Shelter from the Holocaust

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Crossing Over
Exploring the Borders of Holocaust Testimony

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In September 1939, as the German forces neared their home in Tarnow, Poland, Harry Berkelhammer and his brother jumped on a bicycle and began pedaling eastward. Harry’s brother was concerned that as young men they would be forced to serve in the German army. They took neither clothing nor food with them, hoping to hide out only until the danger passed. As the Germans continued to advance, the boys rode further and further eastward, finding food in fields and drinking out of streams along the way. At some point they met Russian forces and finally felt safe. They ended up settling in Lvov (Lwow), now under Soviet control, where they found their eldest brother, who had been serving in the Polish army.¹

None of the three brothers had planned to go to Lvov, much less to live under Soviet control. One had been mobilized into his country’s army, which later collapsed and left him stranded in what had become foreign territory. The other two mounted a bicycle in order to escape an immediate threat, but were under the impression that they soon would be returning home. However, in the course of those early, chaotic weeks of the war, all three managed to cross what would become an international

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published in Yad Vashem Studies 43, no. 2 (2015): 83–108.
border; albeit inadvertently, they crossed an imaginary line with very real consequences.

Among the several hundred thousand Polish Jews who fled eastward in the autumn of 1939, some had short-term plans. Some had relatives with whom they planned to stay until the war ended; a few had longer-term plans. They hoped to escape to the as-yet-unoccupied countries of Lithuania, Romania, or Hungary and then pursue exit visas. Most, however, had no real plans. Like the brothers mentioned above, they sought to escape the bombing, or the initial indignities of occupation, and they hoped to return to their homes as soon as possible. But notwithstanding their desires and expectations, the split-second decision to flee, often made under pressure and always taken with no access to accurate information, would have singular consequences for their chances of survival during the war, as well as their postwar status and identity.

This chapter deals with an exploration of borders—natural and constructed, geographic and political, popular and academic—and how they affect conceptions about the Holocaust and survival. When the Nazis and the Soviets met in August 1939, to discuss dismembering Poland, they chose natural geographic features of the land to serve as dividing lines. The secret protocols attached to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact designate the Narew and Vistula (Wisla) Rivers in the north and the San River in the south as boundaries for the two powers’ “spheres of interest.” However, once the invasion began in September, the movement of troops was not easily controlled. It took several weeks and further meetings before the two sides retreated to their newly established borders. In return for greater control over the Baltic states, the Soviets ceded the Germans more Polish territory, making the northern border at the Bug River. In the next months both occupation regimes would establish order and annex parts of their newly conquered territories. The Bug and San Rivers became an international border—although it was not recognized by either the Poles or the Western nations.

Yet even without wide recognition, the border was of great significance both during the war and afterward. Polish citizens who happened to live west of the Bug, or who were studying, working, or vacationing there in August 1939, were destined to spend World War II under Nazi occupation. Those on the eastern side spent nearly two years adjusting to
the Soviet system, before the Nazi invasion of June 1941 brought renewed fighting and a new order. The distinction between the two occupation regimes was particularly significant for Jews, who made up approximately 10 percent of the prewar Polish population.

Holocaust scholarship has amply demonstrated the differences between the unfolding of the genocide in western Poland and in those areas incorporated into the USSR. Whereas the Jews held under Nazi occupation from 1939 faced a long period of ghettoization and labor before deportation to the death camps, Jews in the Soviet territories encountered mobile killing squads immediately following the invasion in the summer of 1941. The arbitrary border imposed on the region had very real life-and-death consequences for Poland’s 3 million Jews.

Less known is the fate of another group of Polish Jews: those who, like the brothers mentioned above, crossed the newly established border. In those chaotic and traumatic final months of 1939, all Polish Jews considered their options, and tens of thousands moved from Nazi to Soviet control, as we have seen in the contributions by Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik and by John Goldlust in this volume. Some would end up returning to their homes once the fighting stopped, but most remained in the Soviet-held areas. Exact numbers are impossible to determine, as are the reasons that some individuals and families fled eastward, while most stayed put in their homes.⁴

Although in retrospect flight appears to have been a wise decision, the Polish Jews at that time could not have known what we now know. They could not have imagined the death and destruction Hitler would cause. They could not have foreseen that within a year Stalin would deport the Polish refugees to labor installations deep within Soviet territory. Through the combination of choices they made and forces beyond their control, the majority of the Jews who crossed over the Bug and San Rivers would live out the remainder of the war in the Arctic, Siberia, the Urals, and Soviet Central Asia. By crossing a recently imposed political border, they effectively crossed out of direct danger from the Holocaust—but also outside the borders of Holocaust scholarship and popular memory.

The border crossers would eventually rejoin the few survivors who remained in Poland after the war, forming over 70 percent of the Polish Jews in displaced persons (DP) camps.⁵ Yet their story has remained
largely unknown outside of their immediate families. This chapter is part of a larger project intended to document the survival experiences of Polish Jews in the far reaches of the USSR. A number of scholars have recently turned to examining aspects of this topic, to which this volume makes an important contribution. Here, however, the focus is not on history but on memory. The oral testimonies of border crossers will illuminate the constructed nature of scholarly, chronological, and geographical borders.

**SETTING THE SCENE**

There is no end to the “flight” of the Jews to the Führer’s “friends.” One must admit that our sages’ words were justified: “The Almighty prepares the remedy before the sickness.” Were it not for Soviet Russia we would be strangled to death.

Tens of thousands of young Jews are without means of sustenance. Jewish youth has no present and no future, and it is fleeing for its very life. The escape is accomplished in various ways: on foot, by automobile, by train, in carts, and in all sorts of other vehicles. There is no obstacle from the Soviet side, and the Nazi conqueror has no established policy. One never knows what is prohibited and what is permitted.

