At the age of twenty-one, Jack Pomerantz fled from his hometown of Radzyn in eastern Poland to escape the advancing Nazi armies. Over the next five years, Pomerantz’s travels took him across the wide expanse of Soviet territory—from Western Belarus to Tashkent (Uzbekistan) to a labor camp in Siberia and then to Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan), and finally to Moscow and back to Poland, where he returned as a soldier with the Red Army.¹ Pomerantz’s journey may seem extraordinary, but it is, indeed, in some ways typical of the experiences of many Polish Jewish refugees who fled or were deported to the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1941 and managed to survive the Second World War and the Holocaust on the Soviet home front.

In a memoir written in the 1990s, Pomerantz tells of his encounter with a Soviet Jewish Red Army officer upon escaping from the Siberian camp; the officer helped Pomerantz gain passage to Alma-Ata and shared

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his food supplies with him. In the short time they spent together on the train, Pomerantz and the officer conversed in Yiddish, and while his new acquaintance was reticent to reveal much about himself, he was eager to hear about Pomerantz’s background and his experiences: “He wanted to know about me, where I was from, what I had done, my stories of running away. He asked questions, and I talked, grateful at last to have a sympathetic ear, someone who was concerned. We spent hours in the private luxury of the compartment. It felt like freedom.” The officer even invited Pomerantz to his home and offered him the option of staying with his family while Pomerantz awaited the chance to return home to Poland. Pomerantz declined the offer and continued on to Alma-Ata, but the meeting stayed with him and constituted an important episode in his wartime sojourn.

In some ways, this incident provides a glimpse into the nature of relations between Polish Jews and Soviet Jews on the Soviet home front during the Second World War. It illustrates how, in some cases, a shared Jewish identity brought Polish and Soviet Jews together and fostered a sense of trust between them. At the same time, it is clear that significant differences in status, background, and political allegiance meant that these friendships were more complex and fraught than one might imagine. The trust between Pomerantz and his unnamed interlocutor was by no means absolute—it is indicative here that the officer refused to divulge any information about himself to Pomerantz. Indeed, he was curious to hear about Pomerantz’s life but was tight-lipped about his own, probably for fear of being associated with someone of questionable background who had spent time in a labor camp.

Moreover, it is evident that both Soviet Jews and Polish Jews benefited from these interactions, but in distinct ways. In this particular case, Pomerantz’s encounter proved fortuitous in that he gained a powerful ally who helped him get to his destination. Yet Pomerantz’s description suggests that the officer, too, welcomed the interaction, though the benefits he may have received were intangible. The Soviet Jew seemed to relish the opportunity to speak Yiddish and to learn about Pomerantz and his life. Thus, as I argue in this chapter, interactions between Polish and Soviet Jews often proved to be mutually beneficial for both groups involved. At the same time, these interactions demonstrate the ways distinct interwar experiences, specifically the processes of Sovietization
among Jews in the USSR, created significant impediments to mutual understanding.

It is a truism that in the Soviet Union one’s well-being depended on having access and connections. More often than not, associations and friendships with those in privileged positions were more important than money. The period of the Second World War was no exception to this rule. In fact, on the Soviet home front, the importance of establishing and maintaining useful connections in order to gain access to scarce goods was heightened by the inadequacy of official distribution networks, which were focused on supplying the Red Army. Moreover, Polish Jews, who had lived in the territories annexed to the Soviet Union in 1939 or fled from the German-occupied zone to the Soviet zone between 1939 and 1941, were relatively unfamiliar with how the Soviet system functioned. A significant proportion of them had been deported by Soviet authorities between 1939 and 1941 and had been doubly impoverished through displacement and deportation. Once amnestied following the reestablishment of relations between the Soviet Union and the Polish government-in-exile in the summer of 1941, they found themselves in a precarious position. Most traveled southward to Soviet Central Asia in search of more hospitable living conditions, and there they encountered millions of Soviet citizens, a significant proportion of them of Jewish background, who had been evacuated or had fled in the wake of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Given this situation, it is not surprising that Polish Jews turned for help to Soviet Jews, who tended to be better-off.

As Pomerantz’s example indicates, upon liberation, Polish Jews were often at a loss in deciding where they should go and how they could get there. Born in Krakow, Rita Blattberg Blumstein and her family fled to Lwow in 1939; from there, they were deported to a special settlement in the Mari Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). Released in 1941, they decided to make their way south. On the way down the Volga River, they met a Russian Jewish couple who warned them that Blumstein’s mother, who had already endured a bout of malaria, would fare poorly in Central Asia and persuaded them to change course. Instead, their new friends suggested that they go to Kambarka, a small town in Udmurtia (in the Volga region between Perm and Kazan), and helped put them in touch with relatives who lived there. Though how the families met is
not clear, the Poles likely had an easier time reaching out to and trusting Soviet Jews with whom they had more in common.\textsuperscript{10} Thus this initial encounter illustrates the ways Soviet Jews could prove to be useful sources of information and practical advice.

Unlike Blumstein and her family, Yitzkhak Erlichson had a clear sense of where he was headed. Liberated from Kolyma and having experienced the difficulties of life in Soviet Central Asia, he was eager to make his way to Kuibyshev (present-day Samara) to seek aid from the representatives of the Polish government-in-exile in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{11} Working with very limited resources, he often had to sneak his way onto crowded trains. In Novosibirsk, he recounted seeing a Jew on the train platform, weighed down with multiple suitcases he could not possibly carry on his own. Erlichson offered to lend a hand and thus secured passage onto the train and an additional 400 rubles from the Soviet Jewish evacuee, who was relieved and grateful that Erlichson had not taken the opportunity to steal his bags.\textsuperscript{12} Erlichson had clearly taken the chance to approach the man because he identified him as a Jew. The Soviet Jew, however, was hesitant to take him up on his offer, but with no other option took the risk. Such chance encounters suggest the ways initial trust and confidence in one another began to develop between Polish Jewish refugees and Soviet Jews.

