

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

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

(From interview with 'Abe' cited in Ruth Wajnryb, *The Silence*¹)

In her book, *The Silence*, Ruth Wajnryb explores the multi-layered and sometimes fraught, intergenerational dynamics experienced by many who grew up in Australia as children of Jewish immigrants from Europe whose lives had been 'dislocated or traumatised during the twelve-year period of the Third Reich.'² The little vignette above told by Abe – one of the 27 adult children of Holocaust survivors she interviewed in the course of her research – is presented in her book to illustrate Wajnryb's point that we might best characterise the way in which some children hear their parents' experiences of 'The War' as a kind of 'leaking out'. By this she means that over many years, during their childhood and even beyond, they tend to catch onto, but only partially absorb, numerous unanchored events that come to them in the form of disparate, hazy and disjointed bits of information. It is not surprising, then, that when they later try to recall or retell one of these stories, even though they may have heard versions of it many times before, as with Abe, they are still a little 'baffled by their own lack of knowledge of their parents' background' and are acutely aware that the 'bits don't compute in your head; they roll around and are unconnected to anything else in your world'.³

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

For one thing, there is Abe's throwaway reference to this 'whole bunch of

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

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

A subtler, but equally important, consideration is that while Wajnryb's sample of Australian interviewees included 27 'second generation' adult children, Abe's are the only 'survivor' parents whose flight to evade the Nazis led into the Soviet Union, and even here they were literally only 'passing through'⁴. Yet, for quite some time it has been widely known, certainly by historians and researchers of the period, that: first, a considerable majority – some even suggest as many as 80 per cent⁵ – of the 300,000–350,000 Polish Jews who remained alive when Germany surrendered to the Allies in May 1945 spent most, if not all, of the war years in territory controlled by the Soviet Union;⁶ and second, that around half of the European Jewish immigrants who settled in Australia in the late 1940s and early 1950s were Polish Jews. Therefore statistically – unless this was a very unusual cohort – we would expect that the immigrants who settled in Australia in the immediate postwar years included, at the very least, 4000–5000 Polish Jews who had 'survived' the war inside the Soviet Union. Yet none of 'these' Polish Jews, or their Australian-raised children, made it into Wajnryb's sample of 'survivor families' – Abe's parents were only travelling through the USSR on their way to their eventual destination, Shanghai. One could reasonably ask: does this suggest there is a broad consensus in place that the term 'Holocaust survivor' should be applied only to those Jews who were liberated from the Nazi concentration and labour camps, or who remained in hiding, somewhere in Nazi-occupied Europe, or who found shelter with some anti-Nazi resistance or partisan group?

This thought receives added support when we look more closely at an earlier study of Holocaust survivors carried out in Melbourne, the city in Australia where

by far the greatest number of postwar Polish Jews chose to settle.⁷ For her book *From Darkness to Light*, Naomi Rosh White undertook extensive interviews in the 1980s with eleven Holocaust survivors – five women and six men – all Polish Jews who were in Nazi-occupied Europe between 1939 and 1945. Among the eleven she selected for her study, and whose stories make up the bulk of the narrative of her book, she included only one male survivor who spent any period of the war years inside the Soviet Union.⁸

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

Sources of information and data

My aim is to contextualise the private, often fragmentary and skeletal, family stories of refuge and exile of Polish Jews inside the Soviet Union, and thereby to locate them within a broader political and sociological narrative. In doing this, I also draw attention to a number of loosely connected but also clearly differentiated geographical and situational trajectories taken by different ‘sub-groups’ among Polish Jews who, by choice or circumstance, spent much of the war in the Soviet Union. I will draw on two different but complementary sources of information and data:

1. Published academic articles and books

There is no suggestion that the ‘story’ has remained completely untold, but rather that, for a variety of reasons I will discuss more fully below, it has gradually receded further into the background and, therefore, much of the complexity and detail surrounding these experiences is no longer widely known or coherently understood. A brief literature review of available material shows that there has been a small but steady stream of academic articles, from the earliest overview in 1953 right up to the present day; as chapters in edited books that deal more generally with aspects of the Second World War, the Holocaust or Eastern Europe; and also in a wide range of academic journals. These include History and Jewish Studies journals, but also others with specialist academic interests such as Slavic Studies, International Relations, Genocide Studies and even Military History.⁹ There is also one edited volume, published in 1991, on the general theme of Polish