As observed by Chaim Kaplan, a diarist and keen observer of Jewish life in Warsaw, in November 1939, many Jews from the areas under Nazi occupation, especially the youth, continued to move into the Soviet-held territories. Yosef Litvak estimated that 400,000 Polish Jewish refugees crossed the new border between the two occupying powers. Recent scholars have sought to downgrade this figure. Their logic is based partly on the realization that the Polish government-in-exile, on whose documents Litvak relied heavily, had reason to inflate its numbers and also on new access to Soviet archives. While it is certainly true that the Poles had limited access to exact figures and every reason to exaggerate their cause, it is also true that Soviets kept far better track of the refugees they eventually deported than they did of the shifting group as a whole. My own research, while not quantitative in nature, has shown that many Jewish
individuals and families entered Soviet territory only to return soon after-ward to their homes under Nazi occupation. Some even crossed the border several times, unsure as to where they would fare better. As no statistics can accurately chart these multiple and bidirectional flight patterns, I find the larger estimates more convincing. In any case, there can be no question that at least 150,000 Jews from western Poland crossed into the former eastern territories in the late summer and autumn of 1939.

There they joined the millions of other Poles who were trying to adjust to rapid Sovietization. Many of the refugees relied on friends and relatives to take them in. Others had to find space in public buildings or rent rooms in cities overflowing with other refugees and newly arrived Soviet officials. Yet while the refugees lived among other Polish citizens, the Soviet authorities treated them differently. Only those Polish citizens with official residency in the newly conquered areas were forced to accept Soviet citizenship and take part in the plebiscite to approve Soviet annexation and then elect representatives. The border crossers remained in a separate category.

Nevertheless, once the Soviets began deporting those elements of the Polish population they deemed to be potentially dangerous, they included Jewish refugees. Indeed, refugees from western Poland were not only swept up in the first waves of deportation focused on political, military, religious, and other leaders, but the third major deportation in June 1940, as well as a smaller one in the Baltic states in June 1941, specifically targeted the refugees and succeeded in capturing most of them. The major exception was the relatively small number of Polish Jewish refugees who had accepted voluntary Soviet citizenship. A great deal has been written about the Soviet deportation of former Polish citizens in the USSR, mostly from the perspective of the Poles, for whom this action was a major crime. From the perspective of the Polish Jews, however, by the time the war was over it became clear that the Soviet deportation had inadvertently saved them from the Nazis.

The deportees were sent to collective farms and work camps in the Urals, in northern Kazakhstan, and as far as Siberia. There they labored under harsh conditions and without access to sufficient food, clothing, or tools, until the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union. At that point the
Polish government-in-exile, working out of London, was able to negotiate the release of incarcerated Polish citizens. While some chose to stay in or near their former camps, many used this opportunity to move south into Soviet Central Asia. With the exception of the Poles able to evacuate from the Soviet Union with the Anders army in 1942 and 1943, most stayed in the country until the war ended, when they were able to return to Poland.

Throughout this period the Polish Jewish refugees were largely indistinguishable from the other Polish deportees and exiles. Jews made up between 22 and 30 percent of the Polish deportee population. Most of these were refugees, but some had been arrested and deported for other reasons. These groups were later joined by other Polish Jews fortunate enough to escape the Nazi onslaught and self-evacuate to the Soviet interior. During the period of enforced labor, many of the Jewish deportees were sent to installations on their own or with other deported Soviet populations. Some, however, lived and worked alongside ethnic Polish deportees. Catholics and Jews alike struggled to survive the harsh conditions and faced punishment for practicing their religions or discussing their political views.

After the “amnesty,” as Poles of all backgrounds relocated to southern climes, certain areas attracted larger concentrations of Jews, but there was also a good deal of mixing. All of the former deportees, along with the millions of Soviet citizens evacuated to the area, found resources to be limited due to overcrowding and the tremendous needs of the military. Homelessness, starvation, and disease hit the Polish exiles hard. Tensions arose between Catholic and Jewish Poles over the allocation of the scant resources the Polish government-in-exile was allowed to bring in, as well as recruitment into the Polish army it was forming. Many Jews felt that Polish antisemitism caused them to receive less and to be turned away from the Anders army. While it is difficult to quantify the aid, it is clear that Jews were recruited into the army and evacuated along with it in lower numbers than their percentage of the Polish deportee population.

However, it is also worth noting that the Soviet authorities often changed their agenda with regard to the Polish Jews. Not only were there periodic drives to induce the Polish Jewish refugees to accept Soviet
passports, which included highly coercive measures, but at times the Soviets blocked Polish Jews from entering the Anders army. In both of these instances the refugee Jews were treated differently than those Polish Jews who had been resident in eastern Poland before the 1939 invasion. They should have enjoyed a different status with regard to the Red Army as well, but in reality there were many complaints about Polish Jews who were not Soviet citizens being forcibly mobilized into Soviet military units.

Yet there are important overlaps in the experiences of all these groups. On the one hand, the ethnic Poles, as well as the ethnic Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews deported from eastern Poland into the interior of the Soviet Union, faced similar challenges during the war years. On the other hand, they were also treated differently, and they have understood and interpreted their experiences in divergent ways in the intervening years. While recognizing how much the Jews deported by Stalin and saved from Hitler have in common, this chapter focuses in particular on the testimonies of Polish Jews who were in western Poland in September 1939 and took the decision to flee to the Soviet Union.