Once evacuees and refugees reached what would become their temporary homes on the Soviet home front, they struggled to secure housing, employment, and the necessities of daily life. Yet again, Soviet Jews were often in a position to help the Poles set up their households. According to the recollections of Genia Kniazeva, her parents, evacuees from Dnepropetrovsk, rescued a Polish Jewish boy whom her father had spotted roaming the local market in Chimkent (southern Kazakhstan), attempting to steal food in order to survive. When they found out that he was all alone, they took him in, and Kniazeva’s father employed him in the tailoring workshop he had set up at a local factory to sew uniforms for the armed forces.\textsuperscript{13}

As this story suggests, some Soviet Jews felt that it was incumbent upon them to help out Polish Jewish refugees who were in dire straits. Samuel Honig and his father, refugees from Krakow who had been deported to the Mari ASSR, owed their survival in the USSR in large part to the aid they received from Soviet Jews. After their release, they traveled down
the Volga River to Astrakhan. Waiting in a bread line, Honig spotted a woman who reminded him of his mother, who had stayed behind in Poland, and was simply transfixed by the resemblance. Noticing the stranger’s gaze, the woman beckoned to him to come with her and asked him why he had been staring. Honig shared his biography with her; as he wrote, “I was sure she was Jewish and I mentioned that I was Jewish, too.” The kind woman, Alina Axelrod, invited him home and fed him. It turned out that she and her husband were Jewish evacuees from Ukraine and her husband’s parents were from Lwow and had come to the Soviet Union after the First World War. The husband arranged employment for Honig and his father, uncle, and aunt at a fish processing plant where the director was an acquaintance of his. In this case, an imagined sense of kinship between Honig and the woman he spotted on the street was later reaffirmed by their shared background and by her willingness to help him and his relatives.

Later on, Honig and his father were directed by representatives of the Polish embassy to a town outside Kuibyshev. The Kuibyshev region was an important evacuation hub, and while there the Honigs were approached by a Soviet Jewish evacuee named Gluskin. Gluskin offered them work chopping wood for him; in exchange, not only did Gluskin pay them well for their labor, but his wife also invited them into their home and offered them “milk, eggs, cheese and a big loaf of white bread,” food the likes of which they had not seen in some time. Gluskin, like Kniazeva’s father, was aware that Honig and his father were Jews from Poland and was likely sympathetic to their plight and wished to lend a hand. As the friendship between the Gluskins and Honig developed, Gluskin, who had a good job in the flour mill, encouraged others in the community to also hire the Honigs for odd jobs. As Honig recalls, these side jobs were often particularly lucrative because they received compensation in food, which was more valuable than money.

Honig’s relationship with the Gluskins was not purely economic—Mrs. Gluskin was eager to hear about the Honigs’ background and confided in them her worries about the fate of her sons at the front. Yet there was clearly a barrier between them. As Honig writes, “Though I was very friendly with them, we never talked about politics or the war. We talked about the weather an [sic] our families.” Thus, it seems, there was an implicit understanding of certain limits to the intimacy between the
families, some topics that they could not discuss because of the political realities and their distinct circumstances.

Most, though not all, accounts that I have looked at indicate the creation of economic relationships between Polish Jews and Soviet Jews in which Soviet Jews use their positions to help their Polish coreligionists secure both official and unofficial employment. In the accounts described above, Soviet Jews seem to have acted out of largely charitable motivations. Yet it is critical to note that these accounts derive from memoirs and recollections written and recorded decades after the war. Thus it is quite likely that the narratives were affected by the passage of time and by both the personal and political changes that took place in the ensuing years.

However, a series of interviews conducted by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in 1948 in displaced persons camps with Jewish refugees who had spent the war in the Soviet Union suggest a more nuanced interpretation. Several of these testimonies indicate that Soviet Jews hired Polish Jews to work in the enterprises they managed but, in doing so, also engaged them in the common Soviet practice of siphoning off state goods onto the black market to supplement employees’ salaries. A refugee from Warsaw, identified in the interviews as E.G., found himself in Leninabad (modern-day Khudzhand, Tajikistan), where he found employment at an ice cream plant. According to E.G., the Soviet Jewish evacuees in Leninabad were well-off and well-connected. His superior, the deputy director of the plant, whom E.G. identified as “a Jew from Leningrad,” co-opted him into using less than the allotted quantity of sugar for the ice cream in order to sell off the remaining sugar at the market and make some extra money on the side. However, E.G. soon felt that he was being taken advantage of because he was the one responsible for running the operation, while his boss was simply reaping the profits. As the interview summarizes: “The vice director took no active part in the business but E.G. had to bribe the bookkeeper, give free ice cream to members of the N.K.V.D. [People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs], high officials and the police. The risk was all his and his profits dwindled to very little.”