Jews under Soviet authority during the Second World War that collects together fourteen academic articles by different specialist authors.¹⁰

2. *Published memoirs*

Autobiographical memoirs by Polish Jews who had spent the war years inside the Soviet Union were already appearing by the late 1940s, although most of the early ones were in Yiddish, and many still remain untranslated.¹¹ By the 1970s a few more, in English and other languages, slowly started to trickle out, but there has been a noticeable increase in the number of published personal memoirs over the past two decades, as the growing impetus for Holocaust survivors to ‘tell their stories’, together with their advancing age, encouraged many Jews of this generation and background (including some who had spent the war inside the Soviet Union) to write autobiographical works.

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

From my reading of more than a dozen of these published autobiographies, the majority by Polish Jews who later settled in Australia, each one (even from authors with little previous writing experience) invariably includes at least a few fascinating and often insightful anecdotes, observations, descriptions and details.¹² These provide the historical narrative with a qualitative richness and ethnographic texture we tend to associate more with a unique lived experience. Drawing on such material therefore both complements and, I would argue, greatly enhances our understanding of the sometimes ‘drier’, more generalised academic accounts of the events that took place in these particular times and locations.

The decision to move eastward (1939–40)

The invasion of Poland¹³ by Nazi Germany on 1 September 1939 was preceded a few days earlier by the signing of a Non-Aggression Treaty between Germany and the Soviet Union. This agreement included a secret protocol that specified the projected borders of the soon-to-be divided Poland. The German Army overcame most of the Polish military resistance within the first few weeks, while Soviet forces moved into Poland from the east on 17 September 1939 to take up positions on the newly defined border (see map – Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The German/Soviet Division of Poland, 1939–41

[This map was accessed at the following web address:

http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_nm.php?MediaId=2372]

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

However, the entry of the Soviets into the picture, and their very rapid movement into administrative control of Eastern Poland, introduced one of the few available alternative scenarios – but also posed some imponderable questions. Was it possible for Polish Jews to rationally determine if it was preferable for them to stay where they were or, for those now under German authority, to seek

a way somehow to move themselves into the Soviet sphere of control? Within the first few days after the Germans began their invasion, an increasing number of Jews from western and central areas of Poland began to leave their homes and move in an easterly direction. As a result, some of these ‘refugees’, as they came to be known, were already in Eastern Poland by the time the Soviet troops took possession of these areas. In addition, for several periods during the first few months after the new border between the German and Soviet-occupied territories of Poland was established – that is, until late in December 1939 – movement between the two zones was relatively open.¹⁴

Notwithstanding considerable apprehensions and doubts, some Jews, particularly young single males – less burdened by work and family obligations, and sometimes encouraged to do so by their families, many of whom had kin or close contacts inside the eastern regions – very quickly began to look for a safe route into Soviet-occupied Poland, making use of any available means, contacts and resources. There were restrictions in place at various times, and there was some level of danger involved, but a considerable number who set out with the intention of relocating to the east managed to do so without too much difficulty. It is estimated that by early 1940, as many as 400,000 Jews from the German-occupied sections of Poland had moved into the Soviet-controlled zone, adding to the more than one million Jews who were already living there.

In their published memoirs, Zyga Elton and Felix Rosenbloom both provide very similar accounts of the almost total confusion that reigned in the two largest Polish cities of Warsaw and Lodz, where well over half a million Jews were living in early September 1939. As young men when the Germans invaded, they both were quick to respond to desperate requests for assistance by the Polish military. As Zyga Elton writes, public announcements were urging ‘all citizens capable of carrying arms to leave Warsaw and march eastward, toward the Russian border, where they might organize themselves into fighting units.’¹⁵ However, without any real direction or chain of command, many who started to respond very quickly decided to abandon this ‘leaderless’ mob and return to their homes.¹⁶

Soon after, with the Germans now controlling Warsaw, and Jews already being rounded up, Elton and his family begin to hear of Jews who had already moved into the Soviet-controlled zone and were now encouraging others to do the same.