As we shall see, the reality of having lived for some period of time under the German occupation, before crossing over to the area under Soviet occupation, placed these refugees in a particular category. Although they could not have known about the coming Holocaust, let alone that they would be forcibly deported beyond its reach, they made an active decision to cross a border that ultimately changed their fate. Over 90 percent of Polish Jewry was murdered during the war. The majority of those who survived did so in the Soviet Union. As their testimonies demonstrate, however, many of them are not sure if they qualify as Holocaust survivors.

READING HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

In recent years, the use of Holocaust testimonies has become part of a broad and sophisticated scholarly conversation. Previously, the use of testimonies and subsequent discussion about these sources was limited to a small group, and their publications often appeared only in Hebrew. Today all Holocaust scholars are aware of the importance of these firsthand
accounts while taking into consideration the biased nature of all our sources. Rather than reconstitute this conversation, I will point to a few crucial insights of relevance to this inquiry.

Annette Wieviorka’s important work *The Era of the Witness* demonstrates how the testimony collection efforts originated during and immediately after the war and developed and expanded afterward. She also shows the growth of communal interest in these efforts and in the witnesses themselves. This increased attention, however, has had some mixed results. Among others, Tony Kushner has pointed to concerns about the ways testimonies are used. “It would be a tragic irony if Holocaust testimony, with all its potential nuances, became integral to the telling of a story so polished that we actually lost sight of the individual in any meaningful sense.”

In addition to heeding the individual, it is crucial to be aware of the nature of the source. Zoë Vania Waxman, in her innovative work *Writing the Holocaust*, has articulated that Holocaust testimony itself not only has a history but that “it is also contingent upon and mediated by this history.” One result of this in the contemporary period is that a set of expectations exists for what a testimony should contain and how it should affect the listener: “The accepted concept of the Holocaust and the role of collective memory place two demands on the survivor. First, they seek to homogenize survivors’ experiences, and secondly, they assume that in adopting the role of the witness, survivors will adopt a universal identity. But in negotiating the hegemony of accepted Holocaust narratives, some survivors’ experiences are either pushed toward the margins or neglected altogether.” As we will see, this has particular resonance for survivors whose personal stories do not fit into the accepted narrative of the Holocaust.

As Peter Novick discusses in his well-known book *The Holocaust in American Life*, survivors are far from monolithic, and yet they are expected to represent themselves in certain proscribed ways: “It was the symbol of the survivor—the survivor as emblematic of Jewish suffering, Jewish memory, and Jewish endurance—rather than the highly diverse reality of survivors, that made the greatest contribution to Holocaust commemoration.” The larger oral testimony projects of recent decades, especially those conducted in the United States, arise from a society in which the survivor has an elevated status and fills a particular role.
An awareness of the mediated nature of the sources also requires looking at the norms and cultures of particular testimony collection institutions. Due to the goals of their founders, their histories, funding, and other factors, each of the major as well as the myriad smaller archives, museums, and communal organizations has approached its task in different ways. The testimonies used in this research are from the Visual History Archives (VHA) of the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, an organization that has generated not only the greatest number of oral testimonies but also a fair bit of attention.

Scholars, and most recently the institution itself, have chronicled the seemingly implausible rise of this organization from a tiny staff of film producers in a trailer to one of the largest repositories of Holocaust testimonies in the world, now housed at a major university.26 Due to the sheer size of the collection, as well as its intricate indexing, most scholars of the Holocaust now rely heavily upon it, yet a variety of concerns have also been raised.27 Although the Shoah Foundation regularly employed academic advisers, it also made use of its original expertise in film to innovate in its interview process. The interviews are structured so that roughly 20 percent are devoted to the prewar period, 20 percent to the postwar period, and 60 percent to the war itself. Noah Shenker has pointed out that this can lead to tension between empowering the witness and the institutional imperative to produce a legible text.28

Other concerns have included the “mass production” and the “happy endings.” As Michael Rothberg and Jared Stark ask rhetorically, “Will certain types of narratives—say, those familiarly American ones of ‘healing’ and happy endings—win out over such disturbing truths, despite the crucial work of scholars such as Lawrence Langer, who has thrown into question all affirmative accounts of survival and remembrance and sought instead to develop a typology of anguished, unheroic memory?”29 To avoid such pitfalls, some scholars have cautioned others to avoid the most “cinematic” moments in the VHA interviews. In contrast, this chapter will focus precisely on one of these moments. While the majority of the VHA interviews are devoted to victims telling their stories, at the end the mood and content change dramatically. The interviewer moves from asking specific questions about the witness’s experiences during the war to broad questions about his or her takeaway message for the world. This closing discussion, often punctuated with the introduction
of other family members and followed by family photographs, is easy to view as a supplement to the body of the interview. To my knowledge, no one has published anything about this particular juncture in the interviews.\textsuperscript{30}

The witnesses are generally unprepared for the new line of questioning. They have spent the previous couple of hours narrating their stories in a straightforward and chronological manner. Many are subsumed in their memories. Suddenly they are asked for messages to the world at large. Some of those interviewed, after some initial stumbling, clearly enjoy the opportunity to speak as experts on the world stage. Others, who had not been anticipating this sort of questioning, shy away from these broader queries. They repeat what they have said previously, deny expertise, or offer halfhearted answers. Some of the most difficult testimonies to watch are by those for whom this line of questioning causes a rupture. Suddenly, seemingly, they do not know whether they belong in the august company of Holocaust survivors. The wording of the questions seems to exclude their experiences, and they do not know how to answer. The examples below offer a tentative typology of answers given by Polish refugees who survived in the USSR.

