union border into Russia, first on a bicycle and then continuing his journey by train until, finally, he reaches a small town near Samarkand in Uzbekistan.⁹⁶

Moshe Grossman initially fled into eastern Poland in 1939, but because of his reputation as a Yiddish writer and “intellectual,” he is soon arrested by the Soviets and imprisoned in Archangelsk in Russia’s far north. In June 1941, he also benefits from the “amnesty” and sets out by train toward Central Asia. After a journey lasting seventeen days, he arrived in Samarkand, “in the land of sun, grapes and frontiers.”⁹⁷ There was an official Polish office nearby “which issued Polish Passports to all former Polish citizens who had been in Soviet territory since 1939 and had not adopted Soviet citizenship. This meant all those who had been in prison, camps and exile.”⁹⁸ Grossman notes how important it was to the Polish Jews there to be in possession of their official documents (release certificates).
When they were stolen (as often happened), “people became absolutely desperate.” However, forged papers could be bought at the Samarkand bazaar—in someone else’s name and often without a photograph.99

With his literary eye, he also wryly observes that even among the mix of various groups of “foreign” refugees alongside Soviet evacuees who now found themselves in equally impoverished and desperate circumstances, an inevitable status hierarchy quickly emerged:

The Russian Jews grabbed the big courtyard. . . . They would not admit any Polish Jews there. First because we were dirty, second because according to them we were all thieves. And third, we were not evacuees after all but released prisoners! . . . The Lithuanian Jews also regarded themselves as a higher class in the lineup. They didn’t like the Poles either. Even the Bessarabian Jews did not hold with us, while among the Polish Jews themselves there was a struggle between the Galicians and the Congress Poles. What was more, there was quite a special dispute between those who talked Polish and those who talked Yiddish.100

Another important initiative that came out of the 1941 agreement between the Soviets and the Polish government-in-exile was the formation of a separate “Polish army,” made up of Polish citizens now inside the USSR and placed under the leadership of General Władysław Anders (himself only recently released from a Soviet prison). One of the major recruiting centers was in Buzuluk, near the city then known as Kuibyshev (now Samara), deep inside Russian territory and close to the northern border of Kazakhstan. The imminent existence of such a military force quickly attracted the attention of the Polish Jewish refugees, particularly as it soon also become widely known that, once formed, this army was to be moved out of the USSR and then through Iran, to join up with the Allied forces in the Middle East under British command. As Yisrael Gutman writes: “From the very beginning of the recruiting, thousands of released Jewish prisoners and exiles flocked to the collection points,” most acting on their own initiative.101

Some Jews who volunteered were accepted. However, there is some evidence to suggest that an ingrained bias against taking Jewish recruits
was shared by some officials of the Polish government-in-exile but was particularly prominent within the Polish military hierarchy, from General Anders down; despite both internal and external maneuverings that sought to challenge this type of discrimination, Jewish recruitment into the army came to almost a complete halt after the first few months. And according to the personal experiences recounted in some of the autobiographical memoirs, there is considerable anecdotal support for this scenario.

Zyga Elton accepted Soviet citizenship in 1939 and later had his studies at a teachers college in Western Ukraine rudely interrupted by the German attack on the Soviet Union. Slightly wounded after volunteering, and being assigned to an auxiliary role supporting the Soviet military in its somewhat ineffective attempts to defend against the initial German advance, Elton then hears about recruitment for the “Anders army” taking place in Buzuluk. He makes his way there with the hope that, by successfully volunteering for this unit, he will also be able to regain his Polish citizenship. However, when he arrives after a long train journey, he is told he cannot join because he is carrying a Soviet passport. But he is sure, he explains, that the “real reason for the refusal was that we were Jews, and the acceptance of Jews into the Polish Army was limited to a very small number, mostly former officers.” Larry Wenig tried on two occasions to join the Anders army without success.

Moshe Grossman writes: “Everybody wanted to go and volunteer for the Polish Army. . . . But Jews were not accepted.” Only a tiny number was able to enter, and it was widely believed that the only way in was either through bribery or a certificate of conversion. Leo Cooper’s anecdote from his personal experience provides support for this view. As a Polish Jew who earlier accepted Soviet citizenship and found work in Soviet Belarus, when the German military begins to advance he moves further east and, by November 1941, is on a train to Uzbekistan. When the train stops at Buzuluk, he discovers, by chance, that this is to be the headquarters for the Polish army being formed by General Anders. While still at the railway station, he meets a fellow Polish Jew, also now a Soviet citizen, who suggests that they join up as a way out of the Soviet Union. However, Cooper soon finds out that recruiters are rejecting those who admit to being Jewish. His new friend has heard that one can easily get around this by trying again, only this time presenting oneself as a Catholic. He
employs this strategy and is accepted, but Cooper is unwilling to employ this strategy.\textsuperscript{107}

Eventually, by the summer of 1942, more than 75,000 military personnel recruited into the Anders army, together with almost 40,000 family members, including children, were able to leave the Soviet Union. And despite the many who report that they were unable to join, this number included around 6,000 Jews—more than 4,000 soldiers and almost 2,000 civilians. In another strange twist, soon after leaving the USSR, these Jewish soldiers found themselves suddenly under British military control and, in the summer of 1943, also stationed in Palestine.\textsuperscript{108} Once there, and with the encouragement and assistance of local Jewish settlers keen to recruit well-trained soldiers, many Polish Jews who left the USSR with the Anders army deserted and quickly disappeared into Jewish towns and \textit{kibbutzim}. Therefore, for the relatively small number able to take advantage of the circumstances, the alliance between the Soviets and the Polish government-in-exile and the subsequent formation of the Anders army provided both an escape route from the USSR and an opportunity to bypass the British Mandate restrictions designed to severely limit further Jewish immigration into Palestine.\textsuperscript{109}

The movement of Polish Jews into Soviet Central Asia added only a tiny fraction to the huge numbers of people moving into these areas in the months following the German attack on the USSR. Almost immediately, the Soviet government put into effect a gigantic evacuation plan, so that by December 1941 at least 10 million Soviet citizens had been relocated from “European” into “Asian” areas of the USSR.\textsuperscript{110} This, together with the movement of troops and military support toward the front, meant that the major roads and railways across the USSR were filled with the constant flow of people heading in both directions.

In this context, it is not surprising that there were numerous opportunities for chance encounters between different groups of Polish Jews whose paths happened to cross. For example, Zyga Elton became a Soviet citizen and therefore was not deported to a labor camp in 1940, but in the summer of 1941, having just been rejected as a potential recruit into General Anders’s Polish army, he was on a train to Uzbekistan:

In Kyzl Orda on the way to Tashkent we met a large convoy of cattle wagons full of people, left on a railway siding. . . . Most
were poorly dressed and some were in tattered clothes, their bare feet covered in cloth. They were Polish citizens freed from concentration camps and settlements in accordance with the term of an agreement between the Polish Government-in-Exile and the Soviet Union. They were escaping the severe cold of the snow-covered Siberian expanse. Their only chance of survival was to reach the mild climate of Central Asia and last out till the end of the war. These people were hungry and had not eaten in days. Some were sick, and without medical help. They hoped to travel as far as Aschabad, and from there to the Persian border. These hopes were the product of delirious minds, as the borders were strongly guarded against any trespass. . . . We returned to our train, grateful to have escaped their fate.  

But despite their currently impoverished state, as noted in the book by Moshe Ajzenbud, the former Jewish deportees had one reason to feel optimistic about the future: they were carrying their “release certificates” affirming that they were Polish citizens. “They assumed that the others, the [ones who chose to become] Soviet citizens, could expect very little to change—they would have to remain always in Russia. For us, they thought, it is different: we are Polish citizens, and we will have to be allowed to go home after the war.”  

Certainly, as many of the memoirs suggest, day-to-day survival for the refugees in the Central Asian republics was often quite stressful and difficult. Anna Bruell, writing about life in her small town in Kazakhstan, mentions serious illnesses such as typhoid and dysentery and the ever-present bedbugs and lice. And, while a wide range of work was available, the pay was often insufficient to support basic nutritional needs, more so if some members of the family or group brought in no income. Some who found employment in a local kolkhoz were required to take on unfamiliar, physically demanding agricultural work and were paid in accordance with the rules of the particular collective. Grossman describes working, together with hundreds of other refugees, in the cotton plantation of an Uzbek kolkhoz in “primitive” living conditions and receiving “meagre food.” Some were fortunate enough to later move on from these situations and take up less physically arduous work in offices and factories in the local towns.
A number mention that they resorted to illegal activities to supplement their impoverished diets. Bruell comments: “Everybody stole from each other. There was bribery and cheating on the small and grand scales.” Indeed, an often-repeated observation is that the “black market” trading of goods, usually acquired through stealing and reselling materials from one’s workplace, was endemic throughout the Soviet Union. As Elton writes: “A whole culture developed which rationalised the lifting from factories and government enterprise, as these were common property, and partly owned by the perpetrator. This would be distinguished, in people’s minds, from lifting privately owned property which was considered morally wrong. . . . Being in charge of goods for which there was a great consumer demand would further enhance one’s well-being.”