So, aged nineteen, Zyga and his brother take a train to somewhere near the newly defined eastern border. There, they negotiate with locals who are paid to take them by cart to the Bug River, which for most of its length has been designated as the de facto border between German and Soviet zones, which they are then able to cross by boat at night. From there they take the train to Bialystok, in the western Belorussian region now occupied by the Soviets.¹⁷

The larger cities, Bialystok in Belorussia and Lwow, in the western Ukraine region, became the most popular destinations for the Jewish ‘refugees’ from German-occupied Poland. Both already have sizeable Jewish populations, with

the number further inflated by at least 30 per cent in the last few months of 1939 when the refugees come streaming in.¹⁸

In late November 1939, Bialystok is also the destination for Felix Rosenbloom, aged eighteen, urged by his father to leave Lodz where violence against Jews is increasing, and a law requiring the wearing of yellow Star of David armbands is about to be introduced. Felix and his cousin take a train to a small town close to the border, from where they are able to sneak across and proceed on to Bialystok without hindrance.¹⁹

In one memoir the decision to move into the Soviet area is presented as a simple choice with few moral complexities or dangers. When the Germans invade Poland, Toby Klodawska Flam is in her late twenties and living in Lodz, but happens to be visiting friends in Warsaw. She decides to remain there and, in late September of 1939, it is quite apparent to all that Poland's war had been lost. She writes: 'One evening a soldier came to the place where I lived and told us he'd heard on the radio that everybody who didn't want to be under German occupation was welcome in the USSR: the borders were open for everybody'.²⁰ As she has heard about the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany, she says to herself: 'Maybe there is a way. Maybe the USSR will save my life'. So, together with some friends and her brother, they decide, as she puts it, to take up the 'Russian offer'.²¹ They leave Warsaw on foot on 28 September. 'The next day we were refugees in the care of the Russian Army in Bialystok ... We were well treated and got some food and shelter.'²²

In some instances the decision to leave was far from voluntary, but rather at the determination of the local German military unit controlling the area. In the first few months following their conquest of Poland, the German policies applied towards Jews often sought to 'encourage' their 'voluntary emigration' into the Russian zone. They even helpfully provided a legal document called an *Ausweis*, which was intended to act as an exit visa. This, for example, was the experience of Fela Steinbock who was living in the southern Polish town of Sosnowiec, near Cracow, which came under German control on the first day of the war. A few weeks later, early in October, she married her fiancé and they quickly decided that they should try to leave if possible. The Germans did not seek to prevent them, however: 'We had to sign a document (an *Ausweis*) stating that we would never return to Sosnowiec again. We were the first to leave town.'²³

Leo Cooper, not yet eighteen years old, at the urging of his father leaves Warsaw on his own in late 1939, moving eastward toward the Soviet zone. In his memoir, he recalls that arriving somewhere near the new border, he seeks and receives an *Ausweis* from the local German authorities without any trouble, and that this also permits him to cross into the Soviet zone unhindered. From here he quickly reaches members of his extended family living in Bialystok, which he observes is now filled with refugees.²⁴

Felix Rosenbloom writes that he and his cousin were moving cautiously

towards the border without any exit papers when they were actually stopped by a German patrol in an area of ‘no man’s land’, but allowed to continue: ‘It seemed that the German authorities were only too happy to be rid of as many Jews as possible.’²⁵

However, in other places, the Germans were neither quite so cordial nor particularly concerned with formalities. Zev Katz, who was in his mid-teens in 1939, was living with his family in Yaroslav, a small town in the south-east of Poland, halfway between Cracow and Lwow, which was occupied by German forces. One day, someone from the local Gestapo gave his family an abrupt ultimatum: either leave town within five hours or be shot. He records in his memoir: ‘In an instant we turned from a well-to-do family with a thriving grocery shop and export business into hapless refugees.’²⁶ Anna Bruell, then aged nineteen, was already on the move towards the southern section of the Soviet zone when she and her brother found themselves in a town occupied by the German Army and with a presence there of the SS. She recalls that a few days after her arrival there the *Sondercommandos* ordered Jews to leave within 24 hours, telling them just to ‘go east’.²⁷

A few of the memoirs point to a relative ease, at least in the early months, with which it was possible to move in both directions across the border between the two zones. At the outbreak of the war, Arthur Spindler is 23 years old and living in Tarnow in Galicia, which is quickly occupied by the Germans. At his father’s recommendation, Arthur and four friends begin their journey towards Lwow in the Soviet-occupied Ukraine, taking about a week to arrive at the border. They cross by night and manage to arrive in Lwow, but not long after, at the request of his family, he re-crosses the border in the other direction and returns to Tarnow where, as a qualified electrician, he is regularly employed over the next few years by the German military.²⁸ Among Naomi Rosh White’s eleven interviewees, four mentioned that, at least once, they had moved in both directions across the German-Soviet Polish border. One informant, Wladek, even reported that as an adolescent: ‘I used to cross the border between east and west Poland once a week’, moving back and forth between his mother’s home in the German-occupied zone and his girlfriend who lived in the Soviet-controlled area.²⁹

