Shelter from the Holocaust

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Saved by Stalin?

Trajectories and Numbers of Polish Jews in the Soviet Second World War

MARK EDELE AND WANDA WARLIK

“TO THE SOVIET PARADISE”

Adam Broner, resident of Lodz, was fourteen years old when the Germans attacked Poland on 1 September 1939. Two and a half weeks later, on 17 September, the Red Army invaded Poland from the east, and Polish territory was subsequently divided between the two aggressors in accordance with a secret protocol of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 23 August 1939. Following elections held in October 1939, eastern Poland was incorporated into the Soviet Union as Western Ukraine and Western Belarus. This division of his country gave Broner a choice of occupier. As his hometown had fallen to the Germans, he decided,
together with his older brother, to flee to the Soviets (see map 5). In November, like many others, they traveled by train to Warsaw, dodging SS beatings when changing trains on the way. From Warsaw, they crossed the Vistula River by horse and cart to board another train on the eastern side. At the last stop before the border, they were ordered off the train. Jews were separated from other Poles, and the Germans showed the former which road to take to the border. They also fleeced the refugees of their belongings at checkpoints along the way, and some particularly brutal representatives of the Herrenvolk picked out victims for their amusement, beating them bloody. Again the Broner brothers were lucky. They avoided physical assault: “The last German soldier I met at the 1939 Soviet-German border before entering the so-called neutral zone was very polite and even kind. He didn’t ask for our knapsacks; he didn’t beat us. He only asked the ironic question ‘So you are going to the Soviet paradise?’ and offered me a cigarette.”

The Broner brothers were only two of between 150,000 and 300,000 Polish citizens of Jewish faith or heritage who fled German-occupied territory between September 1939 and June 1941 (table 1). While they could not have known the extent of the apocalypse about to descend on Polish Jews, they were aware that calamity awaited and hoped that the Soviet Union would offer a more livable alternative. As it turned out, they were right. While many would perish in the Soviet Union during the war, their survival chances were much higher than had they stayed. Including several other contingents of Polish Jews, at least 157,000 and no more than 375,000 were inadvertently saved from the Holocaust by Stalin’s Soviet Union, which provided a harsh but mostly livable alternative to genocide.

Once on Soviet territory—the border crossing was its own epic, as the Soviets did not at first want to let them across, stranding them in no-man’s-land—the Broners joined the approximately 1.3 million Polish Jews who had become Stalin’s subjects after their home region had been occupied by the Red Army (table 1). Another group of Polish Jews had originally tried to escape the Nazis without having to submit to the Soviets: not everybody was as optimistic about life in Soviet paradise as the Broner boys. The Zionist activist Zorach Warhaftig and his family left Warsaw on the night of Thursday, 7 September 1939 (see map 6). They traveled on foot, by horse-drawn cart, and—after beast and wheels had
Map 5. Trajectory of Adam Broner, 1939–1944

- November 1939. Flight and voluntary labor contracts.
- Spring 1942. Red Army volunteer assigned to labor battalion.
- November 1943. Escapes Red Army to join Polish army (Berling).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Lower estimate (thousands)</th>
<th>Higher estimate (thousands)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A  Polish Jews taken over by Soviet annexation</td>
<td>1,300.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B  Polish Jews fleeing to Soviet territory after German occupation</td>
<td>150.0</td>
<td>300.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C  Of B returning to German-held territory</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D  Hence: total number of Polish Jews who became Soviet subjects on formerly Polish territories incorporated into Soviet Union (D = A + B − C)</td>
<td>1,448.4</td>
<td>1,598.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

been commandeered by a Polish army unit—on foot again. At first their goal was Brest Litovsk, some 200 kilometers to the east, but they soon changed direction, traveling south instead, trying to reach the Romanian border some 700 kilometers away. They arrived at the outskirts of Lutsk after ten days, only to hear the news—“We could not believe our ears”—of the Red Army’s invasion from the east. They journeyed on to Lvov and there discovered that the Romanian border was sealed. Unstoppable, the Warhaftigs turned toward Vilna, some 750 kilometers to the north and about to be handed over by the Soviets to still independent Lithuania. This time they traveled for two days “on a packed train that meandered and stopped all over the place” before reaching their destination.7

Lithuania seemed like a peaceful island in a sea of dictatorship, and quite a few Polish Jews tried to reach this haven—about 15,000 succeeded, according to Warhaftig. Vilna alone registered 10,370 refugees in late 1939, in the vast majority (75 percent) men, while only 20 percent were women and slightly above 5 percent children. By February 1940, the number of Jewish refugees in the Vilna area had grown to 14,000.8

In what follows, we sketch the story of Adam Broner’s and Zorach Warhaftig’s wartime survival as part of a very complicated larger history: the trajectory of Polish Jews whose lives were saved by their removal from Hitler’s to Stalin’s sphere of influence. Our attempt at outlining their collective path builds on several important essays and utilizes a growing memoir literature, relatively recently published Soviet archival records, and newly available archival sources from Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and the United Kingdom.9 We combine individual life stories with estimating the relative size of the groups involved, a reconstruction summarized in a series of tables.10

Both parts of our methodology have their problems. As for the individual stories, we are dealing mostly with later reconstructions, subject to the well-known problems of memoir literature and oral history.11 More importantly, our group of survivors is predominantly male and mostly of the generation old enough to fight in the war. This selection bias is partially a reflection of who has published memoirs to date, but it also reflects a historical reality: that those who survived in the Soviet Union were more often than not young men. The quantitative aspect of our chapter is similarly problematic. Not only is the group so complex and the trajectories in question so complicated that good quantification is
Map 6. Trajectory of Zorach Warhaftig, June 1939–October 1940
SAVED BY STALIN?

hard; the numbers are also subject to dispute and highly laden with political meaning for many observers. We deal with these problems in three ways. First, we privilege sources most likely to have recorded more or less correct numbers over those more subject to inflation: we take the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) statistics of deportees as more reliable than the estimates by the exile Polish government in far-away London; likewise, we trust the numbers of the Jewish-Polish repatriation commission, whose representatives counted people as they came off the repatriation trains after the war, more than the statistics of how many were registered in the localities, which were prone to double and triple counting, as the same person was registered first in one, then in a second, and finally a third locality. Second, we provide both minimum and maximum numbers, in order to give a sense of the possible deviations between different estimates, which are often massive. Third, we subject these estimates to a diachronic analysis: in the end, even ballpark figures need to add up over time. It cannot be that more people repatriated after the war than had supposedly left at its outset, unless one of the two numbers is wrong.

The diachronic analysis of the numbers takes place in a series of six tables, each accompanied by explanatory notes and a discussion of sources. It is possible to read these tables as a separate text, if what interests is not so much the overall story we are trying to tell but the numbers that underwrite our narrative. For readers less interested in statistics, the tables can be skipped altogether, as our review of this history mentions in summary their conclusions.

The main text, meanwhile, proceeds chronologically. We begin with the fate of those Polish Jews who became Soviet subjects during the early phase of the war in Europe, when the Soviet Union made common cause with Hitler’s Germany. This period, from September 1939 to June 1941, is covered in the second section below. The third section then covers the first half year of the German-Soviet war, from 22 June 1941 to the end of the year, when evacuation and flight were the order of the day for those Polish Jews who would manage to survive in the long run. The fourth section then covers the further paths these survivors took through the rest of the Soviet Second World War, while the fifth section deals with postwar repatriation to Poland and subsequent emigration elsewhere. Overall, we argue that the fate of these survivors of genocide, flight, deportation, and
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war shows in a nutshell not only the far-reaching displacements that characterized the Soviet war experience but also the very moral and political ambiguity of the Soviet Second World War. On a more empirical level, we stress that both those who initially escaped east and those who returned after the war were, in their majority, men. Our diachronic analysis of the available statistics, finally, does not lead to undisputed facts, but demonstrates that a reasonable range can be established. While we will never have hard numbers, as other contributors to this volume rightly point out, some figures are more likely than others and some clearly wrong.