In this way, Polish Jews became engaged in both official and unofficial Soviet economic practices. While the evidence is anecdotal, it does suggest that the motivations of Soviet Jews were not always purely altruistic.
Since Polish Jewish refugees had few resources and little social capital, Soviet Jewish employers would have seen them as trustworthy workers who were unlikely to double-cross them because they were dependent on their help. Another refugee, identified as S.L., found work in a food cooperative in Uzbekistan run by “a Jew from Odessa who had been exiled to this place for criminal offenses during the Czarist regime.” He reported that his boss sold off state goods at the local market. According to S.L., he knew all about his boss’s operations “because he [S.L.] was considered a ‘reliable’ person, one who would do as he was told.” Thus economic relationships between Soviet and Polish Jews on the home front served important purposes for both groups involved—helping Polish Jews make ends meet and providing Soviet Jews with dependable employees who were unlikely to report these shady dealings to the authorities.

However, beyond these material benefits, friendships between Polish and Soviet Jews enriched spiritual and cultural Jewish life at sites of resettlement. Both Soviet and Polish Jewish accounts attest that the arrival of the more observant Polish Jewish refugees on the Soviet home front reinvigorated Jewish religious practice. While Polish Jews (or, in some cases, local, non-Ashkenazi Jewish communities) largely initiated efforts to celebrate Jewish holidays and carry out traditional rites, evacuated Soviet Jews often took part. One interviewee, identified as Mr. Traitman, traveled to Dagestan with his family after the amnesty and recalled attending services at a synagogue set up by the local community of Mountain Jews. Traitman served as a ritual slaughterer (shochet) for the community during his stay there, but he noted that he observed Jews from Kiev and Kharkov attending services at the synagogue. Once Nazi forces approached the region, Traitman and his family moved further east to Central Asia, where they had similar experiences. He recalled Polish Jews organizing prayer groups, collecting funds for a ritual bath (mikvah), and establishing a yeshiva. While noting that only Polish Jews attended the yeshiva, the “Russian Jews,” as he identified them, contributed funds for the construction of the mikvah.

Although few Soviet Jews would openly participate in religious ceremonies, some expressed a degree of interest in these events, particularly the elderly, who likely were more familiar with these practices and were less concerned about the potential ramifications for their careers if their
behavior was discovered by the authorities. According to one interview, observant Jews from Russia, Bessarabia, and Poland collaborated in opening two synagogues in Ush-Tobe (Kazakhstan); the community also had a shochet, and a Jew from Kiev performed ritual circumcisions (mohel).  

In a recent interview, one evacuee from Kiev, M.D., reflected on religious practice in the Jewish community in wartime Orsk, a city in the Urals located close to Russia’s border with Kazakhstan. He himself had been raised in a relatively observant family from Berdichev, had attended a Yiddish school, and had had an illicit bar mitzvah. In evacuation in Orsk, he recalled that his parents attended holiday services at someone’s home, where they encountered Polish Jews. However, it was impossible for young people like himself to do so since they had to be at work. In Kuibyshev, Samuel Honig attended Rosh Hashanah services at a synagogue located in a rather run-down part of the city. Honig noted that the service was brief and somewhat hurried: “Everybody seemed to want to leave in a hurry. The younger people just minutes before the services ended. It was not a popular place to be found in the Soviet Union.”

Despite the informal, abbreviated, and clandestine nature of these occasions, they presented an opportunity to bring people together and revive Jewish religious practice. Some interviews suggest that Soviet Jews were inspired and impressed by refugees’ willingness to practice their faith and their traditions openly. After befriending a Polish Jewish young man in Kazakhstan, R.K., an evacuee from Moscow, was invited by him to attend a Polish Jewish wedding, where she observed the traditional wedding ritual under a chuppah; the scene made a big impression on her. Similarly, in Erlichson’s memoir, he notes that Soviet Jews in Dzhambul were pleased to witness a Jewish wedding celebration. For the occasion, a friend of his made a speech in Hebrew, which, according to Erlichson, the Soviet Jews found truly poignant: “The Russian Jews were really beaming when they heard a speech in the holy language. They swallowed every word as if it were pure honey. Moreover, most of them had not attended a Jewish wedding in a long time. They were moved and congratulated us warmly.” According to multiple sources, members of the Soviet Jewish evacuee community relished the opportunity to witness and take part in Jewish rituals and customs and to learn about Jewish communities abroad.
Like weddings, burials were key moments for the community to come together. Herman Carmel, a Jew from Czechoslovakia who had escaped to Latvia in 1939 and fled east from there, recalled his wartime experience in Tamak (Bashkiria) and described the creation of a Jewish community thanks to the efforts of one Mendel Menikhes. Menikhes was evacuated with his daughter’s family to Tamak from Belarus, where he had been a leader of the religious community in Mozyr prior to the revolution. Their shared Jewish identity and religious literacy brought Carmel and Menikhes together. During their first meeting, Carmel endeared himself to Menikhes when he recited a Hebrew verse containing Menikhes’s name, and the two became close friends. Menikhes, or Reb Mendel as he came to be known, served as the main organizer of the Jewish community in Tamak, and Carmel dubbed him “the one-man Jewish charitable institution in Tamak.” Menikhes consulted on religious matters, collected money for the more needy members of the community, performed burial rites, and even organized a Passover Seder. Polish Jews and Soviet Jews who died during the difficult war years in Tamak were buried at the site of the old Jewish cemetery, which had been established by the small prerevolutionary Jewish community of “cantonists,” Jews who had been conscripted into the czarist army. It was a woeful sign of the revival of Jewish life in the region.