David Kay was still a young boy when, in 1939, he was transported with his mother to a small Siberian town, where he became involved with a gang of youthful thieves and petty criminals. He asserts the view that theft was “endemic” to Soviet life. His mother also soon engaged in illegal activities and shrewdly established “business” relationships with powerful men in the town with whom she could make mutually beneficial “deals.” Kay writes: “She was imprisoned many times for her black marketeering, but her bribes and contacts saw her released fairly quickly.” He also contends that “thieves did not receive severe treatment from police and magistrates” because their offenses were not as bad as “capitalist” crimes such as speculation. In particular, from the Soviet ideological perspective, “distributors,” that is, merchants, were perceived as “nothing more than speculators.” The producer should sell directly to the consumer and thereby eliminate the “parasitical” middleman.

Inevitably, the Polish Jews had some contacts with the distinctive “ethnic” communities that constituted significant components (usually the majority) of the local populations. In the memoirs, few devote much attention to these “indigenous” groups such as the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Tajiks, not to mention the “Bukhara” Jews. When such groups do appear in the narratives, it is often to emphasize their Muslim or, more frequently, their “Asiatic” exoticism. Toby Klodawska Flam observed that the “local” (meaning “Bukhara”) Jews “seemed almost unaware that there were Jews in other parts of the world. They lived with the local people, spoke their language, dressed like them.” However, Moshe Ajzenbud observed
that, on the contrary, in the small town near Samarkand where his central character “Michael” lived, the “Buchara Jews” dressed in European clothes (unlike the local Uzbeks) and “had biblical names like Moses or Jacob.”

Chaim Künstlich found the Kazakhs “welcoming and very good to the Polish people.” According to Anna Bruell, the Kazakhs were a “very hospitable and generous people with whom we got on very well. They had nothing against Jews or Poles but hated Russians passionately.” However, she also notes their widespread poverty, “superstitions,” and “quaint” child-caring practices and felt less comfortable with their “low hygiene standards.” She pointedly mentions, with regard to this last factor, that when they were invited to eat with their Kazakh landlords, “No matter how hungry we were, we could never bring ourselves to share the meal.”

Zyga Elton’s memoir is one that does include a lengthy and somewhat more detailed “ethnographic” description of local living conditions, dress, and customs. In the Uzbekistan city of Bukhara, Elton observed, “most living quarters were built of clay, patched together with small windows, low ceilings and doors,” and “one had to bend to enter.” Not surprisingly, then, it was the local chaikhanas, or tea houses, that operated as hubs for most social and community interaction, although restricted to males. He also observed that the visually impressive and ancient tiled mosque was “now abandoned and the front a major market site.” As for the people: “The inhabitants of these parts, the Uzbeks, were dressed in long quilted kaftans, worn in winter on top of other kaftans and in summer, on bare bodies. The headgear, called ‘tyubiteika,’ had the shape of a squared dome and was richly embroidered with local motifs.” The Uzbek language, “a Turkish derivate,” was incomprehensible to the newcomers, and, overall, Elton found the locals “not particularly welcoming to the Polish refugees, or for that matter, the Russian evacuees.”

Larry Wenig agrees about the social distance between the two groups, noting that “the Uzbeks on our street did not talk to or look at us.” Moshe Grossman, in Samarkand, at first presents a similar view, noting considerable hostility between the local Uzbeks and the refugees, even down to the children, who were continually throwing stones at the Jewish children: “The little Uzbeks hated the Polish children because they were better dressed and received clothes and food from America.”
However, he soon tempers this by observing that, over time, the relationship between the two groups began to warm: “It took a long time for the Uzbeks and the Jews to get to know one another better. Once we were accepted as guests at their festivities, both people saw that you must not judge in a hurry or superficially by the people you meet by chance in the street or the bazaar. Among them, as among ourselves, there were decent, modest, fine folk of high morality and culture.”

Overall, relations between the Jews and “ordinary” Soviet citizens, with the general exception of those in authority positions and NKVD officers, tended to be mostly cordial and friendly. Anna Bruell observed that most of the Russians in these areas were also often quite impoverished and, except for those “in charge,” not much better off than the local Kazakhs. David Kay was a young boy when he and his mother were transported from their home in eastern Poland to their place of exile in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, where they remained for almost six years. During his time there Kay found it easy to make friends with boys his own age and experienced little overt discrimination against Jews. The locals were generally hospitable, even prepared to share what meager food supplies they might have, leaving him with the impression that “individually, Russians are remarkably good people.”

Zev Katz had already shown his determination to take advantage of what the nominally egalitarian Soviet system had to offer with his letters to Stalin requesting access to education while still an inmate of a Siberian labor camp. He pursued these ambitions further when he and his family were “amnestied” and moved on to Semipalatinsk in Kazakhstan. By September 1942, Katz had gained entry as a student in a teachers training college linked to the University of Kazakhstan, from where he was able to graduate with his degree four years later. During this period, life for him and his family regained some sense of “normality.” There were cultural institutions operating—the National Theater of Kiev was resettled and performed in the town—and cinemas regularly showed movies, including even some from America. But he also remained conscious of the enormous contradictions inherent in Soviet society: the difficult working conditions and immense poverty and hunger of most workers and “peasants” that contrasted sharply with the material advantages open to members of the privileged classes (the nomenklatura), who were able to enter closed shops to purchase goods that were unavailable to the rest.
Despite their parallel experiences during their time in the USSR, the relationship between Polish Jews and ethnic Poles, according to a number of the autobiographical memoirs, continued to follow a mostly separate, mutually distrustful, and sometimes openly hostile pattern. But there are also some who present a different image. After the 1941 amnesty for Polish refugees, Felix Rosenbloom, unable to get to Central Asia, instead relocated to Biysk in central Siberia, where he remained for several years. There were also other refugees in the town, including non-Jewish Poles, with some of whom he developed warm and lasting friendships: “I could not vouch how they felt about Jews in general, but I believed that their friendship to me was genuine. We remained good friends until I left Biysk.”

In the main, both Jews and “ethnic” Poles came into the wartime situation with established, often strongly held views about, and personal experiences with, members of the other group that inevitably contributed to how comfortable and open they were likely to feel now. Indeed, from the widely shared Jewish perspective, Chaim Künstlich might be seen as somewhat atypical when he writes about his life in prewar Poland: “I never experienced any difficulties as a Jew attending Polish schools, because Krakow was a very nice city and the Polish people were very nice.” Later, when he is settled in a small town in Kazakhstan, he is again careful to resist placing emphasis on any “ethnic” differences within the refugee population: “There was a Polish community, but the Jewish community was very small and we really didn’t know who was Jewish and who was not. . . . There was no anti-Semitism there.”

After April 1943, with the Germans now in retreat from the USSR, the already intense ambivalence felt by many of the Jewish refugees with regard to their past and present identity as Poles, not to mention their future relationship with an as yet unknown, postwar Poland, was put to a further test. For reasons that lie outside the scope of this chapter, but revolve around irreconcilable differences on the location of the future Poland-USSR border, the Soviet government’s already uneasy relationship with General Sikorski’s Polish government-in-exile fractured completely.

Even before this final break, the Soviets’ broader geopolitical strategy had already turned toward making effective use of the Polish refugees inside the USSR who might play a useful role in securing one of
Map 4. Polish Jews in the southern republics of the Soviet Union registered with the Polish embassy, Kuibyshev, as of April 1943.

Data source: Report on the Relief Accorded to Polish Citizens by the Polish Embassy in the USSR, with Special Reference to Polish Citizens of Jewish Nationality, USHMM, RG-59.032, Polish embassy in Kuibyshev, A.7307/40.
their postwar objectives: establishing a predominant Soviet influence over a compliant, and Communist, Poland. To these ends, the Soviets assisted in the setting up of two important new Polish institutions: the first was the “Polish army in the USSR,” again a military force to be drawn entirely from Polish refugees, but this time trained and assigned to fight alongside the Red Army in the liberation of Poland from the Germans; the second was a political organization, the Union of Polish Patriots (known also by its abbreviation in Polish as the ZPP), aimed at recruiting any Polish Communists who were still alive, and other Poles whose political credentials met Soviet requirements, to be trained to play leading roles in a future Polish government and administration.