TRANSIT, ARREST, DEPORTATION, LABOR CONTRACTS, MOBILIZATION

Altogether, then, there were three groups of Polish Jews in the Soviet sphere of influence in the period between the Nazi attack on Poland and the subsequent assault on the Soviet Union: 1.3 million acquired with Polish territory in 1939, 150,000–300,000 refugees of 1939–41, plus an estimated 15,000 who had fled to Lithuania and who eventually became subject to Stalin’s rule once the Soviets had taken over the Baltic states in 1940. Their number was reduced to about 9,000 through emigration by the time the Germans attacked on 22 June 1941. A significant minority would survive the Holocaust because they either fled or were removed from the territory later occupied by the Germans. There were six main paths of this escape to or through the Soviet Union: transit across Soviet territory to countries beyond the Soviet sphere of influence, arrest and incarceration in a prison or labor camp, exile or deportation to special settlements, voluntary travel to work in the hinterland, mobilization into the Red Army, and further flight or evacuation when the Germans attacked.

Transit was possible through and out of the Soviet Union only to those who were seen by the Soviet authorities as stateless refugees rather than as newly acquired citizens. Without too much consistency, the Soviets categorized those who had reached Lithuania as stateless, after the Soviets had annexed the country in the summer of 1940, while those in the territories taken over from Poland in September 1939 were not given that status. This categorization meant that both before and for the first half year after the Soviet annexation, Polish Jews in Lithuania could try to arrange
leaving Eastern Europe. Some of the well-connected and well-off managed to emigrate to the United States, while Palestine was the default destination for the majority. They traveled by plane, boat, and train, circumnavigating the European continent to avoid setting foot on German-occupied territory. The journey to Palestine was made possible by Soviet exit documents and transit visas obtained from Scandinavia, the United

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Lower estimate (thousands)</th>
<th>Higher estimate (thousands)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A  Total removed by coercive means from Ukraine and Belarus</td>
<td>101.6</td>
<td>115.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B  Volunteered to work in Soviet hinterland</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>53.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C  Fleed via Lithuania through Soviet Union to Japan, Turkey, or Iran</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D  Evacuated from western borderlands</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>210.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E  Drafted into Red Army (including labor battalions) after German attack in 1941 and marched east</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F  Hence saved from Holocaust by removal to Soviet Union (ca. early 1942)</td>
<td>146.1</td>
<td>384.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Rows A and B: See table 3. Row C: See the discussion of the available estimates in Mark Edele, “Second World War as a History of Displacement: The Soviet Case,” *History Australia* 12, no. 2 (2015): 35n67; and Levin, *Lesser of Two Evils*, 207–8. Row D: Piotr Żaroń, *Ludność Polska w Związku Radzieckim w czasie II wojny światowej* (Warsaw: PAN, 1990), 131. Żaroń gives the number of Polish citizens who fled or were evacuated in the summer of 1941 as 250,000, among them 40,000 Polish children on holiday camp. Among the remainder, the Jewish share must have been fairly high, implying that we can take 210,000 as an upper limit for Polish Jews who evacuated in the summer of 1941.

Note: The lower estimate in row F is clearly too low: it does not account for any evacuations from the borderlands and removal by way of conscription into the Red Army. The higher estimate, meanwhile, is most likely much too high. First, there is double and triple counting: people could volunteer to work and then be evacuated once their new places of employment were overrun by the Wehrmacht. Second, not all who were arrested actually left the borderlands; only those who had already been sentenced to imprisonment were sent to the Gulag, and those who were evacuated successfully when the Germans arrived were actually saved. Those still in prisons in June 1941 were often either overrun by the Germans or shot instead of or while being evacuated. The table also does not account for increased mortality among all these groups. Third, not all Polish adult evacuees (higher estimate in row D) were Jewish.
Kingdom, France, Turkey, and Syria. The largest share of those who succeeded in moving on before the Germans turned on their Soviet ally, however, were those who, equipped with Soviet exit documents and Japanese transit visas, traveled over 7,000 kilometers across the Soviet Union to Vladivostok to board ships to Japan. The Warhaftigs were among the 2,718 who arrived there by August 1941. Overall, about 4,500–6,000 escaped via the various routes from Lithuania (table 2). Thus the Soviet exit visas, which made the routes through Riga, Tallinn, Vladivostok, and Odessa possible, saved between 30 percent and 40 percent of the Jewish-Polish refugees who had reached Lithuania in the wake of the German attack on Poland.

Others were rescued more or less by accident: while all of these escape routes were planned and sometimes put into practice, arrests and deportations began after the Soviet takeover of Lithuania. Zionists, Bundists, and other “politicals” were construed as “counterrevolutionaries.” “Invited” to have a friendly chat with the authorities, they found themselves in the clutches of Stalin’s police, as did Menachem Begin, the later prime minister of Israel. We do not have data for the Baltic states, but in Western Belarus and Western Ukraine, a total of 23,590 Jews were arrested in 1939 through 1941 (table 3).

While those arrested were eventually sentenced for more or less imaginary “counterrevolutionary crimes,” others were rounded up as a security measure and deported preventatively. They were seen as potential rather than actual enemies of Soviet power. Samuil Rozenberg was one of these victims of the arbitrary use of police powers. Born in 1923 in a small town near Pinsk in the Polesie region of eastern Poland, he was the son of an entrepreneur running a fish farm supplying the market of western Poland. With the arrival of the Red Army in 1939, his family lost the business to nationalization and Rozenberg’s father became a brigade leader in a newly formed fishing cooperative. The boy—who had just finished seventh grade—was drafted into a trade school attached to the railway system, becoming one of the victims of this particular Soviet form of youth indentured labor. Rather than learning a trade, he was forced into the heavy work of changing tracks from the European to the Soviet gauge. They worked seven days a week without pay. The food was tolerable, he told his interviewer many decades later, and they did get clothes (uniforms) and housing (barracks), but he still experienced this “school”
### Table 3: Polish Jews removed from western borderlands and number remaining (1941)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A 1939–41</td>
<td>Total number of Polish Jews who became Soviet subjects on formerly Polish territories incorporated into Soviet Union (from table 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B 1940–41</td>
<td>Jews arrested in Western Ukraine and Western Belarus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 1940–41</td>
<td>Polish Jews deported to Soviet hinterland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D 1940–41</td>
<td>Polish Jews conscripted into Red Army and removed east</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E 1940–41</td>
<td>Hence: total removed by coercive means from Western Ukraine and Western Belarus (E = B + C + D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 1941</td>
<td>Polish Jews who volunteered to work in Soviet hinterland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G 1941</td>
<td>Hence: Polish Jews still in Western Ukraine/Belarus by time of German attack (F = A – E – F)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lower estimate</th>
<th>Higher estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(thousands)</td>
<td>(thousands)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 1,448.4</td>
<td>1,598.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B 23.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 68.0</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D 10.0</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E 101.6</td>
<td>115.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 40.0</td>
<td>53.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G 1,306.8</td>
<td>1,429.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** Row A: See table 1. Row B: O. A. Gorlanov and A. B. Roginskii, “Ob arestakh v zapadnykh oblastiakh Belorussii i Ukrainy v 1939–1941 gg.,” in *Istoricheskie sborniki ‘Memoriala’: Vypusk 1, Repressii protiv poliakov i pol’skikh grazhdan* (Moscow: Zven’ia, 1997), 89. Row C: Data on the number of Jews are available only for the third deportation wave (65,000–68,000), see Stanislaw Ciesielski, Grzegorz Hryciuk, and Aleksander Srebrakowski, *Masowe deportacje ludności w Związku Radzieckim* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2003), 230–33; and for part of the second wave (data from Ukraine, April 1940: 1,311 Jews, making up 4 percent of the total), see “Tablitsa o vyselennykh kontingentov antisovetskogo elementa iz zapadnykh oblastei USSR, po natsional’nomu sostavu,” Main State Archive of the Security Services of Ukraine (GDA SBU), f. 16, op. 1, d. 395, l. 207. This latter number should be a subset of our estimate of 3,000 as family members of the 700–900 Jewish officers killed in the Katyn mass executions. See Frank Fox, “Jewish Victims of the Katyn Massacres,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 23, no. 1 (1993): 52. Row D: There are no data for the number of Jews in the conscription of former Polish citizens (between 100,000 and 210,000 in 1940–41, before the German attack). The numbers here assume that the share of Jews was about equal to their share in the population (10 percent). The source for the higher figure is the Documentation Bureau of the Second (Anders) Polish Army, which for political reasons was inclined to overestimate the suffering of the Polish population at the hands of the Soviets. See Hoover Institute, Anders Collection, box 68, no. 62C, Bohdan Podolski, *Polska wschodnia 1939–1942*, 29. The source for the lower figure is Roman Buczek, “Działalność opiekuńcza Ambasady R.P. w ZSSR w latach 1941–1943,” (continued)
as a form of forced labor and as a repressive measure by the new government. Nevertheless, this experience was only the beginning. In the night of 20 June 1941—two days before the Germans attacked—the entire family was deported to Siberia as part of the “alien and bourgeois element” (see map 7).