The movement into the Soviet-occupied zone slowed down dramatically in the first few months of 1940 when stricter border controls were put in place by both sides.³⁰ However, refugees from German-occupied Poland, albeit in much smaller numbers, continued to find ways of slipping into Eastern Poland right up to June 1941 when the area was invaded by the German Army. There was no particular refugee profile, but the external circumstances tended to favour older adolescents, young married couples, and small groups of peers or similar aged kin travelling into the Soviet zone together. In the early months there was also a pattern of husbands first making the trip into Eastern Poland and later calling for their wives to join them. There were small extended family groups as well, not usually larger than five or six persons, who made the journey together. However,

all who became refugees had to make what for many was a wrenchingly difficult decision: to separate themselves from families left at home – from siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins – many of whom, as it turned out, they were never to see again.

Life under the Soviets (1939–40)

So far we have focused on Jews who actively moved into the Soviet zone; but for a much larger number already resident in these areas, it was the Soviets who came to them, as, for example, in Moshe Ajzenbud's autobiographical novel, where the young protagonist is living in a town in Belorussia occupied by 'the Russians' on 17 September 1939: 'The young folk watching felt distinct relief: they had at last been freed from the anti-Semitic Poles and if the Russians were here, the Germans would not come. They greeted the Russian soldiers joyfully ...'³¹ In her memoir, Anna Bruell, who was able to cross the border into a town in southern Ukraine, writes of a similar response there to the entry of Russian troops: 'They were an unforgettable sight. This was a regiment of Cossacks all on beautiful horses, dressed in long fur-lined capes and tall fur hats. They rode slowly through the streets and were greeted with cheers and flowers, mostly by Jewish people.'³² Bernard Weinryb, writing in the early 1950s, quotes from an oral testimony gathered very soon after the end of the war: "'It is easy to imagine with what great delight the Jews of Lvov met the Red Army which saved them ... from the Germans almost at the last moment.'"³³

These brief passages highlight one widely cited reason for the heightened tension between the Jews and their 'ethnic' Polish neighbours. The relationship between the two groups had already become increasingly volatile in the late 1930s, further sharpened by the growth in electoral support for anti-Semitic political parties in Poland. Another contributing factor was a prominent Jewish presence within the Polish communist party.³⁴ And now, for many nationalistic Poles, the Soviet Union was a hated partner with Germany in the joint destruction of the Polish state. So, observing Jews who, for a variety of perfectly understandable reasons, now appeared to welcome the Russian occupiers, convinced many Poles that Jews as a group had little identification with or loyalty to the Polish nation.³⁵

But political and social differentiation within the Jewish population was an important determinant in how the Soviets responded to the Polish Jews and vice versa. As the Soviet troops took control of Eastern Poland, their political and administrative authorities were intent on quickly identifying and neutralising perceived 'class enemies' amongst the local population. High on their lists were persons active in local political parties, members of the intelligentsia, religious authorities and the group they called the *kulaki*, which included major landowners and leading businessmen and merchants. Jews were to be found in all of these groups. David Kay was only a young boy in 1939 when the Soviets occupied his hometown of Slonim in western Belorussia. As his father was a prominent

local property owner and merchant, he was immediately identified as a *kulaki*, arrested by the NKVD and never seen again.³⁶ The rest of the family, consisting of David, his mother and one of his two older brothers were exiled soon after to a small town in Siberia.³⁷

This was consistent with the general pattern followed by the Soviets, whereby the head of a 'class enemy' family was usually arrested and sent to a prison in one of the Soviet gulags, while the rest of the family was relocated to one of the more isolated 'places of exile' deep within the USSR.³⁸ In a historical time and place, where the particular intersection of external forces and individual circumstances often yielded the most unpredictable of outcomes, it is perhaps one of the blackest of ironies that most of the more than one million Jews permanently resident in Eastern Poland in 1939 were to meet their deaths soon after the German armies invaded these territories in June 1941, as victims of the ghoulish Nazi extermination policies; while, on the other hand, many of the Jews living there but arrested by the Soviets as 'class enemies', who along with other members of their immediate families were incarcerated or deported inside the USSR, were destined to survive.