**FLIGHT SURVIVORS CONFRONT THE HOLOCAUST**

- How often do you think about your Holocaust experiences?
- Do you have dreams/nightmares? How often? Describe in detail.
- How did your experiences affect your faith / religious identity?
  - Explain. Do you believe in God?
- Do your experiences affect you in other ways? How?
- What is your attitude toward non-Jews?
- What would you like to tell future generations?\textsuperscript{31}

In this selection of questions taken from the “Reflections on the Holocaust” section of the list of questions provided to Shoah Foundation interviewers, we can see that there are a variety of closing questions and that not all of them explicitly refer to the Holocaust. Nonetheless, the context is clearly the Holocaust and, with or without the exact term, interviewees usually understand that. Their responses vary, but many fall into one of three categories. Most of the flight survivors interviewed
clearly differentiate their own experiences from those of Holocaust survivors, sometimes even correcting or redirecting the interviewers in order to do so. A smaller number do consider themselves Holocaust survivors and claim that mantle proudly. The smallest group of witnesses do not seem to know to which group they belong, and so they fumble over the questions. Suddenly the coherence of the interview as a whole, as well as of the identity of the witness, is compromised and disintegrates. In a few cases it is not so much the final questions as the overall attitudes and interests of the interviewers that precipitate this confusion and discomfort. Examples of each group follow.\footnote{32}

**Flight Survivors Who Do Not Identify as Holocaust Survivors**

Brothers Mendel and Yankl Saler were interviewed separately by the Shoah Foundation. In late 1939, their family fled across the Bug River. After volunteering to work in Ukraine, they found themselves in the Ural Mountains. In March 1940, they managed to leave and reach their relatives in Berdichev. They were still there when the Nazis invaded, but managed to self-evacuate to Uzbekistan. There they suffered hunger, sickness, and deprivation on a kolkhoz. Yankl Saler was drafted into the Red Army, but eventually the family reunited and repatriated to Poland after the war.

Towards the end of the testimony, the interviewer, who is also not a native English speaker, asks Mendel Saler, “How often do you think about, you know, the experiences which were caused by Holocaust?” Saler’s immediate response is, “Always.” Soon afterward, as he describes his excellent relations with Australians of all ethnicities, the interviewer asks him pointedly about his attitude toward Gentiles. Saler responds with examples of close relationships and then concludes:

I don’t hate anybody. I don’t hate. . . . You see I have been in Russia. It was very hard. We were starving, and cold, and everything. But I don’t hate the Russians. I hate more the Poles, because in Poland I felt on my own back the sticks from the boys when they used to go with me in the same school, in the same grade! And I used to get hurt because I was a Jew. But I don’t hate anybody. I would like everybody to live in peace because it’s possible. If only the people would like to, it’s possible.\footnote{33}
It is noteworthy that Saler makes no mention of Germans. Although it was they who started the war and led to his family’s displacement, his direct experience was with Russians and Poles.

Yankl Saler’s message to the world is that people should not fight. He is also concerned about the influence of religion. Although the Muslims in Uzbekistan treated him like a human being, the Christians back in Poland were “like animals,” he says. Both Mendel and Yankl Saler were deeply affected by the war and their suffering. They learned lessons about humankind and the dangers of violence. Nonetheless, they are both clear that their war experience took place in the Soviet Union. Neither lays claim to the Holocaust, although both mention antisemitic persecution by Poles before and after the war.

Eva Blatt, also placing herself outside of the Holocaust, articulates her status as part of her story. Traumatized by her experience in Soviet Central Asia, Blatt returned to Poland a shattered individual. She had no home and no family, but found a small amount of solace in a collective Jewish dwelling in Lodz. Then a young man named Abe came along and started paying attention to her. He wanted her to leave the “kibbutz” and move in with his cousin. He wanted to talk to her about his ideas for starting a business and for escaping from Poland. She only wanted to be left in peace and resolved to tell him all that she had endured. Then, surely, he would realize that she was too wounded to start a relationship. She was on the verge of speaking when she noticed the numbers on his arm. “So I says to him, ‘Why do you have a number?’ So he started to tell the whole story. I thought I have a story, a better story than he. Then when I met him, forget it. I didn’t say nothing anymore.”

At least in her own retelling, Blatt came to see her experience as lesser than that of the Holocaust survivor in the immediate aftermath of the war. She had not known what was occurring in Poland while she struggled to survive in Central Asia. Although she lived on the street, begged for food, and lost her first husband to starvation and disease, she clearly differentiated her experiences from those of Abe, who would become her second husband. At the end of the interview, both she and her daughter express regret that Abe died in 1979, before anyone wanted to listen to the stories of survivors.

Like Blatt, Boris Baum explicitly differentiates his experiences from those of Holocaust survivors. All of his friends, he says, either survived
the Holocaust or were in Russia, but the two situations were not equivalent. “We were not in front of the Germans,” he states. He adds that his wife also experienced hunger, referring to earlier in the interview when he described having met her begging on the street in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, after having lost her entire family to starvation and disease. But, he says, it was not the same.  

The Salers, Blatt, and Baum all transition fluently from describing their wartime experiences to answering the final interview questions. They provide thoughtful answers yet make a clear distinction between their survival experiences and those of Holocaust survivors. The same is true of Tema Abel, another flight survivor, who, when asked about the influence of the Holocaust on her life, replies as if the question itself is misplaced. “I don’t know how the Holocaust has shaped my life. It shaped my life like everybody else’s.”

Flight Survivors as Holocaust Survivors
There are some survivors of flight to the USSR and deportation who have managed to produce an integrated narrative of their experiences. They see their trials during the war as one complete story involving chapters in occupied Poland as well as in the unoccupied USSR. This story is not only their war experience but also their Holocaust experience. Yeshajau Lewkowicz lost his three sisters in the initial bombing of Warsaw in 1939. Even though that bombing was meant to pacify the Poles and not to murder Jews, it was nonetheless the beginning of Lewkowicz’s Holocaust. Later he and his father spent some time hiding in Nazi-occupied Poland before escaping to the Soviet side. They fought with the partisans, worked in a shoe factory, and moved around frequently. After the war they went back to Warsaw and found the city and their family utterly destroyed.