Deportations engulfed many more people than arrests, though statistics have undergone drastic and controversial revision in recent years. The mass deportations of February, April, and June 1940 and June 1941 forcibly removed a minimum of 315,000 Polish citizens, including Jews, from the annexed territory of eastern Poland, that is, Soviet Western Ukraine, Western Belarus, and part of Lithuania. Each deportation targeted a particular group of Polish citizens regardless of ethnicity or religion: military and civilian colonists and foresters in the eastern borderlands, the families of arrestees and prisoners of war, refugees who had been rejected for repatriation by the Germans and refused to accept Soviet citizenship, and “alien elements” from the border areas of all territories incorporated into the Soviet Union.

Jews were present in each of the four mass deportations, though their numbers are difficult to ascertain. We know that the second deportation to Kazakhstan included the families of at least 700 Jewish officers who had been prisoners at Starobelsk, Kozelsk, and Ostashkov and were victims of the so-called Katyn massacres (see table 2). Most striking, however, is the composition of the third deportation group, of whom 85 percent, that is, between 64,000 and 68,000, were Jewish refugees who had refused Soviet citizenship and/or registered to return to German-occupied Poland. Some were deceived into believing they were returning

**TABLE 3: (continued)**


Note: The numbers in row G can only provide a general orientation. They exclude children born since 1939 but also deaths since the Soviet invasion of Poland. They also exclude those from row F who had already returned after encountering poor living conditions in the Soviet hinterland, and they assume that all in row B had been either already sentenced and sent east or evacuated in 1941. Both are not reasonable assumptions.
home, only to find themselves bundled into freight trains and transported east.\textsuperscript{22} Of the group, three-quarters were adults, more than half were male, and over 8,000 were highly qualified professionals and specialists, notably doctors. All were destined for a life of hard labor in remote forestry and mining “special settlements” scattered across northern European Russia and Siberia and controlled by the NKVD.\textsuperscript{23} Paradoxically, refugees from western Poland increased their chances of surviving the Holocaust by making a decision to register to return to German-occupied territory. Fortunately for almost all Jewish refugees who applied, the Germans rejected their repatriation, and as a consequence the Soviets forcibly
moved them to remote areas of the USSR, where the further east they went, the more shielded they were from the “Final Solution.” The Jewish applicants who were successful numbered 1,600 and returned to their certain death under the Germans (table 1).

The Rozenberg family was caught up in the fourth deportation. NKVD trucks rolled up at night. Officials told the family to pack what they could carry and get on the vehicles. Under escort they were driven to the town square. Early in the morning, a crowd gathered around. “Many were happy that ‘they throw the bourgeois out.’ They yelled insults at us. This was when my grandfather got up and shouted at the crowd: ‘There will come a time when you will envy us.’ It was as if he could see the future.”

The Rozenbergs—twenty-three people in total—ended up in the same cattle car in the echelon that would carry them east. They were warned that any attempt to get out of the car would be seen as flight. The perpetrator would be shot without warning. Then the train started to roll out of the station. It was the morning of 22 June 1941. Military operations had already begun further west. Pinsk would be bombed heavily later that day and occupied by 4 July. In May of the following year, the Jewish population was forced into a sealed district, the Pinsk ghetto. Few survived its brutal liquidation in October 1942. “This was a paradox,” mused Rozenberg. “It turned out that the exile to Siberia saved our lives. . . . Our echelon moved toward the east.”

Meanwhile, the Broner brothers had escaped deportation, because they had quickly thrown in their lot with the Soviets. Adam, the younger of the two, changed his age to sixteen in order to be eligible to work, and by the end of 1939 the two had signed up to work in Novosibirsk. They were among 40,000–53,000 refugees, many homeless and without any means of support, who, hoping to improve their lot, signed labor contracts (table 2). The travel from Bialystok took the volunteers twenty-one days in cattle cars, which, despite a stove in the middle, were covered with white frost on the inside. “The red-hot stove could not warm up the inside of the car, except in its closest proximity. There were no toilets in the cars, and no water.” But, in contrast to most deportation trains, there were no fatalities either, and they were fed along the way. Broner’s description of their reception in Novosibirsk—“lavish”—is also very positive. The authorities made a point in treating the “liberated Belorussians” particularly
well, giving them preferential access to scarce goods. Their work contracts expired in the spring of 1941, and because the brothers had by then accepted Soviet citizenship, they were able to follow rumors of better supplies in Ivanovo-Voznesensk, where they experienced the outbreak of the war with Germany.²⁷

The fate of young, unattached men responsible only for themselves and able to make quick decisions contrasts with the more negative experiences of couples with children. Sara Broder’s family had also initially fled to Bialystok, and not unlike the Broner brothers, Broder’s father decided to move the family east.²⁸ He had been promised a job in his trade of shoemaking, a good wage, and a place for his family to live. On arrival at the train station at Homel, workers were greeted with the standard fare of a band playing, welcoming speeches, and a meal. However, the family’s accommodation was a small, unfurnished room, and there was no work of any kind for Broder’s father. No work meant no food, and in desperation they moved to a kolkhoz (collective farm), where for a short time both parents and their four children worked long hours in the fields in exchange for meager food rations. As Broder recounted, “We worked hard, from dawn to dusk, and we were always hungry.”²⁹ When they were told there was no more work on the kolkhoz and they were faced with the very real prospect of starvation, they risked incurring the wrath of the NKVD and returned to Bialystok.