In this regard, the latter were joined by many among the larger group of Jewish refugees from German-occupied Poland who, by 1940, were increasingly becoming a 'political, administrative and economic problem' for the Soviets in Eastern Poland.³⁹ Finding work was difficult, particularly in the larger cities to which the refugees gravitated.

One attempt to solve this problem was to offer the refugees jobs inside the Soviet Union.⁴⁰ Zev Katz reports that among those who took jobs offered by the Soviets, skilled workers such as tailors or shoemakers 'who could produce goods in the "Western style"' often managed to settle quite well.⁴¹ Leo Cooper who registered himself for work in his trade as a turner was provided with free transport to travel to his assigned location inside the USSR, and later given a form of Soviet 'passport' that listed his status as 'resettled' person as distinct from 'refugee'.⁴² Zyga Elton formally accepted Soviet citizenship, moved to a small town in the Soviet Ukraine and later was able to take up a scholarship at a teachers' college there. He completed one year of his course but his studies were then interrupted by the German invasion of the Soviet Union.⁴³ Toby Flam first took up a job that was offered to her in Soviet Belorussia, later found other work there as a dressmaker and, in the summer of 1940, was accepted as a student in a technical training school in Minsk.⁴⁴ All four write of this early period of their stay in the USSR in a tone that is generally appreciative of the opportunities for training that opened up for them and the positive stimulation associated with the experience of learning a new language and adapting to the Russian people and Soviet culture.

Interestingly, in the main the Polish refugees made few connections with the Russian-speaking Jews, of whom there were many living within the Soviet Union. As Leo Cooper explains: 'The Jews of Minsk, or for that matter of any

other city in the Soviet Union, did not constitute a separate entity. The Jews were in the process of being assimilated and did not, therefore, make any attempt to identify themselves with the newcomers. It was probably fear of entertaining relations with foreigners ... rather than lack of feeling towards a fellow Jew that kept them apart from us.⁴⁵

However, a number of the memoirs tell of the author, or someone they know, taking up the offer of a job inside the USSR and very quickly becoming disillusioned with the working and living conditions they encounter. According to Moshe Ajzenbud's novelistic account, some locals from his town enlisted for work being offered in a number of different locations, including coal mines, iron works and building projects, but many soon returned complaining that the conditions specified in the contract were 'one big lie'.⁴⁶ Larry Wenig tells a similar story about labourers recruited for the Donbas coal mines. The young men who went 'soon found that they had been duped. They sent back letters telling of miserable working conditions.'⁴⁷

One quite spectacular exception emerges in the autobiographical memoir by Ruth Turkow Kaminska.⁴⁸ As a third-generation actress in one of the most illustrious Jewish theatrical families of Eastern Europe and, while still only in her late teens already an established 'star' of stage and screen, Ruth's introduction to life and work under the Soviets is characterised more by ease and luxury, rather than misery and deprivation. Soon after the Germans invade, following the familiar path taken by the Polish refugees, Ruth together with other members of her family – her mother Ida Kaminska, one of the most celebrated stars of Yiddish theatre, her stepfather, and her flamboyant, German-Jewish, jazz trumpet-playing husband, Adi Rosner – hastily decide to depart Warsaw and make their way to Bialystok in Soviet-occupied Eastern Poland. Once there, both Ruth and her husband are quick to take up the offer of Soviet citizenship, and within a few weeks, under the 'auspices of the Belorussian People's Commissar', Adi is offered the leadership of a local jazz orchestra with Ruth to be employed as one of the band's vocalists. They sign a contract for a substantial sum of money that includes extra provision for costumes, sets and other necessary expenses, with the understanding, at the request of local Party functionaries, that they will organise an extensive USSR-wide tour for the band, performing mostly western-style jazz. They then embark on an extremely affluent life style, staying in the best hotels and, with the money being earned, are able to purchase food, clothing and other provisions available only to the Soviet elite. This extends to Adi buying Ruth a luxurious mink and a sable coat as well as expensive jewellery. Their tour opens to great acclaim, first playing dates in Belorussia and then, in late 1939 and early 1940, moving on to extended seasons in both Leningrad and Moscow, before travelling to some of the more remote areas of the USSR.⁴⁹