However, even on these matters, there was sometimes a lack of consensus. One refugee from Lwow recalled how his proposal to establish a Jewish burial ground in Tashkent encountered opposition from a Jewish official who sat on the Tashkent municipal soviet. It is quite possible that the bureaucrat, most likely a Soviet Jew, was concerned about appearing partial to Jewish communal concerns in his official capacity, especially at a time when antisemitism was on the rise in cities such as Tashkent and Alma-Ata.

At the same time, the description of a similar incident in Samarkand suggests a more nuanced interpretation. According to a Yiddish memoir cited by historian Yosef Litvak, when two Polish Jews approached a Soviet Jewish cooperative director to ask for a donation to the Jewish burial society, he initially threw them out of his office. However, he then immediately called in one of his employees (a Polish Jew, and the source for the account) and “gave him 300 rubles for them, and asked him to pass
the money on to them and to tell them to return every month for his
donation.” The director was evidently concerned about appearances; he
did not want to associate himself with the Polish Jewish visitors, but felt
comfortable using his employee, a man he clearly trusted, as a conduit to
support their efforts. These episodes suggest that many Soviet Jews felt
pressured to feign an outward indifference to Jewish religion and culture
and to keep their true commitment and support of these initiatives under
wraps.

Interactions between Polish and Soviet Jews reveal both a sense of
familiarity based on a shared identity and a certain bemusement and ap-
prehension that had to do with their distinct experiences in the interwar
period. Children raised in an ostensibly atheist Soviet society were struck
by the odd appearance and language of some of the Polish Jews they
met. For these youngsters, the Polish Jewish refugees represented as much
a novelty as the native Central Asian populations they encountered. Se-
men Ar’ev recalled that in the course of his family’s journey to the east
from Kamenets-Podolskii (Ukraine), he saw a Hasidic Jewish family for
the first time and was struck by the father’s clothes, beard and side-locks,
and Ar’ev’s grandmother explained to him that these were refugees from
Poland.

Evacuated from Kiev to the Volga German region, Viktor Radutskii
recalled an almost mythical encounter with a Polish Jewish man who
came to ask for hot tea from Radutskii’s grandmother, evidently because
he guessed that Radutskii’s family was Jewish. Radutskii and his siblings
were struck by the man’s appearance because he wore traditional Jewish
Orthodox garb, and they had never seen anyone dressed like that before.
Moreover, his manner of speaking also denoted his foreignness. The
visitor mispronounced the words for hot tea, asking for “gaise tai” instead
of “goriachii chai,” but the children were so impressed by him that they
adopted the new word “gaisetai” into their lexicon. While Radutskii’s
and Ar’ev’s accounts emphasize the exotic appearance and mannerisms
of the religious Polish Jews they met, these encounters also impressed
upon the youngsters the existence of diverse Jewish communities. Their
recollections may also be shaped in part by their postwar lives—both
immigrated to Israel later in life—and these particular episodes may
stand out in their memories because they would later come across Hasidic
and Orthodox Jews in Israel.
Of course, in some cases, interactions between more observant Polish Jews and assimilated Soviet Jews became quite contentious. In Osh (Kyrgyzstan), Maks Koifman, who had been evacuated from the town of Shostka in central Ukraine with his family, recalled an encounter with the Polish Jewish family that lived next door. One day, when Koifman and his sister were looking after their baby brother while their mother was at work, one of the Polish Jewish neighbors poked his head into their room and explained that “a real [nastoiasbchii] Jew should be circumcised.” Koifman described the guest as an older man “who had something or other to do with medicine,” suggesting that the man may very well have been a mohel by profession. The neighbor further explained that it was particularly important for Koifman’s brother, who was blond unlike his siblings, to be circumcised so that he would look like a Jew. The neighbor proceeded to perform the circumcision, recruiting Koifman and his sister to assist him.

Not surprisingly, Koifman’s mother was horrified when she arrived home to discover what had transpired and was particularly irate with the neighbor. As she yelled at him for what he had done, he tried to explain that he was only trying to do the best for her son, who would now be protected by the Almighty. In this instance, the neighbor’s assumption of a shared faith and common practice between the two families proved to be erroneous. The episode demonstrates just one of the potential sources of tension between these families and reveals their distinct understandings of the meanings of Jewishness.

While religious practice and observance of traditions could understandably prove to be points of contention, Soviet Jews and Polish Jews also shared a linguistic and cultural background. On many occasions, a common interest in Yiddish literature and press brought them together. During the war, the Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee received permission to publish a Yiddish newspaper, titled *Eynikayt (Unity)*, which in essence served as a propaganda tool aimed at both domestic and international Jewish audiences. Yet, given people’s hunger for news from the front and the absence of other reading material, the appearance of a new edition of *Eynikayt* was often an occasion that brought together the Yiddish-speaking community, Soviet and Polish alike.

M.D., in his account of his life in Orsk, recalled that he would meet with Polish Jews at the local library to read *Eynikayt*, adding that since
not all of them were literate in Yiddish, he would read the newspaper to them. In most cases, the problem was not literacy as much as it was the difficulty of getting one’s hands on a copy of the newspaper. M.D. himself confesses that he was not even sure how to subscribe to the newspaper, nor did he have the resources to do so, but he was fortunate to be able to access it at the local library. A Polish Jewish refugee in Ush-Tober recounted that subscriptions to Eynikayt were hard to come by and, more often than not, subscribers would discover that the delivered newspapers had been appropriated by the local population to be used as cigarette paper. For M.D., attending religious services was too risky (see above), but gathering to read Eynikayt was a socially acceptable activity that he, as a young Soviet professional, could engage in and that provided him with an opportunity to meet fellow Jews.