When asked by the Hebrew interviewer why he thinks he survived, he replies with many examples of close calls with the Germans and then, finally: “I survived. What is [survival]? It’s a type of fate [goral]. I don’t know whether to believe in fate, in God. I don’t know what it is. Possibly there is something [called] fate. Fate.” Lewkowicz responds as many other Holocaust survivors do, with an abiding awareness of the contingency of survival. He goes on to explain that, just in case it was God’s doing, he dons ritual phylacteries daily. Lewkowicz feels no need to justify his inclusion in the category of Holocaust survivors.
Similarly, Hersz Bimka has no problem integrating his war experiences on both sides of the Bug. Drafted in the buildup to war, Bimka returned to his hometown near Lodz after the collapse of the Polish army. He was with his family in October 1939, when his father died of a heart attack. After sitting shivah (seven days of mourning), he was caught by the Germans outside without his yellow armband. While he was with his punishment work crew, one German beat him, but a second advised him to escape to the USSR. At the end of November, after consulting with his mother, he did just that. Several years later, as part of the Communist-sponsored Polish army, he left the USSR and helped to liberate Eastern Europe. When asked how he survived, Bimka repeats a formula often used by Holocaust survivors: it was due to his promise to his mother. His message to the world is about the importance of a strong Israel to protect the Jews.\(^{40}\)

Shalom Omri was seventeen when the war broke out in 1939. In the course of the next few months, he faced murderous conditions under the Germans and then escaped to the Soviet side, only to run afoul of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). He managed to survive and then immediately made contact with the Bricha, traveled illegally to Palestine, volunteered for the Haganah, and fought in Israel’s War of Independence. His testimony includes all these experiences, which were clearly interconnected and integral to his identity. At least in his own retelling, at the precise moment when the Gestapo leader in Sokal threatened to shoot him if he could not run fast enough, Omri decided that if he survived the war, he would forswear exile and live only in a Jewish state.\(^{41}\)

Unlike these men, with distinct memories of violence and oppression by German soldiers, Diana Ackerman, who was born in 1931, has no recollection of interactions with Germans. Indeed, much of her story is told through the eyes of a child. She has little sense of duration or the reasons that her family moved around the Soviet Union. Her first experience with antisemitism was in 1946, when her family repatriated to Poland. After consulting with other Jews they met, her parents insisted that the entire family pretend to be Polish. Only several months later, when they reached Vienna, did they return to outward Judaism.\(^{42}\) Yet when asked about her “Holocaust experience,” Ackerman does not falter. She tells the interviewer that she used to wake up screaming in the night, remem-
bering the war. The interviewer next asks why she thinks that she survived. Ackerman says that she was lucky and then adds that on the Soviet deportation train, when they were all weeping and cursing their fate, a rabbi told them not to fear. He was right, she explains, because that trip led to their survival. When the interviewer asks how the Holocaust has affected her life, Ackerman explains that she is always consumed by worry.43

Lewkowicz, Bimka, Omri, and Ackerman all exhibit normative responses to the final questions of their Shoah Foundation interviews. None of them is derailed by the use of the terms Holocaust or survivor. On the contrary, they seem to feel that those terms apply to them as well. They see their entire war experiences, under the Nazis, the Soviets, and even afterward, as part of one integrated whole that entitles them to be included under the rubric of Holocaust survivors.

Identity Confusion
Unlike the witnesses mentioned thus far, a small number of Polish deportees interviewed by the Shoah Foundation express confusion over their identities, especially during the final questions of the interview. Up until that point, Rivka Agron related her experiences in a clear and informed manner. Although she was young during the war, she evidently spoke to other relatives and read about their experiences later. She narrates her family’s travels from Lvov to Sverdlovsk, to Talitsa, to Bukhara and their losses along the way. It seems to be a harrowing tale in its own right.

Then, at the end of the testimony, the interviewer asks Agron about the consequences of having lived through that period and about her message, and she suddenly switches from discussing her own experiences to talking about the Holocaust. As the interview was conducted in Hebrew, Agron says that she carries her “Shoah” upon her shoulders and that it is impossible to escape. She adds that, at times, she even viewed the Arabs as equivalent to the Germans. With some awareness that this is an odd statement, she clarifies that even though she was not with the Germans, she felt them as if she “had received the blows,” as if she had been killed “in some sort of Auschwitz.”44

It is tempting to try to seek some objective criteria to make sense of the varied responses to questions related to the Holocaust and its legacy. For example, does a certain number of months under Nazi occupation or
a deeply traumatic event perpetrated by the Nazis automatically place someone under the rubric of the Holocaust? Indeed, some reparations organizations use similar benchmarks for granting payments to survivors. Alternately, it may be a function of age. Perhaps those individuals who were too young to remember their experiences under the Nazis are less likely to claim survivor status. Could it be that those who have told their stories numerous times are more likely to have reached a firm sense of their identities and where to place their stories?

The testimony of Symcha Burstin challenges all of these logical assumptions. A jolly and outgoing man, at the time of his interview in 1997 Burstin was active in the Jewish community, especially with regard to Yiddish and to Holocaust commemoration, in his adopted home of Melbourne, Australia. As such, one would expect that he would have considered himself a Holocaust survivor, or at least that he would have developed a strong sense of where to place his survival story. Indeed, his story seems almost rehearsed, and he includes many tangential details about the politics, culture, and economy of the Jews and surrounding populations. Burstin’s message to the world is not to forget. He raised his four children speaking Yiddish, and they know all about his remarkable experiences.