Another trajectory that took Polish Jews eastward to relative safety was conscription. In the period before the German attack on the Soviet Union, conscription drives in autumn 1940 and spring 1941, enlisted between 10,000 and 21,000 Polish Jews (table 3), predominantly male (female nurses and doctors were also conscripted) and aged in their early twenties. Following rudimentary military training and obligatory political indoctrination, conscripts were transported in freight trains to numerous destinations throughout the Soviet Union. Some recruited in 1940 traveled as far north as Karelia and the White Sea, assigned to serve in war-torn Finland. The extreme cold, as well as the absence of daylight and the eerie effects of the aurora borealis, led to desperate attempts at reassignment and sometimes death by freezing. Others conscripted in 1941 found themselves in the Caucasus, where the main obstacle to survival was the raging typhus epidemic. With the German assault of June 1941, their situation changed dramatically. Now considered to be “suspect elements,” they
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were removed from active service and formed into NKVD-controlled work battalions, building military infrastructure and laboring in essential war industries. Though their living conditions deteriorated significantly, their chances of surviving increased with their removal from territories directly in the path of the German advance.\textsuperscript{30}

**EVACUATION AND FLIGHT**

On the eve of the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, then, several thousand Polish Jews had already left the Soviet Union (or were in the process of doing so) via Vladivostok to Japan, via Odessa to Turkey, or via the Baltic states to still free parts of Europe. But these were a tiny minority of Polish Jews who had initially escaped the Germans in 1939. The majority, who were under not German but Soviet power on 21 June 1941—1.4–1.6 million—found themselves still in the Soviet Union’s western borderlands. Conscription, deportation, and arrests had removed only a relatively small fraction out of the path of the Wehrmacht and Einsatzgruppen, and had they not perished on the way, they now lived in extremely dire circumstances in labor battalions, special settlements, or labor camps, but out of reach of the German genocidal machine. Others had left as labor contractors, but clearly the majority must have remained in the western borderlands, to be overrun by the Germans the next day (see table 3).

Like other Soviet subjects, Polish Jews had to decide after 22 June 1941 whether they should stay or try to escape further east. In theory, evacuation was not a voluntary affair but an organized relocation of essential functionaries and labor power by the state. State and party employees and their families as well as workers in enterprises dismantled and sent east received notices to assemble at such and such a time in such and such a place, from where they would be taken away from the frontline by train, car, or whatever other means of transport was available. Collective farmers were often simply told to herd their cattle east. In practice, time was short, the situation confused, and transport missing. Those who preferred to stay behind and wait for the Germans could usually do so without too much effort, even if they had been ordered to evacuate. Others could not find transport, and still others managed to attach themselves or their families to the evacuation without having the necessary papers. Self-directed flight and organized evacuation shaded into each other.\textsuperscript{31}
Decisions were painful and complex, taking into account family and individual need, access to transportation, assumptions about what the Germans were likely to do, information from propaganda sources, word of mouth, and historical memory of German behavior in the First World War. Many did try to leave, sometimes managing to get away. According to current estimates, between 1.2 and 1.6 million Soviet Jews did escape the grip of the Nazis through evacuation or flight. This number is nearly certainly an underestimate, as it does not, for example, include Jewish men who volunteered for the Red Army and were evacuated from the frontline in forced marches, to fight another day. It would also exclude those who managed to flee but never identified themselves to the authorities as refugees, integrating successfully into life in the hinterland or the army. Moreover, we do not know how many of these successful refugees were Polish Jews (as opposed to pre-1939 Soviet citizens of Jewish nationality), but 210,000 is a reasonable upper limit for this group (table 2).

Who successfully evacuated might be gleaned from a list of 1,039 Jewish evacuees in Tashkent, whose registration cards claimed that they came from a city called “Poland” (Pol’sha). This was an overwhelmingly young and male group: 58 percent were men, 38 percent in their twenties, and another 27 percent in their thirties. Not a single person in this sample had a registered age below six years. This might be because younger children were not registered. Equally likely, however, the gender and age imbalance reflected the brutality of the evacuation experience: young, unattached men were more likely to get away in the summer of 1941 than women with children. Consider the description of seventeen-year-old William Z. Good, who tried to escape from the Polish, then Lithuanian, and finally Soviet Vilna (Wilno, Vilnius):

I was going to run away from the Germans. I got together with another kid, we were good cyclists—we would run away. We had a family council. My mother and father decided that they would stay but they realized the gravity of the situation and if I was young, courageous and willing to run they gave me their blessings. . . . The night was terrible, there was lots of bombing. Monday we left heading east to Minsk into Belorussia. The Soviet troops were
retreating and the Lithuanians were shooting at their Soviet comrades. The Germans were bombing and machine-gunning the refugees—the casualties were incredible. As we were riding my friend was killed by the German machine-gun fire. The planes would go down low, the people would fall down and not move. . . . There were thousands and thousands of refugees—kids, cattle, women, all kinds of people—some of them got hit and killed, some not. I was one of those who survived and got to Minsk. But the German tactic . . . was not to go toward their objective directly but rather break through behind it. They were already east of Minsk. . . . There was nothing for me to do in Minsk—I couldn’t go ahead so I started to go back to Wilno. On the way the peasants robbed me, took away my bike, took away my belongings—left me barefoot with just my pants. It took me more than a week to get back home to Wilno.37

Women also often decided to stay behind to look after family, sometimes assuming, wrongly as it turned out, that the Germans were less likely to kill women and children than they were men of military age. For similar reasons, young men were often encouraged by their parents to make a run for it.38

FURTHER PATHS AFTER 22 JUNE 1941

With the storm that broke on 22 June 1941, our reconstruction of the overall size and paths of Polish-Jewish Holocaust escapees becomes increasingly hazy. We have not been able to reconstruct the size of the group who successfully evacuated or fled in the summer and fall of that year, but we can assume that this must have been a minority, at most 210,000. Together with those who had been conscripted, deported, or arrested and those who had already reached Japan, Turkey, or Iran, then, up to 385,000 Polish Jews might have escaped to or through the Soviet Union by the end of 1941 (tables 3 and 4). As we pick up their path further east, the fog of war gets thicker, obscuring our sense of scale. We can, however, continue to follow individual life stories and get occasional glimpses at the size of the groups involved.
### Table 4: Polish Jews on Soviet-controlled territory, late 1942

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Lower estimate (thousands)</th>
<th>Higher estimate (thousands)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A  Saved from Holocaust by removal to Soviet Union</td>
<td>146.1</td>
<td>384.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B  Left via Vladivostok to Japan, Turkey, or Iran</td>
<td>−6.0</td>
<td>−4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C  Left with Anders army to Iran</td>
<td>−7.0</td>
<td>−6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D  Hence should still be in Soviet Union by late 1942 (including those who died on Soviet soil) (D = sum A:C)</td>
<td>133.1</td>
<td>374.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Rows A and B: See table 3. Row C: The Polish Ministry of Defense lists the number of Jewish soldiers evacuated from the Soviet Union as 4,226 (Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, A.II.755/2) and the British Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration (MERRA) claimed to know, in September 1946, of 4,500 deserters in Palestine. It is clear that not all Jewish soldiers absconded and not all absconders were Jewish, so this number is an absolute lower limit for soldiers (British National Archives [BNA] AJ/43/16/314/56/2). The total of Jewish civilians is somewhat clearer. According to correspondence between the British Foreign Office (FO) and the Jewish Agency for Palestine’s London Office of January 1943, 1,235 had sailed from Persia for Palestine (BNA, FO 371/36690/W1262). Correspondence from the FO of December 1943 advised that the remaining 608 had arrived at Suez on route to Palestine (BNA, FO 371/36692/W17542). In addition, an unknown number of Jews were transported overland through Iraq to Palestine in a clandestine operation that involved Polish military trucks and which the British were alarmed to discover and took vigorous action to stop (BNA, FO 371/36690/W1017). Further, a few hundred Jews chose not to go to Palestine and instead sailed for East Africa as part of a contingent of 18,000 Polish evacuees who were temporarily settled in British African territories. The refugee camp at Tengeru in Tanganyika (now Tanzania), for example, accommodated 155 Jews (Julius Carlebach, The Jews of Nairobi, 1903–1962 [Nairobi: Nairobi Hebrew Congregation, 1962], 61). Thus the minimum figure is 4,226 soldiers + 1,235 civilians in first ship to Palestine + 608 civilians in second ship to Palestine = 6,069 total. The 7,000 is adding estimates for those who traveled overland clandestinely to Palestine, were shipped to Africa (more than 155), and died in Persia (56 in Tehran alone).