But the easy acceptance of Soviet citizenship, which presented little problem

to Ruth Kaminska and her husband Adi, was not a choice favoured by the majority of the Jewish refugees now in Eastern Poland. Also, an important condition attached to Soviet citizenship was the requirement for the refugees to then move to smaller urban centres, which most were loathe to do.⁵⁰ The citizenship status of the Polish refugees soon became of major concern to Soviet authorities. In November of 1939 the Soviet Citizenship Law had been extended to the occupied areas of Eastern Poland making all permanent residents *de facto* Soviet citizens. In the early months of 1940 it was decided to extend this further, and offer a Soviet ‘passport’ (the terminology used in the USSR for the required document of identity that confirmed one’s formal status) to the refugees from ‘western’ Poland. However, given the growing general dissatisfaction within the refugee community, highlighted by the widespread disdain that many who had taken work in the USSR had shown by leaving their jobs and returning to the large cities, the Soviets were becoming wary and suspicious of exactly where their ultimate ‘loyalties’ might lie.

So, by March of 1940, the authorities came up with what they thought would prove to be an effective but (as we shall see below, in its level of deviousness and deception) also an exceptionally cruel strategy to test if the refugees’ ‘true’ commitment and ‘loyalties’ were to Soviet rather than German interests.⁵¹ While this may now appear an extremely paranoid response, given the well-known Nazi views towards Jews, not to mention their past policies and action, some of the memoir writers confirm the ambivalence expressed by many Jews around precisely this dilemma. When Toby Flam is about to flee from Warsaw to Eastern Poland, her friend tries to dissuade her by telling her: ‘You will see, the Germans are not so bad.’⁵² Chaim Künstlich’s mother, still living in German-occupied Cracow, wrote to him (he was already in the USSR) suggesting he return, as she thought it ‘better to live with the Germans than to stay in Russia.’⁵³ Late in 1939, in Minsk in the Ukraine, Leo Cooper observed ‘a crowd of refugees who ... were trying to return to Nazi-occupied Poland.’⁵⁴ In various parts of Eastern Poland some Jews even tried, unsuccessfully, to register with German Commissions (set up there as sort of diplomatic ‘consulates’) for ‘repatriation’ back to their homes in German-controlled areas of Poland.⁵⁵ In fact, as Leo Cooper writes: ‘Many managed to cross the demarcation line and re-enter Nazi-occupied Poland, even as many others were still fleeing the Nazi occupation into the Russian zone.’ He retells the widely circulated story of two trains going in opposite directions meeting at the border. Jews from the one travelling into the Russian zone shout: “‘Where are you going? You must be mad,” but are met by those in the other train shouting back at them: “‘You must be insane! Where are you going?’”⁵⁶

So, in March 1940, the Soviets began to require Polish refugees to register themselves with the NKVD, the Soviet internal security agency, and to nominate one of two alternatives: ‘either to become Soviet citizens or to declare that they were ready to return to their former homes, now under Nazi occupation’. But,

faced with this choice, most were wary of opting for Soviet citizenship, fearing that such a step would mean they would never be able to return to their former homes and families.⁵⁷

As a consequence, the Soviet authorities chose to initiate a dramatic and somewhat draconian course of action: the Soviets considered the refugees to be a security risk since they showed a particular interest in developments in the German area, had family connections across the border, had made repeated attempts to sneak through the frontier to visit relatives, and had often expressed the desire to emigrate overseas. This increased Soviet distrust and the refugees were considered as likely candidates for espionage. The refusal of most to accept Soviet citizenship, coupled with their overt declaration to return to German-occupied Poland, drove the Soviet authorities to a radical resolution of the problem – massive deportation of the refugees.⁵⁸

Deportation and ‘Hard Labour’ (1940–41)

The operation to ‘clear’ the Polish refugees from Soviet-occupied territories of western Ukraine and western Belorussia began slowly but reached its peak in June of 1940. Not only Jews were targeted, as a considerably larger number of ethnic Poles had moved from German into Soviet-controlled areas after September 1939. The arrests and deportations reached their peak on the ‘night of June 29 when hundreds of thousands of people were taken from their homes, and sometimes straight off the street, most of whom were Jewish and the rest ethnic Poles.’⁵⁹ Even some of the refugees who had taken up Soviet-sponsored jobs, and some who had accepted Soviet citizenship, were caught up in the swift and efficient round-up operations and summarily deported on the trains with the rest.