On 8 May 1943, two weeks after they broke off all relations with the Polish government-in-exile, the Soviet government announced the formation of the first military unit of its “new” Polish army, which was to be under the command of General Zygmunt Berling, with the foundation unit strategically named, after the Polish national hero, the Tadeusz Kościuszko division. The number of recruits continued to grow, and by the summer of 1944, when units of Berling’s army reentered Poland alongside Soviet forces, it consisted of more than 100,000 soldiers. According to some sources, in the recruiting process there was considerably less discrimination against Jews than had been the case with the earlier Polish army under General Anders. Klemens Nussbaum writes that around 12,000 Jewish soldiers served in the Berling army, with a high Jewish representation among the officers.

Toby Klodawska Flam recalls that her brother was “drafted” into the Kościuszko unit in 1944. But Zev Katz presents a less sanguine view of this Polish army, suggesting that antisemitic discrimination was still in evidence. When he and his brother tried to volunteer, they were rejected and told that the recruiters had been warned, as Katz notes drily, that the Polish army “had too many Abramovitches already, they do not need any more.”

Jews were, however, well represented in the ZPP, leading one academic author to suggest: “The best period for Polish Jewish refugees was from May 1943 until the end of July 1946 because Stalin had assigned them a role in the process of transforming Poland into a ‘peoples’ republic and a Soviet satellite.”
Zyga Elton joined the ZPP soon after its formation and late in 1944 was recruited as an assistant to the local branch secretary in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. He writes: “My task was to organise cells at workplaces where there were at least five Polish citizens working. I had to call and attend meetings at which we were to enlighten the members of the merits of The Polish Committee of National Liberation, and the future of the new Polish Democratic Republic.”\(^{140}\) He was assigned to visit collective farms outside Bukhara “with substantial Polish-Christian populations,” he writes, “who were generally little interested in what I had to say, except with regard to what was on their minds: repatriation to Poland.” Their hostility toward Elton as a representative of the Soviet-sponsored organization was so intense that he felt “hatred in their eyes.”\(^{141}\) After these experiences, he came to realize that the ZPP had no standing within the Polish-Christian community, for whom “as an organisation of former communists and Jews, ZPP was a complete anathema.”\(^{142}\)

Larry Wenig, in another town in Uzbekistan, observed that the ZPP opened its own schools in areas where there was a Polish refugee population and Polish-speaking students were encouraged to transfer into them. The schools took care that the educational curriculum followed was supportive of Soviet ambitions for the direction of the “new” Poland.\(^{143}\)

By 1944 some Polish Jews were also being “called up” to serve in the Soviet army, although most were assigned to a “labor battalion” rather than a fighting unit. Often this meant being recruited to work under conditions not dissimilar from those that prevailed in the Soviet “labor camp.” On being drafted, Leo Cooper was taken with many others by train from Uzbekistan to a camp not far from Leningrad, where most of the other conscripts labored in coal mines, while, because he was skilled, Cooper was assigned work in the maintenance shop.\(^{144}\) A similar story is told by Elton, who also had a brief stint in a Red Army labor unit that involved a train journey of several weeks across the USSR followed by work in a coal mine, before he was released from duty on health grounds.\(^{145}\)

Although the end of the war was now in sight, and most of the Polish Jews were keen to assist the Allied cause and speed up what now appeared to be the inevitable military defeat of Germany, the total unpredictability of their situation was still sometimes forcefully brought home to them. Moshe Grossman was imprisoned as a “class enemy” early in the
war, then released under the Polish amnesty of 1941, and spent the next three years in Uzbekistan. But in February 1944 he was suddenly rearrested by the NKVD and charged with “counterrevolutionary agitation.” After several months of interrogation he was sent to a prison camp, and in his articulate reflection on the seemingly endless vicissitudes of his own experiences in the Soviet Union, he enumerates the bewilderingly diverse range of circumstances encountered and, by implication, the necessary adaptability he, and many fellow Polish refugees, needed to develop as an effective strategy for their survival:

During the years that I spent in Soviet Russia I had almost instinctively tried to pass through everything experienced by a considerable part of the citizens and above all by the Jewish refugees from Poland. I already had been in exile and in prisons, I had already been in hospitals and kolkhozes. Had worked at digging earth, at cotton plantations, I had carried clay and bricks, worked as a bookkeeper, served as a nightwatchman, sawn wood in the forests, worked as a sailor on a freighter, starved, slept in the streets, had been tortured and beaten during interrogation. The only thing missing to round matters off was a concentration camp.¹⁴⁶

Grossman was deported to a labor camp, but, again, fate intervened, in the form of Stalin’s grander political ambitions. Two months after Germany’s unconditional surrender in May 1945, the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union declared a new amnesty for all Polish citizens, including their right to be repatriated to Poland. This even applied to prisoners who were serving sentences of no longer than three years, and, therefore, on 4 August 1945 Grossman was once again a free man.¹⁴⁷

REPATRIATION AND DISPERSION, 1945–

For the Polish Jews who had remained under Soviet authority for the best part of six years, the belief that they would one day be free to leave the Soviet Union had seemingly ebbed and flowed with the political tides. By late 1939, if they were permanent residents of eastern Poland, they were Soviet citizens by decree, and in 1940, if they were “refugees” from
German-occupied Poland, they either became “voluntary” Soviet citizens or were deported to labor camps for refusing this honor. By the summer of 1941, they were all theoretically Polish citizens again, and by 1943, when relations between the Soviets and the Polish government-in-exile fractured, they were again Soviet citizens. As they were by now dispersed throughout the USSR and subject to various civilian and military authorities, who often interpreted these sudden “policy” shifts in unpredictable and idiosyncratic ways, it is not surprising that in the last few years of the war many Jews were perpetually confused and anxious about their precise status and fearful about exactly what might happen to them after Germany was defeated.

By late 1944, with the territory of Poland retaken by the Red Army, supported by General Berling’s Soviet-sponsored “Polish army in the USSR,” the Polish Committee of National Liberation, previously sanctioned by Stalin, was installed in the temporary capital of Lublin as the new government of Poland. For strategic and political reasons, the Soviets considered it important to solicit the support of as many as possible of the several hundred thousand Poles who had survived the war inside the USSR. Following the end of hostilities, this approach was reaffirmed in the form of the announcement on 6 July 1945 declaring “the right of persons, Polish or Jewish by nationality, living in the USSR, to change their Soviet citizenship and be evacuated to Poland.” Albert Kaganovitch suggests a few of the strategic rationales that could have influenced Stalin in making this fateful decision: “In addition to relieving the USSR of a potentially unreliable group and increasing the population of its future satellite state, another consideration in permitting a large-scale emigration may have been Stalin’s desire to gain sympathy in the West during negotiations over Poland’s future borders, and thus to neutralize one basis for the hostility promoted by the London-based Polish government-in-exile.”

Not surprisingly, when the news of this latest “amnesty” spread through the Polish exile population, there was a rush to register for repatriation. While some of the Polish Jews were suspicious that it might be another ruse by the Soviets and that rather than be returned to Poland they would end up back in a labor camp, they very quickly overcame these initial apprehensions. Their path toward repatriation was smoothed further by the general looseness of the registration process, with virtually any
form of documentation accepted as sufficient proof of former Polish citizenship. Even where there was no documentation, as Leo Cooper observed, “two witnesses who would confirm that they knew the person as a former Polish citizen” was sufficient. The final decisions were left to local Soviet bureaucrats, often joined by members of the ZPP. Zyga Elton, who as a representative of the ZPP in Bukhara was placed in charge of organizing the registration process there, notes that sometimes more “creative” assistance was necessary: “We had to invent ways for those who had no documents, but who were genuine Poles, to get through the bureaucratic maze. . . . Any document with a slight indication of Polish locality was made valid. We even accepted medical prescriptions in the Polish language as valid documents.”

The complex logistics for repatriation took considerable time to organize, as many of the Poles, including most of the Jews, required transportation from thousands of kilometers away. A small number who, when the war ended, were located in the western parts of the USSR (including prewar eastern Poland) managed to return in 1945, but most did not gain access to available transportation until the spring and summer of 1946.