Note: The lower estimate is arrived at by taking the lower baseline in row A and subtracting the higher estimates for rows B and C. The higher estimate does the opposite, beginning with the higher number in row A and subtracting the lower estimates for rows B and C. Hence “lower” and “higher” estimates refer only to rows A and D.
The attack on the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany drastically altered the fate of the Polish Jews who had been forcibly removed to the Soviet Union—deported from the borderlands to special settlements in the far reaches of the Soviet Union, arrested and sent to prisons or labor camps, captured as prisoners of war, or conscripted into the Red Army and transferred to labor battalions. Virtually overnight, they found themselves to be not enemies but allies of the Soviet Union. With the signing of the Polish-Soviet agreement of 30 July 1941, diplomatic relations between the London-based Polish government and the Soviet Union had been restored, and the two parties agreed to provide each other with mutual assistance in the war against the now common enemy, Nazi Germany. In a codicil to the agreement, Stalin agreed to amnesty Polish citizens detained on Soviet territory either as prisoners of war or on “other sufficient grounds.”

Hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens were now “amnestied” and, at least in principle, released from prisons, labor camps, special settlements, and labor battalions.

“Suddenly, in the fall of 1941 they explained to us that we were free,” remembered Rozenberg. This announcement was an unexpected turn of events from a grim life since deportation. The Rozenbergs had survived the callous disregard of their guards during the transport east and arrived in a bedbug-infested camp in the Novosibirsk region, Siberia. All males sixteen years and older had to work as lumberjacks, fulfilling demanding norms to receive food rations. No longer guarded, they lived together with their families, and they were able to barter their “western clothes” for food from the local peasants—major differences between their position and those of labor camp inmates such as Begin. Now, both groups could leave and rent corners in the huts of locals, but they were forbidden to move to any of the major cities. At first, Rozenberg’s family was at a loss about what to do, but then his grandfather remembered a cousin in Tashkent—“We’ll go to him.” The authorities, eager to make space for evacuated Soviet citizens and refugees, put few obstacles in their path, and they traveled in a train full of refugees to the south. Indeed, large numbers of freed Poles streamed southward to reach warmer climes, to gain access to welfare assistance from the Polish embassy based in Kuibyshev (present-day Samara in Russia) over a thousand kilometers southeast of Moscow, or, like the Rozenbergs, to connect with family in established Jewish communities.
A further path was now open to people such as Begin and Rozenberg—to join the Polish army, which, under the terms of the Polish-Soviet agreement, was being formed in the Soviet Union. Recently released prisoner of war General Władysław Anders was appointed its commander, and recruitment centers were set up near Kuibyshev and later near Tashkent (Uzbekistan). People flooded to join, men as combatants, women as part of the Women’s Auxiliary Service, and boys and girls aged fourteen years and older as cadets. Begin was, after his release from the Gulag, among a very small minority of Jews who managed to enlist and be evacuated via Iran to Palestine in 1942. Out of a total of about 113,000 evacuees, approximately 6,000–7,000 were Jewish soldiers and civilians (see table 4).\textsuperscript{43}

**APPENDIX NUMBER OF POLISH JEWS IN THE SOVIET UNION, 1942–1943**

By the middle of the war, then, in late 1942 and early 1943, some of the Polish Jews who had been rescued from the Holocaust by removal to the Soviet Union had already left Stalin’s inhospitable lands. Others had died—we do not know how many—but the majority survived. Our reconstruction thus far has estimated the number of survivors by late 1942 or early 1943 as between 133,000 and 374,000. This range is huge. Which numbers are the more likely?

Table 5 compares our reconstruction in tables 1–4 with estimates made at the time of the number of Polish Jews alive on Soviet-controlled territory by the middle of the war. It confirms what we already knew: that 133,000 is nearly certainly too low. Neither the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem nor the Polish government-in-exile thought such a low number likely. The former agency, far removed as it was, produced a tally generally within the ballpark of our lower estimate, but still 35 percent higher. The Polish exile government, meanwhile, came up with a number that very closely tracks our higher estimate. By contrast with the Jewish Agency, the Poles had boots on Soviet ground and had registered Poland’s former citizens until relations with the Soviets deteriorated in the wake of the Katyn affair.\textsuperscript{44} At the same time, however, Poland was for political reasons prone to overestimate the number of its former citizens alive on Soviet territory. Table 5, thus, only confirms that the higher and lower
Table 5: Comparison of reconstruction (tables 1–4) with independent sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Lower estimate (thousands)</th>
<th>Higher estimate (thousands)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A  Dead or alive on Soviet-controlled territory,</td>
<td>133.1</td>
<td>374.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ca. 1943, according to reconstruction in tables 1–4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B  Alive on Soviet-controlled territory</td>
<td>179.0</td>
<td>375.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>according to other sources, 1943</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C  Discrepancy (C = A – B)</td>
<td>−45.9</td>
<td>−0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D  C as share of A (%)</td>
<td>−34.5</td>
<td>−0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Row A: See table 4. Row B, lower estimate: A report by the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem of June 1943 (“Polish-Jewish Refugees in the USSR”) estimated that “260,000 to 300,000 [Poles] are at liberty in Russia, 40% of these are Jews. 150,000 are in labor camps and prison camps, of which 50% are Jews” (Palestine Censorship, J/3261/43, National Archives, United Kingdom, FO 181/977/13 [consulted in USHMM, RG-59.064: Selected Records from the Foreign Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Embassy and Consulate in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (formerly Russian Empire), General Correspondence, 1942–1946]). According to this estimate, by the middle of the war there were between 179,000 and 195,000 Polish Jews alive in the Soviet Union. Soviet documents support the Jewish Agency numbers for Poles (former deportees and arrestees) at liberty, that is, 257,660 as of 1 December 1943. However, they also indicate that all but 344 of the 120,962 Poles in prisons and labor camps were released under the amnesty of August 1942. The Jewish Agency figure of 150,000 in prison and labor camps in June 1943 is therefore open to question. Based on Soviet figures, we can conclude that there were 103,064 former Jewish deportees and prisoners in the Soviet Union (N. F. Bugaj, “Specjalna teczka Stalina: Deportacja i reemigracja Polaków,” in Zeszyty historyczne, no. 107 [1994]: 111). If we add to 103,064 at least 10,000 conscripts and 40,000 voluntary laborers (table 2), we reach a figure of 153,064 Polish Jews in the Soviet Union at the end of 1943.

Row B, higher estimate: According to one source, at the time the Berling army was formed in 1943, there were “690,000 to 750,000 Poles” in the Soviet Union, “of whom 40–50 per cent were Jews” (Klemens Nussbaum, “Jews in the Kościuszko Division and First Polish Army,” in Davies and Polonsky, Jews in Eastern Poland, 187). Accordingly, there would have been between 276,000 and 375,000 Polish Jews at the time, significantly higher than our above estimate. The source is a 1974 Polish monograph, published at a time when access to Soviet archives was unavailable. Rather than NKVD records, it relies on the estimates of the Polish government-in-exile, which routinely overestimated the numbers for the deportations as being between 880,000 and 1.2 million (Krystyna Kersten, Repatriacja ludności polskiej po II wojnie światowej [Warsaw: PAN, 1974], 62).
estimates are both historically reasonable but also highly problematic signposts for a quantification.