Although many assimilated Soviet Jews continued to shy away from any outward expression of their Jewish identity, the popularity of Eynikayt reflected a newfound excitement about the possibility of the revival of Jewish life in the Soviet Union, especially in the wake of the assault on Jewish schools and cultural institutions in the later 1930s. In Tamak, as Carmel recalls: “Getting the Einikeit [alternate spelling] used to be an event. Sasha [a lawyer from Moscow whom Carmel had befriended] would lend the newspaper to many evacuees, and it became worn and stained and got to be illegible.” Notwithstanding its content (or even its legibility), the newspaper seems to serve both as a symbol of a shared identity and a pretext to bring people together.

Given the difficulty of finding Yiddish publications for sale, Polish refugees were pleased to discover that some Soviet Jews had brought Yiddish literature with them and were willing to lend the material out. That some Soviet Jews had chosen to bring Yiddish books with them into evacuation, despite the difficulties of their journeys and the limited number of items they could take with them, suggests their commitment to Jewish culture. According to one Polish refugee, he found volumes of the writings of I. L. Peretz in the home of a Kievan Jew; they were then “used as reading matter, as text books for the study of Yiddish as well as for dramatic purposes.” These texts were utilized for Jewish cultural initiatives spearheaded by Polish Jewish refugees under the auspices of the Union of Polish Patriots. While the interviewee does not indicate the intended audience for these efforts, it seems that Soviet Jews
made important contributions to these programs, even if largely behind the scenes.

In some ways, secular Yiddish literature and culture was an important conduit that brought the Jewish community together at sites of resettlement because it was relatively devoid of political and religious connotations that would have been worrisome for Soviet Jews. Yet, as always, there were limits to how far Soviet Jews were willing to go. In Tashkent, when one Polish Jewish refugee inquired of a Soviet Jew, an NKVD official no less, why Yiddish fiction books were available but Jewish history books were not, he was told that there was no need for these since “Jewish history is the history of the Soviet Communist Party.” This response echoes Soviet policy about national minorities, which described Soviet national culture as “nationalist in form, socialist in content.” Thus Soviet Jews, especially those who had experienced significant upward mobility during the Soviet period and were invested in the Soviet project, were careful to ensure that expressions of Jewish culture could not be construed as anti-Soviet.

On numerous occasions, distinct social status and differing views and opinions about the Soviet system drove a wedge between Polish Jewish refugees and Soviet Jewish evacuees, thwarting trust and intimacy between the two groups. After all, most Polish Jewish refugees had had firsthand experience of the coercive practices of the Soviet regime and had no intention of remaining in the Soviet Union after the conclusion of the war. Most Soviet Jewish evacuees, by contrast, were employed by Soviet enterprises and organizations and expected to return to their homes, within the borders of the Soviet Union, after the war. Naturally, they had a much deeper understanding of how the Soviet system operated and the importance of being vigilant and exercising self-censorship, lest an erstwhile friend be accused of expressing “anti-Soviet” sentiments.

However, 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 to be always frightened and refused to answer questions.” When conversations did take place, Polish Jews had a hard time understanding the “doublespeak” that Soviet citizens employed. Erlichson comments in his memoir that his interactions in Frunze with a Jewish neighbor from Moscow were somewhat superficial. As Erlichson describes: “He really had a wonderful
ability to talk on many subjects, but no one could figure out exactly what his opinions were. He often talked about Stalin, the government, the Soviet system, the collectivization, the Five-Year Plans, the Jewish question. But after discussing these things for a few hours, we would ask ourselves just what, exactly, he had said. What did he believe about all that? He had not taken a stand with a single word. Everything that he had said could be interpreted in different ways. He was like a cat who always lands on his feet.”

While Erlichson’s description denotes a certain admiration for his neighbor’s ability to remain noncommittal, this kind of guardedness would certainly stymie real friendship between the two.

Polish Jewish memoirs and testimonies thus reveal a clear tension between the authors’ desire to befriend Soviet Jews alongside a very real sense of the differences in political beliefs and commitments between them and their Soviet Jewish interlocutors. On the one hand, as noted above, they appreciated the practical benefits and advantages these friendships could reap. On the other hand, they had a difficult time understanding the views and attitudes Soviet Jews espoused. Carmel, in recalling his wartime experience in Tamak, noted that he befriended many Soviet Jews, but “there was an invisible line of frankness beyond which they were unwilling to go.”

Originally from Suwalki, Poland, Regina Kesler and her family had been deported from Vilna to Siberia. After their release they settled in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, where Kesler befriended a classmate of hers, Luba Lurie, a Jewish evacuee from Odessa. Kesler became close with Lurie and her family, and Lurie’s father came to her aid on a number of occasions. Lurie’s father, the head of the hospital in Osh, helped Kesler secure a summer job as a nurse’s assistant, which led her to discover her passion for medicine. Kesler wrote that she “adopted him” as her “Russian father,” while her own father languished in a Soviet prison. Yet, from the outset, she had an acute sense of the differences between them. Lurie’s family and especially her father, a prominent physician, were true Soviet patriots and were dedicated to Soviet values, with Dr. Lurie often quoting Marx, Lenin, or Stalin. After having personally experienced the Soviet penal system, Kesler could not share these views.