Before they departed, many of the refugees were less than subtly encouraged by their Soviet hosts to consider and appreciate, upon their return to Poland, the benefits and assistance they had received during their stay in the USSR. Zev Katz was awarded his degree from the University of Kazakhstan before he was scheduled to depart in the summer of 1946. He recalls that after the graduation ceremony, he was invited to the dean’s office and told: “You have been one of our best students. We have given you education and made a major effort to see that you graduate. . . . You will shortly return to Poland. A Polish citizen who graduated from a Soviet university, who studied Marxism-Leninism, is very important to us. I am sure that you will be able to make a meaningful contribution for the good of both our countries.”

Cooper tells of a similar experience. Following the release of Poles working in a Soviet military labor battalion and now to be repatriated, local officials at a celebration ostensibly in honor of the Poles’ imminent departure “expressed the hope,” he writes, “that we would remember with gratitude our stay in the Soviet Union and would continue to work for the cause of socialism in liberated Poland.”
The Soviet authorities employed other strategies to gain the sympathy of repatriates, for example, by providing comfortable traveling conditions on the trains that took the refugees back to Poland, including ample provisions, available medical support, and even free clothing and footwear. Anna Bruell, reflecting on her train journey in April 1946, recalls that they were repatriated without being required to pay a fare.

In the end, while few of the Polish Jews departed with a particularly favorable view of Soviet Communism as a political system, many did retain positive feelings about the people—Russians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and others—who, in the main, had treated them decently and with compassion and also a heartfelt appreciation for the relatively safe and peaceful refuge they had been fortunate enough to find inside the USSR. Toby Klodaw ska Flam, in her memoir, recalls her rather effusive parting words on the train leaving the Soviet Union in March 1946: “Goodbye, my friends! . . . Goodbye, friendly country! . . . I’ll never forget you, goodbye!” Cooper is more measured, but also quite open, about feeling some ambivalence when it was time for him to take his leave of the Soviet Union. He writes: “At this moment I was overcome by a strange feeling. It was a feeling of uncertainty about what lay ahead mixed with sadness of leaving behind the people amongst whom I lived for over seven years of my prime youth, of leaving my Russian friends who treated me with so much kindness and understanding.”

But for two of the memoir writers, their last years in the USSR were anything but compassionate or benign. While, by the end of 1946, due to the unprecedented but politically calculated display of Soviet “generosity,” most Polish Jews had already been repatriated, Arthur Spindler and Ruth Tur cow Kaminska had instead been subjected to a rather unpleasant taste of the impenetrable, “Kafkaesque” Soviet judicial process in action.

Spindler had moved into the Soviet-occupied part of Poland in 1939 but, soon after, returned to his family in German-occupied Poland. Working as an electrician in Tarnow, he was employed by the German military, but when Jews began being rounded up and a ghetto established, he obtained false “Aryan” papers and moved to Warsaw. Now presenting himself as an ethnic Pole, he found work with a German company dealing in wheat. Sometime later, he was contacted by Polish “partisans”
who persuaded him that, as a “Polish patriot,” he should assist their cause by diverting some of the company product for their benefit. Of the double irony here, he notes: “Me, a Jew being asked to join the Polish underground! It had been made all too clear that Jews were not welcome in the organisation.” Spindler was given a Polish code name and sworn in on the Holy Cross. Events took an even stranger turn when, in December 1944, the Soviets reoccupied the town and, as they considered the Polish partisan movement to be an ultranationalist and anti-Soviet organization, Spindler was arrested. Despite his protestations that he was really a Jew hiding under false papers, he was transported to a “gulag” inside the USSR and not released until late in 1947, when, as the beneficiary of another “friendly” Soviet gesture toward the new Communist Polish government, he was finally allowed to return to Poland.

In 1940, Ruth Turkow Kaminska was on a national tour with her husband, Adi Rosner, and his jazz band. While many of the other Polish Jews were being deported to labor camps, they seem to have stumbled into an alternative universe and were living the ostentatious and lavish lifestyle of the Soviet nomenklatura, associating mostly with high officials, favored artists, writers, and other “celebrities.” After successful, lengthy seasons playing Leningrad and Moscow, their tour continued into the “provinces,” covering the Soviet Central Asian republics and the “far east.” This included a concert in the so-called Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan, the Soviet-created “Jewish homeland” referred to at the beginning of this chapter, where they found little evidence of “Yiddish culture” and a noticeably impoverished living standard. At one point they were all flown to a Black Sea resort town and directed to perform a “special concert” played to a completely empty theater, except for one curtained box, which they later believed was probably occupied by Comrade Stalin himself. By 1944, they were being asked to provide entertainment relief for frontline troops of the Red Army during its advance into Poland, and, as a reward, they gained possession of a “war trophy”—a Ford automobile left behind by the retreating Germans.

Their musical careers and privileged lifestyle continued until the summer of 1946. They began to sense that with the emerging Cold War rhetoric their form of entertainment was now at odds with the current ideological climate, and, having completed their contractual obligations, they requested permission to return to Poland along with the other
repatriated refugees. They were scheduled to leave late in November on one of the last repatriation trains from Lvov, in Ukraine, when, on the evening before their departure, they were paid a visit by NKVD officers, who searched their apartment and arrested Rosner. Within a short time, Turkow Kaminska was also in custody. Both were sentenced to lengthy terms. Turkow Kaminska served five years, the first part in prison and then later in exile in Kazakhstan. She was finally “rehabilitated” after Stalin’s death and only managed to return to her home in Warsaw in 1956.164

However, what awaited the Jews who returned to Poland from the USSR in the eighteen months following the end of the war was more horrific and shocking than anything they could have ever imagined. Some news of the Nazi campaign to exterminate European Jewry had filtered through while they were in the Soviet Union, but now they came face-to-face with the unimaginable extent of the devastation and loss. What they quickly learned was that most, and in some cases all, of the families and friends, and even entire communities, they had left behind a few years before had vanished, leaving barely a trace.

The sense of desolation was undoubtedly amplified by the widely noted hostility they faced from their fellow Poles upon their return. Zyga Elton experienced a taste of what was to come as soon as the train bringing him back crossed over the Polish border: “Wherever we stopped on the Polish side, we attracted the local population who stared at us, taunting and jeering, exhorting us to go back from whence we came. . . . We realised that our troubles were not yet over.”165 Leo Cooper points to a certain ironic symmetry in being warned on the train by the Russian conductor against returning to Poland, where Jews were already being killed by their fellow Poles, echoing the sentiments expressed in his story from 1939: “Fools, where are you going?”166

Almost every one of the memoir writers makes a point of reporting the coldness and rejection they encountered from “ethnic” Poles, often quoting almost identical phrases of hatred and contempt as the first words with which they were “greeted”: “You are alive? I thought all the Jews were killed?”167 “So many of you still survived?”168 “Where are all these Jews coming from? We thought Hitler finished all of them. Pity he didn’t.”169 Larry Wenig, while having his hair cut following his return to Krakow in 1945, overheard a fellow Pole exclaiming: “We must forever
be grateful to Hitler. He got rid of the Jews.”\textsuperscript{170} Elton was saddened by the total lack of empathy toward the Jews who had survived: “I could not understand the mentality of these people who had witnessed the destruction of their neighbours without showing any compassion. They could not find in their heart a word of consolation for those who survived.”\textsuperscript{171}

Even with documentation now available, we are still unable to say exactly how many Jews returned to Poland from the Soviet Union. Some estimates suggest that as many as 200,000 had been repatriated by late 1946.\textsuperscript{172} However, Edele and Warlik propose a “high” figure of a little over 160,000.\textsuperscript{173} Taking a longer time frame, as some Jews in the Soviet Union did not return to Poland until later—even well into the 1950s—Lucjan Dobroszycki calculates that a total of between 240,000 and 250,000 eventually returned, “arriving at different points in time.”\textsuperscript{174} But what we can be certain of is that considerably fewer Polish Jews—the likely figure, according to Laura Jockusch and Tamar Lewinsky, lies somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000—survived inside the territory of the prewar Polish state, liberated from the concentration camps, emerging from hiding, or with partisan groups.\textsuperscript{175}

As suggested in many of the comments from the memoirs quoted above, in general the homecoming was not a sweet one, and indeed a considerable number stayed in Poland only for a very short time. The official Polish government policy directed the returning Jews toward settling in the western areas of Poland, such as Lower Silesia and Pomerania, only recently “cleared” of their former high concentrations of ethnic Germans.\textsuperscript{176} David Kay describes arriving in the virtually empty Upper Silesian city of Szczecin only a few weeks after it was taken by Soviet troops. He and his family, he writes, were “dropped at the end of the street, told to choose whatever flat we wanted and to register with the police the next morning with details of the property we had appropriated.”\textsuperscript{177} On their return, Fela Steinbock, Chaim Künstlich, and Anna Bruell were also resettled in Silesia. Bruell describes a savage Polish reaction as more of the returning refugees from Russia began arriving in Szczecin: “After a few weeks the Poles started a real ‘pogrom,’ attacking the traders at the market, robbing them and beating some savagely to death.”\textsuperscript{178}

Zev Katz learned, with some consternation, that his family had been resettled in Lodz in a house that was previously part of the Jewish ghetto
and from which, only a few months before when the ghetto had been “liquidated,” the former inhabitants had been expelled and transported to a Nazi death camp. On coming “home” to physically devastated Warsaw, Zyga Elton poignantly captures the feelings of total helplessness and despair that many who returned must have experienced:

As I was taking my first hesitating steps in the city of my childhood, now almost completely destroyed, I could hardly recognise the outlay of the streets. . . . An immense sadness descended upon me as I realised the enormity of the destruction and the tragic fate of my family. I could hardly see anything in front of me as my eyes filled with tears of helplessness. . . . There were only ruins where the apartment house stood when we said goodbye to my parents and sister, leaving them in their hour of need. It was then that I felt guilty and remorseful for leaving them on their own, powerless as they were to defend themselves. I wandered around aimlessly, trying to imagine what and how it all happened. There was no one to whom I could turn for help.