A second test of our higher and lower numbers puts them in the context of postwar repatriation numbers to Poland (table 6). It again shows that the lower estimate is clearly too low—otherwise nobody would have died on Soviet territory or stayed there after the war. Indeed, as row G in table 6 shows, the lower estimate would imply that more Polish Jews returned after the war than had been on Soviet territory by early 1943—clearly an impossibility. Nevertheless, the higher estimate also has its problems. It would imply that over 200,000 Polish Jews remained in the Soviet Union after the end of repatriation, a hypothesis not supported by Soviet postwar census data. Rather than an increase in the Jewish population of the Soviet Union, it shows a decline compared to the 1939 figure. Thus both tables 5 and 6 imply that the higher and lower estimates can be seen as the limits to where the numbers might reasonably have been. Neither of them is likely to be correct, but we can assume that the true number was somewhere between these extremes.

RETURN WITH THE RED ARMY

Some of the Polish Jews who remained after the evacuation to Iran of Anders’s troops and their families in 1942 would also eventually be mobilized into the Red Army. They were not treated much differently from the earlier conscripts or, indeed, the Broner brothers. As former citizens of Poland, they were subject to a rather unhealthy dose of suspicion and ended up in labor battalions rather than the regular army. Michael Goldberg, who had grown up in Pinsk and became a Soviet citizen by decree after the Soviet annexation, had a fairly chaotic start to the war. Recently mobilized into the armed forces, he managed, more or less of his own initiative, to get away from the advancing Germans. He ended up in a military camp in Orel, from where all those who had been born outside the Soviet Union (Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Germans) were shipped off to northeastern Russia, to join the labor army. After several weeks in cattle cars (without guards), his group arrived in early September in Izhevsk, where they were set to work in terrible conditions to rebuild the factories evacuated from the west. In April 1942, his labor battalion was disbanded, and its members were assigned to other workplaces. He remained in Izhevsk,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Lower estimate (thousands)</th>
<th>Higher estimate (thousands)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A  Alive on Soviet-controlled territory, ca. 1943</td>
<td>133.1</td>
<td>375.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B  Returned with Berling army to Poland, 1944</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C  Returned in organized echelons under postwar repatriation agreement</td>
<td>156.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D  Returned on their own steam</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E* Thus total return to Poland 1944–46 (E = B + C + D)</td>
<td>144.6</td>
<td>162.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F  E as share of A (%)</td>
<td>108.6</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G  Hence remaining on Soviet territory (including those who died there)</td>
<td>−11.5</td>
<td>212.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H  Polish Jews in DP camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy, 1947</td>
<td>180.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Row A = See table 5. Row B: In July 1944, of the 37,024 soldiers in the four main fighting divisions of the Berling army, 2,011 were Jews (Ignacy Blum, “O składzie socjalno-demograficznym Polskich sił zbrojnych w Związku Radzieckim, maj 1943–lipiec 1944 r.,” *Wojskowy przegląd historyczny*, no. 2 [1963]: 19). Other historians put the number of Jews much higher, claiming that Polish sources obscure their real tally. According to Klemens Nussbaum’s calculations, “about 12,000 Jews served in the Polish Army in the USSR and formed more than 12 per cent of the total number of soldiers” (“Jews in the Kościuszko Division,” 194), while Yosef Litvak gives the even higher estimate of “between 16,000 and 20,000” (“Polish-Jewish Refugees Repatriated from the Soviet Union to Poland at the End of the Second World War and Afterwards,” in Davies and Polonsky, *Jews in Eastern Poland*, 227–39). Row C: “Wykaz transportów repatriantów z ZSRR” (not before 31 July 1946), Centralny Komitet Żydów Polskich (Jewish Central Committee; CKŻP), Wydział Repatriacji z ZSRR, sygn. 303/v.60: 61 (consulted in USHMM, RG-15.104M, reel 3). Row D: 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): 69. Row H: Litvak, “Polish-Jewish Refugees Repatriated,” 238.

Note: DP = displaced person.

*In 1946, the Soviet embassy in Poland reported that according to the CKŻP, more than 150,000 Polish Jews had returned from the Soviet Union—a number that would be well within our estimates. The same source also noted that these were 90 percent of all the Jews living in the Soviet Union and subject to the repatriation agreement. (“Spravka posol'stva SSSR v Pol'she o sostoiании evreiskogo voprosa v strane,” 24 September 1946, reprinted in *Sovetskii faktor v Vostochnoi Evrope 1944–1953: Dokumenty*, 2 vols., ed. V. T. Volokitina [Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999], 1:340–45, 341). Other estimates put this total somewhat higher, at 202,000, a number including 54,900 who returned under earlier repatriation agreements. With a few exceptions, (continued)
working as a tailor. In early 1944, former Polish citizens were drafted into the Red Army again. Goldberg trained for two months in Siberia and then was sent to the front, fighting his way through Romania and Hungary into Austria.47

Broner was initially also sent to the labor army. Having volunteered in the spring of 1942, he found himself building airfields rather than fighting the Nazis, as he had hoped. He remained in this labor battalion until the summer of 1943, when he used a hospital stay to doctor his papers. He was released to a regular Red Army unit and soon learned that all Poles were to join the Berling army, a second Polish army being formed on Soviet territory with Soviet backing and inspired by the Union of Polish Patriots, a Polish Communist organization. He put up his hand, but his Jewishness threatened to throw him back into the labor army. “You are Abram Broner, son of Israel,” he was told. “You are Jewish and we won’t send you to the Polish Army.” Instead, Broner was sent to a Siberian coal mine, a potentially lethal work assignment. Not willing to submit to the Soviets’ demands that he become a uniformed slave, he deserted and made his own way to the Berling army, which he joined in late November 1943. He returned to Poland in its ranks.48

Broner was not the only Jew in the Berling army.49 Estimates for their number vary between 2,000 and 20,000 (table 6). Even the higher figure, however, implies that the Berling army was a relatively minor conduit for leaving the Soviet Union: Jews in its ranks constituted, at best, 15 percent of Polish Jews who had been on Soviet territory by the middle of the war (table 5). These numbers were not due to a lack of desire to join up.

### Table 6: (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6: (continued)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the latter were Holocaust survivors who had either managed to hide under German occupation or served in partisan units. Strictly speaking, then, they do not count toward the number who had been “saved” by the Soviet Union. Therefore, we would need to subtract the 54,900, which would leave us with 147,100 (Kaganovitch, “Stalin’s Great Power Politics,” 66–67, 75). Litvak gives an even higher number for Jewish repatriates, 157,420 for June 1946, and 230,700 by the end of the decade. Again, these would include some who are not part of our research here. Moreover, these numbers are based not on the arrival numbers in echelons but on registration in the localities. One would assume that these include people who had returned with the Berling army. Moreover, as he explains, there was a significant amount of double counting, and at least 10–15 percent would need to be deducted from this number (Litvak, “Polish-Jewish Refugees Repatriated,” 235).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>working as a tailor. In early 1944, former Polish citizens were drafted into the Red Army again. Goldberg trained for two months in Siberia and then was sent to the front, fighting his way through Romania and Hungary into Austria.47</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Rozenberg was one of many who experienced anti-Jewish barriers. He had ended up, together with his family, on a collective farm in Kazakhstan (the authorities had not let them into Tashkent), a hungry place filled by refugees and a life not much better from what they had experienced in Siberian exile. Never having received internal passports, they were stuck in this godforsaken place. Rozenberg and his grandfather learned how to make felt boots from a Polish refugee, a trade that allowed the family to survive. In the middle of 1943, all “non-Soviet Poles” were registered for the Berling army and sent to training close to Moscow—Rozenberg among them. However, the Jews were not enrolled but had to listen to the ravings of a Polish major: “We are a Polish army, not a Jewish army [voisko zhidovskoe]. . . . I won’t take you.” Hence Rozenberg returned to his village in Kazakhstan. He was called up again in June 1944, this time mobilized in the regular Red Army. “It seems that the total prohibition to draft ‘westerners’ from Ukraine and Belarus was lifted,” he speculated, “although refugees from Bessarabia were not taken into the field army until the very end of the war.”