Burstin, who was fifteen at the time, vividly remembers the initial attack on Warsaw. His entire extended family was crowded together in one apartment on Yom Kippur when a bomb fell on their building. He remarks sadly that the first dead body he had ever seen was his cousin Moshe’s. He recalls weeks of starvation and humiliation at the hands of Germans and Poles before the family decided that the men would be better off going to Soviet territory until things calmed down. On the way to crossing the border, Burstin and his father were caught by German guards, robbed of all their valuables, and beaten with sticks. Here is clearly a man with direct and personal experience of the Nazi occupation.

The remainder of Burstin’s story is equally detailed and engaging. He remembers each place where he and his father settled and worked in the USSR and the challenges they faced there. On two different occasions Burstin’s father managed to get himself arrested for making impolitic remarks. They almost starved to death at one point and were afflicted with several deadly diseases. There are also fascinating interactions with
Polish Catholics, NKVD agents, Uzbek peasants, and others. Burstin appears to be a man with a neatly integrated identity who enjoys telling stories. But then the interviewer turns to the broad concluding questions.

She begins by inquiring whether people in Australia often ask him about his experiences. Although she does not use the word *Holocaust*, Burstin seems to assume it as the subtext. He shares a story of a time when his colleagues at an accounting conference asked him about the past: “At that conference, after the main items were finished, a group of us of about twenty-odd were sitting around, and somebody asked me about it and I started to tell them about my life [pause] in [pause] about the German occupation of Poland, about the Holocaust. And they were sitting from about around half past nine, ten o’clock at night till well into the next morning to about three or four the next morning, just listening to me relate about the Holocaust, about the ghettos, about the Shoah.”

Burstin experienced very real suffering at the hands of the Germans. He went on to fight for survival in the USSR over the course of several years. He has numerous harrowing stories of his own to tell, but when asked about whether Australians have shown an interest in his story, he turns to a prototypical Holocaust incident of which he had no personal experience. This is not simply a misunderstanding. It is yet another example of the slippage in identity. Even a seemingly proud and confident witness like Burstin ultimately retreats in the face of the Holocaust.

**Interviewer Confusion**

At times, the confusion is caused by the ignorance of the interviewer rather than factors inherent to the interviewee’s self-perception. Chaim Zemel, an elderly Yiddish speaker tries to tell his story in a linear fashion, but the interviewer keeps interrupting and prompting him. She allows him to describe his terrible experiences during the infamous death march from Hrubieszów to Sokal in December 1939, but once he reaches Soviet territory, she loses patience. “How long were you in Russia?” she asks with obvious confusion. Soon afterward, as he is describing his efforts to get back to his family and his wife’s final missive, telling him not to return, the interviewer tells him to speed up. For her, obviously, Zemel’s stay in Russia is not his Holocaust story. She continually cuts him
off and tries to lead the conversation back to Poland. In the end, both of
them are frustrated. He is unable to tell his own story and leaves out
crucial information as she pushes him forward, and she, quite simply,
does not get the story she wanted. She does not even bother to ask him
the closing questions.46

Individuals interviewed by the Shoah Foundation submitted a writ-
ten questionnaire in advance of their interviews. This was designed to
allow the interviewer to familiarize himself or herself with the broad
outlines of the person’s story and prepare accordingly. However, most of
the interviews were conducted by volunteers without a great deal of
training or historical knowledge. More obscure stories, such as those by
Polish Jews who survived the war in the Soviet Union, were beyond their
experience and, in many cases, did not fit their own understandings of
survival. Although Zemel’s interview was particularly difficult to watch,
there are other cases where the problem of definition and identity ap-
pears to stem more from the interviewer than the witness.

Just as Ann Benjamin-Goldberg begins to describe the conditions
under which she both worked and studied in Aktyubinsk, Kazakhstan,
the interviewer asks her whether she was receiving information about
the situation back in her hometown.47 Benjamin-Goldberg quickly real-
izes that her premedical courses, loneliness, and hunger in Soviet exile
are not of interest to the interviewer. She truncates her own story to an-
swer the interviewer’s more insistent questions about the death of her
family members back in Poland and her own growing awareness of their
plight. The interviewer also asks her quite a bit about her life in the DP
camps. The result is an interview that replaces the sought-after 20 percent
prewar, 60 percent war, and 20 percent postwar ratios with over 50 percent
devoted to postwar experiences and reflections.

Given the clear assessment provided by the interviewer, it is hardly
surprising that Benjamin-Goldberg ends up dismissing her own suf-
fering during the closing questions. When asked how her experiences
have affected her life, Benjamin-Goldberg begins by trying to describe
what it meant for a teenager who had never left home to suddenly
find herself entirely alone. She says that it created a pain that was al-
most physical. She goes on to refer to the constant hunger and her bout
with typhus leading to hospitalization and a coma. In the end, however,
in view of what she learned afterward, she concludes, “This becomes negligible.”

It is, of course, impossible to know what Benjamin-Goldberg might have said to a different interviewer more interested in her unique story or at least better informed about it. The opportunity to tell her story in full might have encouraged her to place greater value on her own survival, but it could just as easily have ended with the same ambivalence and dismissal.

**CONCLUSION**

Scholars, aid agencies, states, testimony collection bodies, memorial institutions, and support groups must define terms such as *Holocaust* and *survivor* for the sake of clarity, fairness, and transparency. Their definitions, however, are varied. Then there is the overlapping, yet distinct, popular conception of the two terms and what they stand for. To quote Annette Wieviorka: “A veritable social imperative now transforms the witness into an apostle and prophet.”