It is not surprising, then, that most who came back also very quickly came to the conclusion that there was no place for Jews in the new Poland. The rejection and verbal insults they encountered were sometimes accompanied by serious outbreaks of violence; several hundred Jews were killed in such attacks between 1945 and 1947. The most infamous, a pogrom that took place in the city of Kielce on 4 July 1946, finally convinced many Jews, if they still had doubts, that it might be wise for them to leave Poland as soon as they could. The extent of the flight was dramatic: overall, while an estimated 275,000 surviving Jews resided in Poland for some period between 1944 and the spring of 1947, the postwar Jewish population reached its peak of around 240,000 in the summer of 1946 following the mass repatriation from the USSR. But soon after, in the nine-month period between mid-1946 and March 1947, 140,000 Jews left Poland for good.

A large number of those Polish Jews who were looking to leave quickly were assisted by a Zionist “underground railway” known as the Bricha, a network of more than 150 special emissaries sent from Palestine
who helped them make their way into displaced persons (DP) camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy. From there they moved on either to Palestine or to other cities in Western Europe—a number spent some months, and sometimes several years, in Paris. The majority of the Jews who left postwar Poland eventually settled either in Palestine (after May 1948, the new state of Israel) or in the United States. A smaller number, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, were able to secure immigration documents for Australia, Canada, Argentina, or other countries in Central or South America.

A DIFFERENT SILENCE
I now return to the observation in the chapter’s introduction concerning the historical and cultural marginalization of the events, contexts, and stories recounted above. Again, awareness of this process is not new and was already being publicly commented on very soon after the war ended. Already in 1947, in writing about the Jews in European DP camps, journalist Mordkhe Libhaber was of the view that the survivors gathered together in these camps “had not adequately addressed Soviet exile.” He saw this as a paradox, since he was also aware that “Polish Jews who had survived in the Soviet Union constituted the majority of the displaced Jews in Germany.” And more than sixty years later, historian Atina Grossmann noted how little had changed. She pointedly observed that the contemporary image of the “Holocaust survivor,” both through representations in popular cultural forms such as films, documentaries, novels, and museum exhibits and in the academic and scholarly literature, “does not in fact reflect the historical experience of most survivors.” “This does seem to me,” she remarked, “rather extraordinary.”

What are the individual and collective processes that seem to have cumulatively ensured that the experiences of so many Polish Jews who survived in the Soviet Union continue to be relegated to, at best, a brief footnote in the history of the Holocaust? The difficulties faced by many Jewish survivors over many decades in articulating their experiences, both to their children and to “the world” in general, have some resonance in the much explored concept of Holocaust “silence”—the central theme in Ruth Wajnryb’s book on intergenerational transmission of parental memories, emotions, and experiences with which this chapter
A DIFFERENT SILENCE

began. But it seems to me that the events and stories I explored above are not widely known because they have often been buried beneath, not one, but three “layers” of silence.

The first layer of silence is the one they share with all survivors—those who were in the Nazi camps, in hiding, in the forests—to which the major contributors are feelings of grief, loss, and guilt around those close to them who did not survive.\textsuperscript{188} Returning to Poland after their time in the Soviet Union to find their families and communities wiped out would have triggered for them a similar range of emotional and psychological responses to those experienced by all survivors.

Also contributing to this layer of “shared silence,” something common to all the survivors who left Europe soon after the war ended and almost immediately confronted issues associated with immigration and settlement in a new country—finding work, a place to live, learning a new language, bringing up young families—is that most “simply did not have time . . . to record—let alone publish—their experiences.”\textsuperscript{189} And, that among them were some who preferred to follow the words of advice offered by Larry Wenig’s uncle to Larry’s father, when he came to meet the family upon their arrival in the United States in 1946: “You’re in America now. Forget the past.”\textsuperscript{190}

Another aspect of “shared silence” is related to language. Most of the Polish survivors who came to the West were not fluent in English (or other local languages), and many who settled in Israel, if they knew Hebrew at all, only spoke it as their second language. For almost all, their first language was either Yiddish or, in some cases, Polish, which increased the difficulty of effectively “communicating complex, nuanced ‘information’” even to their own children, much less to their new non-European friends and neighbors.\textsuperscript{191} As noted above, the few early published accounts that did emerge of Jewish experiences inside the Soviet Union were almost exclusively written in Yiddish.

The second layer is “politically motivated silence.” The Soviet Union, Stalin, and the international Communist movement all represented polarizing global political symbols, and Jews were just as divided about them as everyone else, perhaps even more so. For the period of the war, the Jewish refugees had been “guests” of the Soviet Union, so how were they to respond to the country and the political system that, for whatever reasons, saved them from likely extermination at the hands
of the Nazis? A certain level of ambivalence was inevitable, as Mordkhe Libhaber had also already observed in 1947: “A feeling of strong gratitude towards the Soviet government, mixed with accusations against it, is part of the problem.”

Many were fully aware that the intention behind the decision by the Soviet authorities to deport them to labor camps was not to “save” them and that the reason they were still alive was the fortuitous combination of historical accident and good fortune. Their own limited agency in responding to their situation is forcefully articulated in the memoir by Zyga Elton when he observes, in the end: “During the war years we were moved around under difficult circumstances, without exercising our own will. We lived from day to day, victims of war. We were not asked what we would like to do. We were always pushed by ensuing events.”

The ambivalence many felt was complicated further by the intensification of Cold War rhetoric in the West. While they remained in Soviet-dominated Poland, it was best not to criticize the USSR, and when many of them moved to the West it was generally wise not to praise it. It is then not surprising that, at least publicly, most preferred to say as little as possible. It was only with the collapse of Communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s that “the need for justification, political positioning, and settling scores with the Soviet Union became obsolete.” It is probably not coincidental that almost all the autobiographical memoirs cited above and written by Polish Jews who spent the war years in the Soviet Union were published after 1990. By this time, “the motivation to write these memoirs generally was not political; rather, the authors sought to leave personal testimonies for the second and third generations.”

The third layer of silence reflects the position of “relative silence”—both imposed on and accepted by the Jews who returned from the Soviet Union—in relation to other Holocaust survivors that derives from what some observers have called “the hierarchy of victimhood.” Many of the returnees were quickly made aware that, in the general context of what had happened to others, their “suffering” had been relatively minor. These sentiments are echoed in a number of the memoirs. Anna Bruell writes: “Much later when we heard about the concentration camps and what happened to people there, we called ourselves lucky. Despite the hard conditions we still had a chance to survive—they had none.”
A DIFFERENT SILENCE

One of the more explicit and direct expressions of this view appears in the introduction to Felix Rosenbloom’s memoir, in which he notes that he “survived the war years in the comparative safety of the then Soviet Union” but had for decades resisted his family’s request to write down his experiences, because he firmly believed that “only people who were incarcerated in ghettos or concentration camps or had been in hiding from the Nazis, should leave eye-witness accounts of those terrible years.”\(^1\)

Among Holocaust survivors, socially sanctioned mechanisms were soon in place that enabled them to very quickly bring their personal experiences and grieving to the attention of the broader general public and particularly to others within the local and global Jewish community. Already by the early 1950s, in Australia and elsewhere, there were ritualized communal forms of public commemoration of the Nazi horrors inflicted in the death camps and the ghettos. Certainly, for almost all of the Polish Jews who survived in the Soviet Union, and later for their children, there was an equally strong impetus to be part of these, as many had lost most, and in some cases all, of their families; those who had remained behind, either in the already Nazi-controlled areas or the soon-to-be Nazi-overrun territories of eastern Poland. However, their own particular stories—the details surrounding their mode of “escape” and “survival”—tended to remain a private and family affair. There was little impetus or desire from them to form organizations, to be with others who had similar experiences, or, even though there were deaths of family and children while they were in the Soviet Union, to create any special public rituals of commemoration.