REPATRIATION

On 6 July 1945, the Soviet Union and the provisional government of Poland signed an agreement on repatriation, which stipulated that ethnic Poles and Jews who had been Polish citizens as of 17 September 1939 were allowed to exit both Soviet citizenship and the Soviet Union itself and settle with their families in Poland. Rozenberg took advantage of this opportunity. Upon being drafted into the Red Army in 1944 and after short but harsh training, he was sent first to Estonia, then to Archangelsk, and on to Poland, where he finally saw action. His division fought its way to the river Oder and finished the war in Czechoslovakia before being sent to Hungary. A candidate member of the Communist Party, Rozenberg was a reader of Pravda, where he learned about the repatriation agreement. He applied, and his parents did so as well, departing before him from Uzbekistan. Still waiting for a reply from the commission, Rozenberg was transferred to a unit near Moscow, which was preparing for departure to the Far East. After intervention by his commander, he was transferred to a Moscow holding unit for
SAVED BY STALIN?

former Polish citizens awaiting decisions about repatriation. He finally got the green light, received his papers, and, with a small group of others, traveled to Poland.52

By mid-1946, 136,579 Jewish repatriates—between 9 percent and 10 percent of the 1.4–1.6 million who had initially become Soviet subjects in 1939–40—had arrived in Poland with organized echelons from all over the Soviet Union. About 6,000 made their way outside of the officially organized transports, whether with official recognition or without such authorization. Further adding those who returned with the Berling army would increase this number to between 145,000 and 163,000 Polish Jews who, having survived World War II in the Soviet Union, returned to Poland in 1945–46. Diachronically, these numbers make sense both in the context of the number who were later accounted for in displaced persons (DP) camps and in the context of our reconstruction of the range of possible numbers of those alive on Soviet territory in 1943 (table 6). Overall data on the composition of the Jewish repatriates are not available, but partial data show quite clearly that they were, like the original group that had left for the Soviet Union, overwhelmingly male: 57 percent of those Jews who returned to Lodz, 54 percent of Jewish arrivals in Wroclaw, and 55 percent of all repatriates (Poles and Jews).53

Many returnees quickly moved on elsewhere. Ninety-four percent of the well over a thousand repatriated who had arrived in Przemysl between 1 February and 1 August 1946 left the town during the same period.54 Often such movement crossed borders again. Rozenberg’s parents and his brothers were already in a German DP camp, ultimately attempting to reach Palestine. Rozenberg ditched his Red Army uniform and fled to Czechoslovakia, then on to Austria, where, in the winter of 1947, he crossed the border to Germany under adventurous circumstances. He reached the DP camp where his family was and with a group of illegal migrants crossed Italy en route to Palestine.55

Many others also left an inhospitable Poland, as a September 1946 conversation between the UK representative in Poland and the chief rabbi of Poland, made clear.56 Rabbi David Kahane claimed that “the Jews who had arrived from the Soviet Union had reached Poland without any possessions, found no prospect of gaining a livelihood in this country
and were therefore resolved to go west without any delay.” By September 1947, German, Austrian, and Italian DP camps counted 180,000 Jews who had left Poland. In their majority, they were repatriates from the Soviet Union, which explains why their number matches so closely the tally of those who had returned through repatriation.

Not everybody eligible to leave for Poland under the 6 July 1945 agreement actually did so. Goldberg, for one, while intimately involved in underground activities to find as many Polish Jews as possible and facilitate their transfer to Poland, stayed behind. He had fallen in love with a local, who refused to leave her family. They left the Soviet Union only in 1958. Some showed class consciousness: “My father was poor all his life in Poland, our family was always hungry and lacked everything,” claimed a twenty-three-year-old Polish Jew. “And I had no understanding of science. Only here, in the USSR, did I get work and an education. Now I will never return to Poland.” Others were denied exit permits because they could not produce documentation of their pre-1939 Polish citizenship, although Soviet bureaucrats showed remarkable flexibility in the kind of papers they would accept: the 1941 amnesty document was as admissible as a Polish passport, military booklet, Polish school reports, any kind of Polish ID card, or birth or marriage certificate. Nevertheless, there were cases where no official piece of paper of Polish providence could be produced. People who had been charged in the past with anti-Soviet activities were also denied return to Poland. Others had missed the deadline for applications and faced suddenly stubborn bureaucrats. By and large, however, those who decided to apply for repatriation were allowed to go home. Of 247,460 former Polish citizens (Jews and Poles) the Soviets had registered by 15 August 1946, 228,814 were cleared and had successfully left for Poland by 4 September. Only 3,471 were denied exit visas for various reasons.

CONCLUSION
The diachronic analysis of the statistics presented in this chapter, then, supports lower estimates for the number of Polish Jews saved by Stalin’s state than are sometimes advanced in the literature. The high estimate of 385,000 by early 1942 (table 3) and 375,000 by 1943 (table 5) would imply
that over 200,000 (or 52 percent) either died or remained in the Soviet Union at war’s end. This is not a reasonable assumption, given that such a conclusion is not supported either by Soviet archival statistics on the repatriation of former Polish citizens or by the 1959 Soviet census. In order to defend this number, therefore, we would have to assume a death rate among our group several times higher than even among Gulag inmates, to say nothing of the population at large. Such a hypothesis is hardly realistic. At the same time, the lowest estimates given in tables 1–6 also do not make any chronological sense: to defend this series, we would have to assume that nobody remained on Soviet soil, whether dead or alive, after repatriation was over (table 6). Hence the real number must have been above these low limits and below the maximum numbers listed in the tables.

The most conservative estimate, then, would be for, at the very least, 157,000 Jews from Poland who would not have survived the Nazi genocide had it not been for the existence of Stalin’s state: 6,000 escaped via the transit route to Vladivostok or to Odessa; 6,000–7,000 left with the Anders army in 1942 via Iran; and between 145,000 and 163,000 repatriated after the war. Including those who remained in the Soviet Union and taking into account higher estimates, their maximum number might have been as high as 375,000, but was more likely somewhere in between these two signposts. Defying critics of such “category creep,” we could call these 157,000–375,000 “Holocaust survivors.” Alternatively, we could call them “flight and deportation survivors.” Whatever words we use, it is clear that their story changes several historiographies of the Second World War, as discussed in the introduction to this volume.

The experience of these Jewish survivors was shot through with ambiguities. For one, there was the question of how they fit into the larger story of the Holocaust. But many of them also fit in poorly with the clear political lines of the Cold War. Few would become true believers in Stalin’s socialism. For that, they knew it too well. Too many people had died in the Soviet Union, as a direct or indirect result of the policies of Stalin’s regime. Nevertheless, few of the survivors would become Cold War warriors, either. “Regardless of the Soviet regime,” wrote Broner, “I had a debt to that land.”
Notes


2. Ibid., 16.

3. Henceforth, we will use *Polish Jews* as a shorthand for “(former) Polish citizens of Jewish faith or heritage,” although an argument for the term *Jewish Poles* could also be made. On the complex social identity of the group, see chapter 6, by John Goldlust, in this volume.