Moreover, a clear difference in social status between Polish and Soviet Jews also created a barrier, often unstated, between the two. Having set-
tled in Kambarka, Rita Blattberg Blumstein’s family relied on their friendships with Polish and Soviet Jews. The Fishkins, two physicians from Minsk, were on hand to help with medical problems. The Ginzburgs from Vilna, whose intimacy with Blumstein and her family is evidenced by the fact that as a child she called them “Mamasha” and “Papasha,” were dentists and were also willing to lend their professional services. There is no doubt that such connections were instrumental, but the ties between the families went beyond a simple exchange of services.64

“Papasha” Ginzburg taught Blumstein a few words in Yiddish and also shared with her his love of the works of Russian poets such as Pushkin and Lermontov.65 Yiddish, a signifier of their common Jewish background, reinforced the tie between Blumstein and Ginzburg, but it was the “hauntingly melodious Russian poems” he recited that stuck with her.66 Still, despite these close friendships, she could perceive the difference in social rank between the Soviet Jews and her own family: “One memorable evening I demanded to be told why our Soviet friends, like the Fishkins and the Ginzburgs, were called ‘evacuees,’ whereas we, the Poles, were called ‘biezheny,’ a word which in Russian means literally ‘those who have run away.’ ‘If we have run away,’ I said indignantly, ‘then so have they. We all ran away from the fascist invaders.’ More than an issue of semantics, what bothered me was an uneasy feeling that somehow we were at the very bottom of the totem-pole, less worthy and less secure than the others.”67 Thus the difference in status between the two groups was evident even to a young child. The Fishkins and the Ginzburgs belonged within the orbit of white-collar, professional Soviet society, while Blumstein’s family, former deportees and Polish citizens who struggled to master the Russian language, could not claim membership within it.68

One of the indicators of the distinct social spheres in which refugees and evacuees circulated is the fact that Soviet Jewish memoirs and interviews rarely mention encounters with Polish Jews. Most of the examples cited here, with some notable exceptions, derive from accounts by or interviews with Polish Jews. One possible explanation for this would be that Jewish identity played a much more significant role in shaping social relations for Polish Jewish refugees than it did for Soviet Jewish evacuees. At the same time, Polish Jews were more likely to depend on help from Soviet Jews than the other way around. For Soviet evacuees, both Jewish and non-Jewish, their professional and educational background
as well as their socioeconomic status was just as significant, if not more so, as their ethnicity in determining their social milieu.

During the Second World War, cities and towns in Soviet Central Asia served as temporary homes for diverse communities that included refugees, evacuees, and deportees, both Jewish and non-Jewish. For Jews, their wartime sojourn took on even greater significance after the war once they discovered the fate that befell those who remained at home. Yet life on the Soviet home front presented its own set of challenges, including separation of families, hunger, disease, and material deprivation as millions of people competed over scarce resources. As a result, individuals and families had to rely on diverse networks of support in order to survive. Jewish identity was one important bond that brought evacuees and refugees together and facilitated the creation of Jewish communal life on the Soviet home front. At the same time, relations between Soviet Jews and Polish Jews revealed the consequences of their distinct interwar experiences. On the one hand, many Soviet Jews, particularly among the younger generation, no longer practiced or identified with Jewish tradition and found the behavior and mannerisms of Polish Jews odd. On the other hand, Polish Jews were confused by Soviet Jews’ espousal of Soviet values and principles. Moreover, relations between Soviet and Polish Jews revealed distinct notions of Jewish identity among people who had lived on different sides of the Soviet/Polish border since 1917.

Notes
2. Ibid., 79–80 (quotation on p. 80).
3. Ibid., 80.
5. For more on this topic, see William Moskoff, The Bread of Affliction: The Food Supply in the USSR during World War II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Wendy Z. Goldman and

6. Significant numbers of Polish Jews were deported to Siberia for refusing to accept Soviet citizenship and/or expressing a desire to return to the German-occupied Polish territories. However, many Jews, like Poles, were arrested because of their political and/or class-based affiliations. Ironically, these deportations had the unintended consequence of removing thousands of Polish Jews beyond the grasp of the Nazi forces. Regarding the deportation of (former) Polish citizens from the annexed territories, see Keith Sword, *Deportation and Exile: Poles in the Soviet Union, 1939–1948* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994); Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland’s Western Ukraine and Western Belarus*, expanded ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), chap. 6; and 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. For more information, see also the introduction to this volume as well as chapter 2, by Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik.

7. Among a Soviet evacuee population of roughly 16.5 million, Jews constituted a sizable minority of roughly 1–1.5 million people. There is a lack of consensus about the total number of Soviet evacuees, with estimates ranging from 6 to 25 million. Due to the lack of accurate records, it is very difficult to provide reliable estimates. I use the figure of 16.5 million cited by historian Rebecca Manley and others. Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 1. Regarding the numeric size of the Soviet Jewish evacuee population, there is less variation in the estimates provided in the secondary literature. It is clear that while Jews were certainly a minority among the evacuated population, they were overrepresented among evacuees in comparison to their proportion within the total Soviet population. For the most recent scholarship, see Vadim Dubson, “Toward a Central Database of Evacuated Soviet Jews’ Names, for the Study of the Holocaust in the Occupied Soviet Territories,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 26, no. 1 (2012): 95–119. For further discussion of the number of Jews among the evacuee population, see Mordechai Altshuler, “Escape and Evacuation of Soviet Jews at the Time of the Nazi Invasion: Policies and Realities,”