The diminished status assigned to the refugee experience in the USSR, over many decades, has permeated many of the debates among “surviving” Jews around Holocaust memory and appropriate commemoration. In most cases, those in both groups have either colluded with or accepted the de facto “hierarchy of suffering,” already in place soon after the war, “with concentration camp survival at the top and the Soviet experience at the bottom.”\(^2\) Since then, we see in virtually every aspect of the memorialization process, either the total exclusion of the Polish refugee experience from the status of “survivorhood,” as is often the case with museums and displays devoted to the Holocaust, or, at best and only recently, an allowance of some of the Poles who were in the Soviet Union.
“slip into” the “survivor” category. This is what has happened, for example, when the more contemporary “gatekeepers” presented no objection to incorporating their voluntary oral testimonies into recently accumulated collections, such as the worldwide USC Shoah Foundation project and the Phillip Maisel Testimonies Project based at Melbourne’s Jewish Holocaust Centre.199

A similar pattern can be discerned with the emergence over the past twenty years of published autobiographical memoirs written by Polish Jews who had been in the USSR. I have drawn on fourteen of these for this chapter, and more have been and continue to be published, but, again, their number and distribution must be considered in a broader context. The distinguished historian of the Holocaust Yehuda Bauer pointedly observed in his foreword to Zev Katz’s autobiography that, compared with the many hundreds of memoirs that have been written by Holocaust survivors, “not many Jews who fled or were deported to the Soviet Union wrote memoirs.”200

My purpose in this chapter, then, has been to try to counter the pervasive influence of the combined weight of the three layers of silence I have identified, which have for a long time relegated the experience of this very large body of Jewish refugees to the periphery of historical awareness and, I would suggest, clouded our ability to fully grasp and comprehend their experiences. By also drawing from some of their now-available first-person memoirs, I am very belatedly responding to the plea from historian Meir Korzen, who more than half a century ago wrote:

The life of horror, the dramatic struggle for survival and the premature, bitter end the Jews eventually suffered under the Nazi regime, has overshadowed the fate of the Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union which has consequently been relegated to secondary importance. . . . And yet, this episode is definitely worthy of the historian’s attention, not only because it involves so many human beings, but also because its study reflects particular experiences that have an impact on the present generation and are likely to impress future generations, no less in their way, than do the experiences and consequences of the Nazi regime.201
Notes

1. Wajnryb, *The Silence*, 40. This is the operational definition of Holocaust survivor Wajnryb used for the purposes of her research.

2. Ibid., 212–13.

3. In their particular instance, they traveled by train from Lithuania all the way across the USSR, from west to east, as far as Vladivostok, then on to Japan, and eventually to Shanghai. It is likely they were among the more than 2,000 Polish and Lithuanian Jews who, together with a much larger group of around 17,000 mostly Austrian and German Jews, were able, between 1938 and 1941, to take advantage of the extremely loose entry requirements into the international settlements of Shanghai and, for the duration of the Second World War, found a relatively safe wartime refuge in this cosmopolitan “Paris of the East.”

4. The Soviet-controlled territory includes both the sections of eastern Poland and the Baltic states annexed by the Soviet Union after September 1939 and the “greater” USSR itself. The recent revival of academic interest in the topic has yielded differing estimates of the total number who returned from the Soviet Union, as the proportion of all Polish Jews who survived the war. These range from around two-thirds to a high of more than 80 percent. See, respectively, Laura Jockusch and Tamar Lewinsky, “Paradise Lost? Postwar Memory of Polish Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24, no. 3 (2010): 374; and Atina Grossmann, “‘Deported to Life’: Reconstructing the Lost Story of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during World War II” (paper presented at the annual conference of the Association of Jewish Studies, Boston, 20 December 2010), 2. For an extended discussion, and a comparative analysis of a range of available data sources, on the number of Polish Jews who survived the war and later returned from the Soviet Union to Poland, see chapter 2, by Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik, in this volume.


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79

7. See the biographical notes on “Kuba” in Rosh White, *From Darkness*, 44–45.

8. On this subject, see also chapter 2 of this volume.

9. One of the earliest publications was Bernard Weinryb, “Polish Jews under Soviet Rule,” in *The Jews in the Soviet Satellites*, ed. Peter Meyer et al. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1953), 329–69. Weinryb presents an extremely detailed historical chronology and politically well-informed outline of events. Another early contribution was by historian Meir Korzen, “Problems Arising out of Research into the History of Jewish Refugees in the USSR during the Second World War,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 3 (1959): 119–40. It is telling, given when it was written, that Korzen begins by noting that the Nazi destruction of Jewish communities throughout Europe “has almost completely diverted the attention of contemporary Jewish historiography from another dramatic and interesting episode in the history of the Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union” (119).

Interest from historians, political scientists, and sociologists cooled over the next twenty years, but a revival occurred in the late 1970s and has continued up to the present. Some examples, in the decade following the late 1970s, include two articles that focus on the period 1939–41 in Soviet-occupied eastern Poland: Ben-Cion Pinchuk, “Jewish Refugees in Soviet Poland, 1939–1941,” *Jewish Social Studies* 40, no. 2 (1978): 141–58; and Pinchuk, “The Sovietization of the Jewish Community of Eastern Poland, 1939–1941,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 56, no. 3 (1978): 387–410. Pinchuk’s first article is more general, while the second looks at the attempts by the Soviet authorities in eastern Poland to politically “reeducate” the Jewish refugees. The underlying political tensions between, and very different interests of, the Soviets and the Polish government-in-exile in relation to the situation of Polish Jewish refugees in eastern Poland are explored in David Engel, “An Early Account of Polish Jewry under Nazi and Soviet Occupation Presented to the Polish Government-in-Exile, February 1940,” *Jewish Social Studies* 45, no. 1 (1983): 1–16. The situation faced by Jews in the territories occupied and annexed by the Soviets during their two-year alliance with Nazi Germany is extensively

Academic interest was spurred considerably by the fall of the Soviet Union and the other Eastern European Communist regimes in the early 1990s, which opened up a considerable volume of new data and archival material to researchers. More recent contributions include Lucjan Dobroszycki, *Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland: A Portrait Based on Jewish Community Records, 1944–1947* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994). Dobroszycki’s book is primarily a presentation of detailed data on Jewish survivors, in particular children, but also includes a lengthy introductory overview essay. Another detailed exposition of both the broader context and chronology of events surrounding the Polish Jewish refugees’ survival inside the USSR can be found in Yosef Litvak, “Jewish Refugees from Poland in the USSR, 1939–1946,” in *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 123–50. The quite extensive article by Laura Jockusch and Tamar Lewinsky, “Paradise Lost?,” also seeks to identify and discuss reasons why, given the obviously expanding interest in Holocaust stories in both academic and broader public circles, this one has remained so “under-explored.” A useful political analysis of the labyrinthine cross-cutting motives and interests of the major international players in the ultimate decision by the Soviets to allow the Polish Jews to leave the USSR after the end of the war is provided in Albert Kaganovitch, “Stalin’s Great Power Politics, the Return of Jewish Refugees to Poland, and Continued Migration to Palestine, 1944–1946,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 26, no. 1 (2012): 59–94.


11. One of the earliest of these memoirs was Moshe Grossman, *In the Enchanted Land: My Seven Years in Soviet Russia* (Tel Aviv: Rachel, 1960). Grossman, a well-known Yiddish writer of novels and short stories from Warsaw, was already in his mid-thirties when war broke
out and he fled into eastern Poland. His memoir of the years he spent under Soviet rule, titled with obvious irony, was originally published in Yiddish in 1949. Grossman later settled in Israel, and a Hebrew-language version of his book was published there in 1951. Another early work is by Melbourne Yiddish writer Moshe Ajzenbud, *The Commissar Took Care* (Brunswick, Victoria: Globe Press, 1986).

Ajzenbud’s account, first published in Yiddish in 1956, presents a fictional story of a protagonist named “Michael” and is a thinly veiled personal memoir of his years in the Soviet Union.


13. Poland’s new borders and integrity as an independent nation-state were only reestablished at the end of the First World War. For more than a century before, all the territory of Poland had been divided,
with various sections subsumed under the authority of imperial
Russia in the east, the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the south, and
the Prussian, later German, state in the west.