5. For the number, see the conclusion to this chapter. On the absence of a Soviet policy to save Jews, see chapter 3, by Sheila Fitzpatrick, in this volume.

6. For the wider context of the impact of the 1939–40 annexations on the Jewish population of the Soviet Union, see chapter 3 of this volume.


8. On Lithuania as a “gateway to the free world,” see also Levin, *Lesser of Two Evils*, 198–217. The numbers are cited from ibid., 200.


11. For more on the problems of memory and history with regard to this group, see chapter 7, by Eliyana R. Adler, in this volume.

12. See also table 6, note to row E, in this chapter.


22. For an elaborate NKVD plan for this deception, see Ivan Serov to Lavrenty P. Beria and Vsevolod Merkulov, Main State Archive of the Security Services of Ukraine (GDA SBU), fond (f.) 16, opis (op.) 1, delo (d.) 397, listy (ll.) 7–9.


24. Rozenberg, interview.
SAVED BY STALIN?


26. Rozenberg, interview.


29. Quoted in ibid., 192.


36. Data extracted from database “RG-75.002, Registration cards of Jewish refugees in Tashkent, Uzbekistan during WWII, Transliterated data.” The database, held at the USHMM, indexes RG-75.002M, registration cards of Jewish refugees in Tashkent during World War II, part of the Claims Conference International Holocaust Documentation Archive at the USHMM. This archive consists of documentation whose reproduction and/or acquisition was made possible with funding from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. Thanks to Megan Lewis, reference librarian at the USHMM, for pointing us to the database and extracting the raw data.

40. A report from Beria to Stalin of 1 May 1944 mentioned 389,382 “former Polish citizens” who were subject to the amnesty in September 1941. Nikolai L. Pobol’ and Pavel M. Polian, eds., Stalinskie deportatsii 1928–1953 (Moscow: Demokratiia, 2005), 178.
41. Rozenberg, interview.
42. Ibid.
44. On the Polish infrastructure inside the Soviet Union, see chapter 5 of this volume.
45. A new repatriation wave of former Polish citizens returned above 249,000 in 1955–59, but they were overwhelmingly (90 percent) ethnic Poles, many of whom had been arrested at war’s end or after. Robert Wyszyński, “Przesiedlenia ludności polskiej z ZSRR w latach 1920–1960,” Studia BAS, no. 2 (2013): 107–30.
47. Michael Goldberg, “Memories of a Generation,” USHMM, RG-10.120, pp. 35–76.
48. Broner, My War, 43–107; 54 (quotation).
50. Rozenberg, interview.
51. Text in both Polish and Russian available at Rzeczpospolita Polska. Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych. Internetowa baza traktatowa
We disregard the earlier 1944 agreement for population exchange, under which 23,651 Jews had registered for repatriation by 1 November 1945 (Central State Archive of Social Organizations of Ukraine [TsDAGO], f. 1, op. 23, d. 1466, l. 246). They were probably not from the group that interests us here, as the agreement covered Poles and Jews who had been Polish citizens before the Soviet invasion of 1939 and who were residents of Western Ukraine. For more on this repatriation wave, see GDA SBU, f. 16, op. 1, d. 548; and Sheila Fitzpatrick’s contribution to this volume (chapter 3), which also explores the reasons why Stalin allowed Polish Jews to leave. It is possible that some of our group sneaked through with this resettlement wave. Some of them were certainly back in time to try. Between July and 20 November 1944, a total of 21,946 former Polish citizens arrived in Ukraine from the eastern territories of the Soviet Union. According to an archival report, these were deported osadniki (Polish military settlers; we can probably assume there were few Jews among them), “evacuated from the frontline regions of Ukraine and Belarus in 1941.” The arrivals were by and large Poles and Jews, with a few Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians among them. It is unclear whether they were included in this first repatriation wave. See TsDAGO, f. 1, op. 23, d. 1466, l. 1–6.

52. Rozenberg, interview.
53. USHMM, RG-15.104M, reel 1, file 17 (Lodz); reel 2, file 23 (Wroclaw); reel 3, file 60 (all repatriates [Poles and Jews]). The total was 158,000; 87 percent of them were Jewish.
55. Rozenberg, interview.
56. On an inhospitable Poland, see Anna Holian, Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism: Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 36–37, 179–80. For more on this issue, see also chapters 1 and 6 of this volume.
59. Goldberg, “Memories of a Generation,” 76–95. On what the Soviets called the “Zionist underground” and its work to allow as many Jews as possible to leave the Soviet Union, see Sergei Savchenko, minister of State Security of Ukrainian SSR, report on the liquidation of Zionist underground (16 April 1946), GDA SBU, f. 16, op. 1, d. 568, l. 266–76. On other cases of decisions to stay because of family reasons, see Sergei Savchenko, minister of State Security of Ukrainian SSR, report on the end of repatriation to Poland, 23 August 1946, GDA SBU, f. 16, op. 1, d. 577, l. 365–71, 367.

60. Savchenko to Khrushchev, 6 November 1945, TsDAGO, f. 1, op. 23, d. 1466, l. 267.

61. For strongly Jewish lists of refused applicants from Kemerovo region, see Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. A-327, op. 1, d. 12, ll. 264–66; ll. 267–69 (consulted in USHMM, RG-22.027M).

62. For a list of the types of documents that were accepted, see GARF, f. A-327, op. 1, d. 12, ll. 103–7 (USHMM, RG-22.027M).

63. For a non-Jewish case, see A. Mozgolov, report on repatriation work in Ryazan region, 23 July 1946, GARF, f. A-327, op. 1, d. 12, l. 198 (USHMM, RG-22.027M).


65. A. Aleksandrov and D. Bychenko to A. N. Kosygin, report on the realization of the 6 July 1945 agreement on repatriation, 4 September 1946, GARF, f. A-327, op. 1, d. 12, ll. 33, 34 (USHMM, RG-22.027M). The numbers for Ukraine also show only a minority of refusals. See Savchenko, report on the end of repatriation to Poland, 23 August 1946, GDA SBU, f. 16, op. 1, d. 577, l. 365–71.

66. Death rates in camps and colonies varied between 2 percent and 27 percent per annum, with a spike in 1942–43. See Edwin Bacon, *The Gulag at War: Stalin's Forced Labour System in the Light of the Archives* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 149, table 8.2. The total population loss of the Soviet Union during the war with Germany, including both civilians and military deaths, was 14 percent. See Michael Ellman and Sergei Maksudov, “Soviet Deaths in the Great Patriotic War: A Note,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 4 (1994): 672, table 1. The death rate among the highly Jewish third deportation group (“refugees”) between their arrival and April 1941 was approximately 2.5 percent, about equal to the death rate in Gulag colonies (as opposed to camps) in 1941 (2.4 percent). It was nearly balanced by the
number of births in that group during the same period. See V. N. Zemskov, “Spetsposelentsy (po dokumentatsii NKVD-MVD SSSR),” *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, no. 11 (1990): 5, 8.

67. Our analysis thus implies somewhat lower numbers than those supported by Goldlust, in chapter 1 of this volume.


69. “Flight survivors” is Adler’s term. Adler, “Hrubieszów at the Crossroads,” 17. See also chapter 7 of this volume. On these terms, see also chapter 6 of this volume.

70. See chapters 5 and 7 as well as the introduction to this volume.

71. On the ways Jewishness structured the experience of the Soviet Union, see also chapter 6 of this volume.