Given the high social stakes, as well as the reigning confusion, surviving Polish Jewish refugees find themselves betwixt and between. While some see themselves as Holocaust survivors, others are equally sure that they are not. A third category is unsure of its identity and can become caught up in questions that explicitly or implicitly probe these issues.

Part of the confusion lies in the significant overlap between the experiences of Polish Jews on both sides of the Bug. The distinction between the Polish Jews who stayed in their homes and those who crossed into Soviet territory hangs on momentary decisions made under enormous pressure. Those who crossed over did not imagine that they were seeing their families for the last time. On the contrary, many left only temporarily or planned to return soon in order to bring their remaining family members with them. Moreover, the fact that they were deported eastward and thus beyond the Nazi reach was not even their own decision. Nor was their safety assured. Polish Jewish refugees who settled in western Ukraine or the Crimea had to flee German advances for a second time. For much of 1941 and 1942, it looked as if the Germans could
not be halted. Survival in any part of the Soviet Union was thus contingent on the fighting.

Just as these individuals started the war in the same position as all Polish Jews—enduring the same bombings and facing the same decisions—they also rejoined the remnant of Polish Jewry after the war. Following their repatriation to Poland, the returnees joined those who had managed to remain alive in Poland in searching for surviving relatives, trying to rebuild Jewish life, and moving illegally into DP camps in Germany and Austria. Like other Polish Jews, they sought information about their missing and murdered relations. Some tried to reclaim property, while others heeded threats and warnings and accepted their losses. Together with the rest of Polish Jewry, they engaged in memorializing the past, but also in building families for the future.

When they arrived in the countries where they would eventually settle, the various types of refugees from Poland received identical treatment. All had to be clothed, housed, and fed by Jewish philanthropies. Relatives who sponsored their immigration heard their stories of loss and encouraged them to find work and learn the language of the land. With their foreign accents and manners, their internal and external scars, and their motivation to settle down and lead normal lives, the new immigrants were largely indistinguishable. Indeed, they often married one another and lived in similar neighborhoods, speaking their Old Country languages and reminiscing about towns and cities no longer recognizable. Together they funded and wrote memorial books to those lost homes, even as they built new ones.

This sense of being part of a community of survivors comes across clearly in the testimony of Symcha Burstin, several minutes after the episode cited above. When asked whether he thinks often about the “Holocaust,” he responds, “quite often,” and goes on to explain:

I have continually the feeling of something terrible done to the Jewish people, to Jewish individuals, to my family, to myself, and I cannot, I really cannot, make peace with this . . . I feel this almost every day. Notwithstanding that so many years have gone by [pause]. After all, the last time I saw my mother I was fifteen years old. My sister was at that time thirteen years old. My sister was gassed when she was sixteen years old. She didn’t
have any life; as a teenager, as a person. My children never had any aunties, cousins, uncles. They never had a grandfather, a grandmother.50

Unlike above, where the introduction of the Holocaust led to the eclipse of his own narrative, here Burstin articulates many of the factors that tie together the two experiences. The losses of the Holocaust are his own, felt on a daily basis, and even affect the lives of his children. Like the children of other survivors, they grew up without the benefits of living relatives.

And yet even though Polish Jews shared so much history, and had all suffered greatly as a result of the war that Hitler started and the genocide he unleashed against the Jews, their experiences during the war were in fact distinct. Over time one narrative, that of the Holocaust, came to dominate, and the other largely disappeared. By choosing on a given day to cross a newly created border, the refugees effectively crossed outside of historical memory. Whereas the story of the Holocaust has grown in importance over the ensuing decades, their story has only become more obscure.

This chapter stems from an effort to uncover that story. My purpose in going through one oral testimony after another was to gather historical data. How did the Polish Jewish refugees interact with Soviet Jews and other Soviet populations during their time in the USSR? How much did they know about what was happening back in Poland? What were their survival strategies? To what degree was cultural and religious life possible for them? But in addition to finding answers to these and other historical questions, I could not help but be struck by the recurring moments of rupture, when their personal narratives broke down in the face of a larger cultural narrative.

Uncovering their story necessitates not only reconsidering its placement but also examining what can be learned from its displacement. Although many people seem to have a neighbor or great-uncle who survived the war in Central Asia, there is remarkably little scholarship on the experience. Historians of the Holocaust and the DP experience generally mention the Polish Jewish refugees only in passing, as they leave the occupied zone and again when they return after the war.51 Polish historians have an interest in the ethnic Poles who were deported for more
overtly political reasons. Some good work has been produced about the Anders army and Soviet oppression, but, once again, the Jews are minor players in the greater drama. The story of Soviet population evacuation during the war has recently attracted some attention, but, given the huge numbers involved, Jews and refugees can only be marginal. Thus far the Polish Jewish deportees to the Soviet Union have fallen between the cracks of established scholarship.

However, as Symcha Burstin articulates so poignantly, the stories are intimately connected. Whether they spent three days or three months under Nazi tyranny before fleeing across the eastern border, there can be no question that the Holocaust had a profound effect on the lives of the Polish Jewish refugees. Not only was their flight directly precipitated by the German invasion, but they returned to find everything and everyone gone. It should be possible to integrate their war story such that experiences on both sides of the new border receive attention. They too, after all, are part of the greater story of the impacts of World War II on European Jewry.

Nonetheless, from the initial aftermath of the war to the present, this has proved challenging. Even the early reports penned before the invention of the terms Holocaust or survivor downplay one experience in favor of the other. Additionally, in the face of some recent attempts to equate the Holocaust with Soviet tyranny, Holocaust scholars are understandably reticent to allow any equivalencies.