15. See table 1 in chapter 2 of this volume.

17. While Elton was in Warsaw, Rosenbloom was in Lodz, to the west,
and he reports an almost identical experience there, only some days
earlier: on Tuesday, 5 September 1939, the radio announced a “strategic
retreat” of military units from Lodz and “urged all able-bodied
males, between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, to leave the city
during the night and to head towards Warsaw, to help defend the
capital of Poland.” Rosenbloom also heeded the call, but observing
the general atmosphere of disorganization and panic with “tens of
thousands” on the roads, he soon returned home. Rosenbloom and
Rosenbloom, Miracles Do Happen, 61–62.

22. Ibid., 40.
23. Ibid., 42. Perhaps the ease with which Klodawska Flam was able to
cross the border had something to do with when this took place.
Pinchuk notes in “Jewish Refugees in Soviet Poland” that while the
new borders between the USSR and Germany were drawn on 28
September 1939, “during the month of October, the Soviet authorities
did not object to the German practice of forcing entire Jewish
communities to cross into Soviet Poland” (143) and that “the Soviets
were still ready to accept thousands of Jewish refugees, either those
who had been expelled or were fleeing on their own” (144).

25. Cooper, Stakhanovites and Others, 12–18.
27. Katz, From the Gestapo, xiv–xvi.
30. Rosh White, From Darkness. See, in particular, the biographical
information provided by her interviewees: “Frania” (18); “Wladek”
(32); “Kuba” (44); and “Henryk” (50).
32. Ajzenbud, Commissar, 5.
35. This presence was notwithstanding the fact that the Polish Communist Party had been virtually destroyed in the late 1930s, ostensibly because Stalin suspected that it was controlled by “Trotskyists.”
37. Kay, Tough Kid, 3.
38. Ibid., 19–20.
39. Katz, From the Gestapo, 32.
41. Ibid., 149–50. Pinchuk notes that, in particular, “teachers, engineers, technicians, accountants and physicians were in great demand.”
42. Katz, From the Gestapo, 45.
43. Cooper, Stakhanovites and Others, 21–29.
44. Elton, Destination Buchara, 162–63.
45. Klodawska Flam, Toby, 43–46.
46. Cooper, Stakhanovites and Others, 40. But as discussed in two subsequent contributions of this volume—Natalie Belsky’s chapter 4, “Fraught Friendships,” and chapter 6, by John Goldlust, “Identity Profusions”—the encounters between Soviet and Polish Jews were both more complicated and nuanced. However, Belsky does offer some support for Cooper’s observation in noting that “Polish Jews expressed confusion about Soviet Jews’ reticence to open up to them. As one refugee commented: ‘It was impossible to learn anything from the Russian Jews. They appeared always frightened and refused to answer questions’” (chapter 4).
47. Ajzenbud, Commissar, 39.
48. Wenig, Nazi Inferno, 96. Both Ajzenbud’s and Wenig’s accounts are consistent with the broader observation reported in the academic overviews by Litvak, “Jewish Refugees from Poland,” 127–28, and Pinchuk “Jewish Refugees in Soviet Poland,” 150. Pinchuk notes that of the Jewish refugees who registered for work in the USSR “quite a few among them came back”: “What might have been considered
by the Soviet authorities to be a generous offer of conditions equal to
their own citizens was believed by the refugees to be hard labor that
they were not accustomed to performing.”

49. Turkow Kaminska, *Mink Coats and Barbed Wire*.
50. Ibid., 9–39.
52. Litvak, “Jewish Refugees from Poland,” 128. The Soviets seriously
suspected that some of the Jewish refugees who had fled into their
territories could have been planted to undertake espionage on behalf
of Nazi Germany or other Western countries (126).
57. Cooper, *Stakhanovites and Others*, 31. Pinchuk also mentions this
same incident in “Jewish Refugees in Soviet Poland” (153) and reports
that it is an “authentic story.”
58. Pinchuk “Jewish Refugees in Soviet Poland,” 150–51. Litvak writes in
“Jewish Refugees from Poland” (129) that, in fact, “more than half the
refugees from the German-occupied zone were registered to return to
their homes on the German side” and that “most of those registered
to return were lone individuals, hoping that in this way they might be
united with their family members.”
60. Litvak, “Jewish Refugees from Poland,” 129–30. Alongside refugees,
some permanent residents of eastern Poland were also targeted. These
included “leading members of Zionist organizations as well as other
political parties, especially the [Jewish] ‘Bund,’ former representatives
in the Polish Sejm and senate and local authorities, some wealthy
people and rabbis, as well as people who were suspected informants
and collaborators with the Polish police against the Communists.”
64. Ibid., 47–48.
66. Stephen A. Barnes, “All for the Front, All for Victory! The Mobiliza-
tion of Forced Labor in the Soviet Union during World War Two,”

69. Ibid., 105.

70. While most of the refugees in Eastern Poland had been deported by the end of June 1940, further deportations continued, but on a smaller scale, up until the outbreak of the German–Soviet war almost a year later. See Norman Davies and Antony Polonsky, introduction to Davies and Polonsky, *Jews in Eastern Poland*, 28–29.


For the lower figure, see table 2 in chapter 2 of this volume. Interestingly, while anecdotally deportation into the Soviet interior as a refugee is widely perceived as the “normative” pathway, that is, the one followed by most Polish Jews inside the Soviet Union during the war, only five of the fourteen memoir writers I read for this chapter had been taken in the deportations of 1940.


73. Quoted in Rosh White, *From Darkness*, 44–45. About bedbugs, Wenig, in *Nazi Inferno* (134), similarly observes that “the war on the bug problem was continuous, with never a victory.”

74. This point is strongly argued by Eva Marks, originally from Austria, who was a young girl when the Nazis took control in 1938 and who then moved with her family to Riga, Latvia. In 1940, the Soviets briefly took control of Latvia, and at the time of the German attack in June 1941, she and her family were transported to Soviet labor camps, first in Siberia and later in Kazakhstan, where they spent the next seven years. In her autobiographical memoir, she argues that this situation can be psychologically more damaging than the one facing “normal” Soviet prisoners, who know precisely the length of their sentence: “The fact that we had no . . . definite sentence imposed on us, played continuously on our minds and caused incredible stress. In some ways, it was worse than physical deprivation.” Eva Marks, *A
Patchwork Life (Caulfield South, Victoria: Makor Jewish Community Library, 2003), 60.

75. Words to this effect are recalled both by Bruell, Autumn in Springtime (43), and by Katz, From the Gestapo (48).

76. See Albert Kaganovitch, “Jewish Refugees and Soviet Authorities during World War II,” Yad Vashem Studies 38, no. 2 (2010): 100. As Steinbock recalls in My life (87–88): “In Siberia there was a saying . . . ‘If you won’t get used to it, you’ll die’ and some who couldn’t cope did.”


78. Künstlich, L’Chaim, 63.


81. Ibid., 55–64.

82. Wenig, Nazi Inferno, 175.

83. Künstlich, L’Chaim, 64.

84. Wenig, Nazi Inferno, 175.

85. Katz, From the Gestapo, 71–76. Clearly, some of the Polish refugees were quick to pick up on this mode for expressing a “legitimate” grievance. As Sheila Fitzpatrick points out, in the Soviet Union it was not uncommon for “ordinary” people to write directly to someone in high authority requesting their assistance or intervention on a particular matter. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s,” Slavic Review 55, no. 1 (1996): 78–105.

86. Edele and Warlik estimate that at the time of the German attack on the Soviet Union the total number of Polish Jews already either voluntarily or forcefully removed from the Soviet-occupied areas of eastern Poland, and now located inside the Soviet “hinterland,” falls between 140,000 and 170,000. See table 2 in chapter 2 of this volume.

87. According to Weinryb in Polish Jews under Soviet Rule (353), to the groups already mentioned must also be added between 120,000 and 180,000 “local” Jews (meaning permanent residents of Soviet-occupied eastern Poland) who fled eastward into the USSR ahead of the advancing German army. Absence of reliable data leads Edele and Warlik (in the source note to table 3 in chapter 2 of this volume) to cautiously estimate 210,000 as an upper limit for the number of Polish Jews who evacuated in the summer of 1941.