8. Jerzy Gliksman, *Tell the West: An Account of His Experiences as a Slave Laborer in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (New York: Gresham Press, 1948), 343–46. According to Gliksman’s memoir (Gliksman was the half-brother of Bundist leader Viktor Alter, who had been arrested and executed by Soviet authorities in 1941 alongside Henryk Erlich), Polish citizens released as a consequence of the amnesty were officially given permission to choose where they wanted to go, with the exception of large cities, which remained off-limits. As Gliksman notes: “According to the provisions of the agreement with the Polish Government, the camp authorities were bound to facilitate our transportation and to provide us with sufficient funds for our railway tickets. We were also to receive food and a specified daily allowance covering the time of our traveling” (343). Most chose to go to Central Asia where they hoped the climate would be more hospitable and where they planned to join newly forming divisions of the Polish army. However, Gliksman asserts that, in spite of their desired choices, many of the released prisoners (himself included) were given certificates indicating that they would continue to reside in the Komi region, where the camp was located. This constituted a blatant attempt on the part of the Soviet security forces to save resources by trying to get the former prisoners to remain in the area and continue to work there (343–46).


10. For more examples of how Soviet Jews assisted Polish Jews, see chapter 6, by John Goldlust, in this volume.

11. Following the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet government and the Polish government-in-exile, the Polish embassy established a network of local offices in areas where there were significant populations of Polish citizens. These offices were largely responsible for the distribution of aid and relief to the Polish populations. See Keith Sword, “The Welfare of Polish-Jewish Refugees


15. Ibid., 140.

16. Ibid., 141–43.

17. Ibid., 188–89.

18. Ibid., 189.

19. Ibid.

20. In the pages that follow, I cite multiple examples from the AJC interviews. This is a very valuable source of information on relations between Soviet and Polish Jews, but unfortunately we lack data about the manner and language in which these interviews were conducted. It is also not clear how the subjects were selected. Rachel Erlich, the author of the report on the interviews and the organizer of the initiative, noted that of a total of eighteen interviewees, fourteen were Polish Jews and four were Soviet citizens, who had lived in the Soviet Union before the war. As Erlich herself cautions, the hardship and suffering the interviewees endured in the Soviet Union clearly left them with an anti-Soviet bias. Moreover, she notes that the Soviet Jewish subjects were relatively tight-lipped because they were afraid to reveal any information that could negatively affect relatives who remained in the USSR. Given the political climate, it is not surprising that many of the subjects emphasized the negative aspects of their experience in the Soviet Union (the hardships of everyday life, hunger, widespread corruption, antisemitism, the limitations placed by the regime on religious and cultural life, etc.). A recent article by Laura Jockusch and Tamar Lewinsky discusses how Cold War politics influenced the ways Polish Jews recounted their years in the USSR. See 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): 373–99. Yet, despite the limitations and biases, these interviews are quite valuable precisely because they were undertaken shortly after the subjects left the Soviet Union, and thus they provide a useful corrective for the later accounts. Source: American Jewish Committee Archive (henceforward AJCA), Rachel Erlich, “Summary Report of Eighteen Intensive Interviews with Jewish DP’s from Poland and the Soviet Union” (New York, 1949).

21. AJCA, Rachel Erlich, “Interviews with Polish and Russian Jewish DP’s in DP Camps on Their Observations of Jewish Life in Soviet Russia,” (New York, 1948), interview no. 10, 8. It is not clear whether E.G.’s boss is an evacuee or if he came to Tajikistan before the war.

22. Ibid. While this account may reflect the subject’s anti-Soviet attitude, the description is certainly in line with what we know about endemic corruption in the Soviet economy.

23. AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 17, 5.

24. Ibid.

25. Local, non-Ashkenazi communities included Bukharan Jews in Uzbekistan and Mountain Jews in the Caucasus.

26. AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 4, 2.

27. Yosef Litvak’s essay on the topic also discusses the establishment of Jewish religious schools in Dzhambul and Samarkand and the construction of a ritual bath in Dzhambul. Based on a Yiddish memoir from the 1960s, he notes that Polish Jews were assisted in these efforts by the local Bukharan community and by observant Soviet Jewish evacuees. Litvak, “Jewish Refugees from Poland,” 144. Litvak’s source here is: G. Lustgarten, *In wanden un gerangel, 1939–1968* (Tel Aviv, 1968).

28. AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 4, 3.

29. AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 6, 4.

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31. USHMM, RG-31.027, box 7, folder 5, 32.
32. Honig, From Poland to Russia, 198.
33. In fact, these wartime religious gatherings may constitute the precur-
sors to the numerous unofficial congregations and prayer groups that
emerged in the years after the war, as described by Mordechai Alt-
shuler in his recent study. Mordechai Altshuler, Religion and Jewish
Identity in the Soviet Union, 1941–1964 (Waltham, MA: Brandeis
34. USHMM, RG-31.027, box 12, folder 50, 32.
35. Erlichson, My Four Years, 133.
36. Herman Carmel, Black Days, White Nights (New York: Hippocrene
37. Ibid., 118.
38. Ibid., 110, 119–20, 137–38.
40. AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 1, 5.
41. Litvak, “Jewish Refugees from Poland,” 146. Here Litvak is citing the
memoir by Moshe Grossman (P. Grim), In farkisheftn land fun legend-
42. The notion that Soviet citizens would adopt a certain “persona” to
avoid raising suspicions is by no means surprising. This phenomenon is
discussed at length in Sheila Fitzpatrick, Tear off the Masks: Identity
and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia (Princeton, NJ: Princeton
University Press, 2005). However, it is important to mention that
Polish Jews, embittered by their own experiences in Soviet labor
camps, were likely to stress the oppressive and corrupting aspects of
Soviet rule.
43. Semen Ar’ev, “Doroga,” in Evakuatsiia: Vospominaniia o detstve,
opalennom ognem Katastrofy, http://www.lost-childhood.com/index
44. Viktor Radutskii, “Stranitsy odnoi evakuatsii,” in Evakuatsiia: Vospo-
minaniia o detstve, opalennom ognem Katastrofy, http://www.lost
-childhood.com/index.php/shkola-vy zhivaniya/141-viktor-radutskij
45. Maks Koifman, “My bezhali togda ot voiny,” in Evakuatsiia: Vospomi-
naniiia o detstve, opalennom ognem Katastrofy, http://www.lost
-childhood.com/index.php/evrejskie-bezhentsy/87-maks-koifman
(accessed 17 February 2016).
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. The Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was created in 1942 as one of four antifascist committees (the others were the Slavic, women’s, and scientists’ antifascist committees) to mobilize support for the Soviet war effort and, especially, raise funds abroad. The committee fell victim to Stalin’s antisemitic campaign in the postwar period. During the war years, the committee sent multiple missives to Soviet authorities soliciting approval for the creation of the newspaper and, once it was granted, for permission to increase the size and frequency of the publication. In doing so, the committee noted the important political and educational role the newspaper would play in Jewish communities both in the Soviet Union and abroad. See Shimon Redlich and Gennadii V. Kostyrchenko, eds., Evreiskii antifashistskii komitet v SSSR, 1941–1948: Dokumentirovannia istorii (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1996). While the content of the newspaper was largely propagandistic, a recent essay on the topic by Arkadi Zeltser discusses the ways the articles highlighted examples and images of Jewish heroism and drew on Jewish mythology and history to place the heroes of the Second World War within a Jewish narrative of heroism. Arkadi Zeltser, “How the Jewish Intelligentsia Created the Jewishness of the Jewish Hero: The Soviet Yiddish Press,” in Soviet Jews in World War II: Fighting, Witnessing, Remembering, ed. Harriet Murav and Gennady Estraikh (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 104–28.

49. USHMM, RG-31.027, box 7, folder 5, 32. M.D.’s reference to the Poles’ illiteracy in Yiddish is somewhat surprising; however, one possible explanation is that they were not familiar with Soviet Yiddish orthography.

50. Ibid.
51. AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 6, 4–5.
52. See Gennadii V. Kostyrchenko, Tainaia politika Stalina: Vlast’ i antisemitizm (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2001), 123–38.
54. I found two cases of this book lending in the AJC interviews. AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 6, 4; interview no. 15, 4–5.
55. This commitment to Yiddish culture supports Anna Shternshis’s findings about the continued interest among Soviet Jews in the interwar period in texts, films, songs, and theater productions that expressed Jewish themes, despite the pro-Soviet, antireligious propa-

56. I. L. Peretz (1852–1915) was a prominent Yiddish writer and playwright. AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 6, 4.

57. Ibid. The Union of Polish Patriots was an organization created to represent Poles in the Soviet Union after the breakdown of relations between the Soviet Union and the Polish government-in-exile in the spring of 1943. It was led by Polish Communists and was closely allied with the Soviet government. It also took on the responsibility of distributing aid to Polish refugees, a function that had initially been carried out by the Polish embassy. See Sword, *Deportation and Exile*, chap. 5.

58. AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 1, 6.

59. AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 3, 2.


63. Ibid., 48.


65. Ibid., 66–67.

66. Ibid., 67.

67. Ibid., 64.

68. It is important to mention that while most accounts follow the pattern of ascribing higher status and privilege to Soviet Jews and describing Polish Jews as seeking assistance from the Soviet Jews, this was not always the case. In some notable cases, Polish Jews, particularly those who managed to hang on to their clothes and valuables over the course of their journeys, thrived as traders in the marketplaces in Soviet Central Asia. For example, one of the AJC interviewees describes Soviet Jewish women in Stalinabad who struggled to make ends meet, sending their children to work with Polish Jewish traders. It is difficult to make generalizations on the basis of this evidence, but it can be surmised that Stalinabad, in the remote and resource-poor Tajik SSR, was a much less coveted destination than Tashkent, Alma-Ata, or Frunze. Thus those who ended up in Tajikistan most probably lacked
connections and affiliations with institutions and were more vulnerable. A memoir by a Soviet Jew, Abram Tseitlin, who was evacuated with his family to Kermine (Uzbekistan), relates a similar perception of Polish Jews—as wealthy and entitled outsiders who came to dominate trade at the local market and prompted antisemitism among the local population. Tseitlin, a child during the war, describes a Polish Jewish neighbor who made her living sewing blankets and recalled that he and other local boys would bring her scraps of clothing and cotton in exchange for candies that she would make for them. However, her attitude toward them was one of condescension, and Tseitlin himself seems to resent the activities of the Polish Jews in Kermine. The financial success of some Polish Jewish refugees also help explain the cases of Soviet Jews marrying Polish Jews in order to secure permission to leave the Soviet Union after the war, per the repatriation agreement between the Soviet Union and the Polish authorities. See AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 15, 3. USHMM, RG-31.053, Memoir of Abram Tseitlin, 1990, chap. 6; original source: Judaica Institute, Kiev, Ukraine. Cases of intermarriage between Soviet Jews and Polish Jews: AJCA, Erlich, interview no. 15, 4; interview no. 13, 4–5.