Yet whether or not it is ever possible to offer a more integrated narrative of Jewish life and death during World War II, the awareness of these overlapping narratives should at the very least inform our use of oral testimonies. It is noteworthy that it was precisely in the section of the interview often dismissed by scholars as extraneous or cinematic that the contingency of identity came through most strongly. Except for the most egregious interventions by the interviewers, and the dramatic testimony of Eva Blatt’s sobering and silencing discovery of her soon-to-be husband’s tattoo, both the diversity and the instability of issues of identity would be invisible in the Shoah Foundation testimonies. In most cases, it takes the jarring final questions to elicit what was always under the surface. But what of the interviews where no such questions are asked? And what of other unasked questions to which we will never know the answers?
This research demonstrates both the potential importance of seemingly superfluous questions to understanding the enduring and unfolding legacy of the Holocaust and the contingent and constructed nature of all testimony. Recorded oral testimonies are some of the most important primary sources available to scholars seeking to understand Jewish experiences during the war. Yet they are also framed and mediated by the agencies that oversaw their creation and by the conduct of individual interviewers. They do not allow us to ask the follow-up questions spurred by our own curiosity, and they necessarily reflect the concerns, knowledge, and goals of a particular institution, interviewer, and point in history. This insight should encourage us to pay attention to the border that lies between us and the witnesses, as well as to expand the borders of our research.

Notes

1. Harry Berkelhammer, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (VHA) interview 14300, Toronto, Canada, 16 April 1996, tape 1, minute 24, through tape 2, minute 4.
3. “German–Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty,” in ibid., 42. See also the “Supplementary Protocol to the German–Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty of September 28, 1939, on the Delineation of the Frontiers between Germany and the USSR,” in ibid., 57–61.
6. The only full-length scholarly treatment of this experience remains Yosef Litvak, Jewish Refugees from Poland in the Soviet Union, 1939–1946 [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1988).
7. See, for example, John Goldlust, “A Different Silence: The Survival of More than 200,000 Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during World War II as a Case Study in Cultural Amnesia,” in this volume; Atina

9. Litvak, Jewish Refugees from Poland, 18.
10. See, for example, Yitzhak Arad, The Holocaust in the Soviet Union (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), 75; and Kaganovitch, “Jewish Refugees and Soviet Authorities.”
12. See chapter 2 (table 1), by Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik, in this volume.
15. For an overview of the historiography, see the introduction to this volume.
16. For the 30 percent estimate, see Keith Sword, Deportation and Exile: Poles in the Soviet Union, 1939–1948 (New York: St. Martin’s Press,
1994), 18. Edele and Warlik’s reconstruction in chapter 2 of this volume, by contrast, would imply only 22–23 percent.


19. See, for example, Stanislaw Kot, *Conversations with the Kremlin and Dispatches from Russia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 182.


23. Ibid., 158.


27. Ibid., 170. For more on the indexing, see the material in ibid.; also see Mary Crystal, “Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation: An Introduction to Its Indexing Methodology,” *Indexer* 21, no. 2 (1998): 85–89.


During an on-site interview conducted in July 2012, Stephen Smith, the executive director of the VHA, showed me an internal study the VHA had conducted based on an analysis of this same section, titled, “Messages for the Future: Summary Report.” It had not been published.

These questions were taken from a 2004 list of “topical questions” for Shoah Foundation interviewers provided by the organization. Their archives are not yet cataloged, and finding an earlier version would have been difficult. Nonetheless, the lists of questions were created based on the same template and would not have changed greatly over time.

The general terms about the relative size of the groups are based on listening to approximately fifty Shoah Foundation oral testimonies in the course of this research. However, as some of the interviewers never insert the final questions, some of the answers are ambivalent, and the sample size remains small. I have not included exact numbers or attempted any statistical analysis.


Yankl Saler, VHA interview 41969, Melbourne, Australia, 18 March 1998, tape 8, minutes 27–28.


Ibid., tape 4, minute 7.


Tema Abel, VHA interview 14584, Toronto, Canada, 26 April 1996, tape 4, minute 20.

Yeshajau Lewkowicz, VHA interview 32039, Tel Aviv, Israel, 23 July 1997, tape 5, minute 6.


42. Diana Ackerman, VHA interview 02418, Chicago, Illinois, 4 May 1994, tape 2, minutes 1–3.
43. Ibid., tape 2, minutes 10–13.
45. Symcha Burstin, VHA interview 31555, Melbourne, Australia, 22 July 1997, tape 6, minutes 15–16.
47. Ann Benjamin-Goldberg, VHA interview 11455, Huntington, New York, 14 December 1995, tape 2, minute 0.
49. Wieviorka, Era of Witness, 136.
50. Burstin, interview, tape 6, minutes 20–22.
51. For one recent example, see the very thoughtful work by Zeev W. Mankowitz, Life between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
53. See, for example, Jacob Pat, Ashes and Fire, trans. Leo Steinberg (New York: International Universities Press, 1947). Pat, who had been fortunate enough to settle in the United States just before the war, returned to Poland afterward as a representative of the Jewish Labor Committee. He met with survivors and refugees across the country to offer support and assess need. His book was written to awaken American Jewry to the tremendous suffering, need, and heroism of Polish Jewry. As such, the vast majority of the powerful stories he included were about suffering under the Nazis. Yet he also had occasion to interact with many survivors of flight into the Soviet Union, and they frequently appear in the background of the pictures he paints.
55. As Jovan Byford has recently demonstrated, the culture of memory in different countries is also an important factor in the construction of testimonies. Jovan Byford, “Remembering Jasenovac: Survivor Testimonies and the Cultural Dimension of Bearing Witness,” Holocaust and Genocide Studies 28, no. 1 (2014): 58–84.