88. Davies and Polonsky, introduction to Jews in Eastern Poland, 33.
90. Katz, From the Ghetto, 78–79.
91. Ibid., 81–83.
92. Wenig, Nazi Inferno, 187.
93. Bruell, Autumn in Springtime, 70.
94. Ibid., 71–83.
96. Ajzenbud, Commissar, 43–56.
97. Grossman, In the Enchanted Land, 125.
98. Ibid., 173.
99. Ibid., 126–27.
100. Ibid., 127–28.
102. For a comprehensive and detailed account, with extensive discussion of the internecine political maneuverings behind the severely restricted Jewish participation in General Anders’s Polish army, see ibid. For a briefer overview, see Ryszard Terlecki, “The Jewish Issue in the Polish Army in the USSR and the Near East, 1941–1944,” in Davies and Polonsky, Jews in Eastern Poland, 161–71.
103. More personal accounts expressing similar views may be found in a number of video testimonies from Polish Jews who were rejected when they tried to enlist. See chapter 6, by Goldlust, in this volume.
104. Elton, Destination Buchara, 183.
105. Wenig, Nazi Inferno, 215, 258.
108. See Gutman, “Jews in General Anders’ Army,” 284–85; and also table 4 in chapter 2 of this volume.
109. Terlecki, “Jewish Issue,” 166–68. One of the deserters, when the Anders army was stationed in Palestine, was future Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin. Some Jews chose not to desert and remained in Polish units that later fought with the Allies in Italy. After the war, as a reward for their service to the British cause, veterans of General Anders’s Polish corps were granted permission to settle in the United Kingdom rather than be repatriated to the now Communist-oriented “new” Poland. Kuba (an interviewee in Naomi Rosh White’s study) spent five postwar years in the United Kingdom, later migrating to Australia. Rosh White, From Darkness, 45–46.

111. Elton, *Destination Buchara*, 188–89.


116. Elton, *Destination Buchara*, 211. Also, according to David Kay, *Tough Kid* (35), because they were extremely “nationalistic” Russians avoided plundering any goods directed toward the military.


118. For example, Ajzenbud introduces a lengthy, literary description of the town of “Zirbulack” in Uzbekistan, with his protagonist “Michael” observing:

> He felt as though he had stepped back in time. . . . The streets were narrow and dusty between small scattered mud-houses. The air was filled with unfamiliar sounds of camels and mules, used for transporting all kinds of goods. The small, state-owned shops that surrounded the market-place were uninteresting and sold poor-quality rugs and household goods, but there were also shabby, privately-owned stalls that sold catic—a kind of yoghurt, tiny balls of butter and an abundance of delicious, exotic fruits which Michael had never seen before. There were honeydews and watermelon, cantaloupes, juicy grapes as long as your finger, figs, dates, pomegranates and many others. On the ground were bags of rice, nuts, and all kinds of vegetables which, having ripened in the hot sun of the region, tasted exceptionally sweet. In round, mud-ovens women baked lepioshkas, the Uzbek bread, and sold it on the spot. In another part of the market shashlik was cooked and Michael was surprised to see Uzbeks sitting on the ground around a big dish of plow—the traditional meal of rice, mutton and vegetables cooked in oil—and eating with their fingers.

> And further: “In time he grew accustomed to the people and their ways, even to the women who walked through the streets with their faces hidden by parangas, black muslin veils. Young women wore long, colourful dresses and delicately embroidered tubiteykas on their thick
black hair that was braided into one single, heavy plait or into many tiny ones.” Ajzenbud, *Commissar*, 56–57.


120. Ajzenbud, *Commissar*, 57.


124. Ibid., 194.


127. Ibid., 202–3.


131. Historian Meir Korzen notes in “Problems Arising” (129) that many of the ethnic Poles now in the USSR were “former colonists, police constables, officials and well-to-do estate-holders” who had been forced off their property when the Soviet army took over eastern Poland in 1939. And, he suggests: “They had always been chauvinistic, and now their national pride had been hurt by the sudden and unexpected downfall of Poland, and embittered by personal misfortune they readily pointed to the Jewish scapegoat, claiming indignantly that ‘the Jews had welcomed the Red Army’ etc. Not even the bitter common fate that they shared with the Jewish refugees who, like them, had been made homeless and taken to remote forced labour camps and work villages, could abate their Jew-hatred.”


134. Ibid., 70–71.

135. For a detailed discussion of this new Polish army, see Klemens Nussbaum, “Jews in the Kościuszko Division and First Polish Army,” in Davies and Polonsky, *Jews in Eastern Poland*, 183–213.

136. Ibid., 194–208. Kaganovitch, in “Stalin’s Great Power Politics” (62), contends that Stalin encouraged the enlistment of Polish Jews into the Soviet-controlled Polish army “in part to boost the Soviet position in the imminent diplomatic struggle for Eastern Poland.” But Edele and Warlik, in chapter 2 (table 6) of this volume, note also that other sources point to a considerably lower Jewish participation in the Berling army.
140. Elton, *Destination Buchara*, 238. This Polish committee, sanctioned by Stalin in July 1944, subsequently became the new government of Poland. See Kaganovitch, “Stalin’s Great Power Politics,” 66.
141. Elton, *Destination Buchara*, 238.
142. Ibid., 245.
147. Ibid., 380–83.
148. See Kaganovitch, “Stalin’s Great Power Politics,” 75–83. For the broader context of the vicissitudes in popular attitudes and party policies toward both Soviet Jews and refugee Jewish populations through the wartime and postwar years, see chapter 3, by Sheila Fitzpatrick, in this volume.
152. Cooper, *Stakhanovites and Others*, 141–43.
154. Elton, *Destination Buchara*, 258. He also notes that there were “some Polish citizens who refused repatriation and preferred to stay behind” in the USSR, for either family or ideological reasons. Some who remained subsequently took advantage of a further opportunity provided by the Soviets to return to Poland in the late 1950s.
156. Cooper, *Stakhanovites and Others*, 146.
162. Ibid., 73–75.
163. Ibid., 111–34.
164. Turkow Kaminska, *Mink Coats and Barbed Wire*, 39ff. The marriage did not survive the prison terms, and after Turkow Kaminska returned
to Poland, Rosner, who was released in 1954, remained in the Soviet Union as a musician, bandleader, and occasional film actor, finally returning to his native Germany in 1973. Turkow Kaminska and her mother, Ida Kaminska, eventually emigrated from Poland and settled in the United States.

172. Jockusch and Lewinsky, “Paradise Lost?,” 374. This figure is supported by Kaganovitch, who calculated that “during the first two stages of the repatriation in 1944–6 slightly more than 202,000 Jewish former citizens of Poland officially left the USSR, including those who cleared border control with false documents, children from orphanages (who had been registered separately), and Polish Jews who had served in the Red Army. Thousands remained in the USSR, even after several later repatriations.” Kaganovitch, “Stalin’s Great Power Politics,” 75.
173. See table 6 in chapter 2 of this volume.
176. Ibid., 376.
183. Ibid., 26–27. Around 90,000 Jews remained in Poland in 1947, but most of these also eventually departed during three subsequent emigration waves: one in 1949–51, the next in the mid-1950s, and the last in 1968–69.

185. On this theme, see also chapter 7, by Eliyana R. Adler, in this volume.

186. Quoted in Jockusch and Lewinsky, “Paradise Lost?,” 380. The authors note that Jews repatriated from the USSR made up two-thirds of the entire Jewish DP population and 85 percent of the Polish Jews among the DPs.


188. As Naomi Rosh White observed in relation to the survivors she interviewed in her 1980s Melbourne study: “The deepest feelings of grief and anger are triggered by the interviewees’ recollections of abruptly severed family contacts, of partings which turned out to be final. The most painful recollections for the interviewees who had been separated from their families were not those dealing with the deprivations that they had experienced themselves, but those that had been experienced by their families.” Rosh White, From Darkness, 217.


190. Wenig, Nazi Inferno, 319.

191. Wajnryb, Silence, 134.

192. Quoted in Jockusch and Lewinsky, “Paradise Lost?,” 381.


195. Ibid., 377–86. The origins and early development of this “hierarchy,” which the authors suggest was already in place in the European DP camps, are explored in the article in considerable detail.

196. Bruell, Autumn in Springtime, 90.

197. Rosenbloom and Rosenbloom, Miracles Do Happen, viii. For more examples of similar views drawn from testimonies lodged in the USC Shoah Foundation video archives, see chapters 6 and 7 of this volume


199. However, despite this incorporation, it is significant that were those Polish Jews who had been in the Soviet Union to be attributed, or to feel themselves “deserving” of, “full” survivor status, statistically they should constitute the majority of testimonies. Yet, of the total collected in Australia, and now lodged in each of these two video
archives, those who spent the wartime years in the Soviet Union still represent only around 15 percent of the Poland-born Jews who have volunteered “survivor” testimonies.