The suddenness of their arrest by Soviet authorities and the rapid events that followed – being herded into overcrowded carriages for a lengthy train journey eastwards, often lasting weeks and into parts unknown – is described in detail and sometimes at considerable length in many of the memoirs. Fela Steinbock tells of being arrested while pregnant and, together with her husband (who was not even one of the ‘refugees’ but a permanent resident of Soviet-occupied Poland) being deported by train to a remote barracks camp in the general vicinity of Krasnoyarsk in central Siberia.⁶⁰

All the first-hand reports are consistent in mentioning the severe discomforts experienced during the journey, in particular the extreme overcrowding in the locked, ‘cattle-car’ carriages, the appalling sanitary conditions and the minimal food and water available. All travelled for lengthy periods, but Anna Bruell’s journey of five weeks on the train before arriving at Tinda, located a few hundred kilometres west of Vladivostok in the far east of the USSR, seems especially gruelling.⁶¹

Zev Katz and his family were arrested and deported in late June 1940. He

writes that the guards on the train informed the deportees that they were being ‘resettled’ in big cities inside the USSR where they ‘would be able to live quite comfortably’.⁶² He captures very evocatively how, on the long journey eastward, after some time on the train, the atmosphere between guards and deportees becomes more relaxed and the overall mood improves considerably:

By then we knew each of our guards quite well and on occasion engaged them in long talks. Some of them were very curious to hear about life in Poland and Europe before the war. Some of our ‘passengers’ had travelled widely, even to America. As Soviet people, isolated from the outside world, the guards were fascinated to hear from people who had seen it with their own eyes. The weather was summery, not too hot, and as we travelled through the huge stretches of Russia, the Ural mountains with their breathtaking views and then through the vast lands of Siberia, we could not help being deeply impressed. It was like a holiday in the middle of a nightmare journey ... The train journey was to most of us something of an adventure, since we had not previously travelled beyond our immediate surrounding. Also, travelling on this train was like being in an eerie, suspended time-capsule: we could do nothing but live from day to day and wait to see what would happen.⁶³

Within the existing Soviet system of incarceration there were three distinct types of penal custody to which detainees could be assigned.⁶⁴ The most severe and tightly controlled was the ‘regular’ type of prison where all inmates – this usually included both criminal and political – were confined by walls, fences and guards, kept in cells or primitive huts, ‘rarely worked and were often kept in strict isolation.’⁶⁵ At the second level were the ‘labour camps’ and ‘labour colonies’, invariably in remote and desolate locations where there was some form of control over movement of inmates, and they were assigned to labour duties, but where, due to the isolated locations, walls and fences were unnecessary as escape was virtually impossible. At the lowest level of external control were the ‘places of exile’ to which those who were ‘banished’ were sent and expected to find work to sustain themselves; persons sent to such locations were deemed to be under some form of geographic confinement and subject to other forms of monitoring and restrictions but free to live their own lives in these places for as long as determined by the authorities. This latter category might also include specified remote urban settlements, *kolkhozes* (collective farms) and *sovkhozes* (state-owned agricultural settlements).⁶⁶ It was the second level ‘labour camps’ and ‘labour colonies’ that were the destinations to which most the Polish deportees were first assigned. Many were located in central and eastern Siberia and northern Kazakhstan, but there were also some in the northern sub-Arctic regions of Russia.

So, for example, Larry Wenig and his family were taken from their home at

midnight and then transported for two weeks by train before arriving in ‘Gulag 149’ near Morki (about 1000 kilometres north-east of Moscow) in the ‘Mari Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic’, the homeland of the ‘Finno-Ugrian’ people known as the Mari.⁶⁷ They were informed that they were now classified as ‘special settlers’, a category applied to ‘capitalists or members of political parties that are enemies of the Soviet State.’ Wenig assumes the harsher treatment his family received may have been because when his father had registered as a refugee in Lwow and was asked by the Soviet officer where he would prefer to go, he had replied ‘to the USA’.⁶⁸

The map below shows the principal deportation routes for the Polish refugees transported out of Eastern Poland in 1940⁶⁹ (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Major routes of Soviet deportation of Polish refugees into USSR, 1940-41 [Still from film documentary: Saved By Deportation, An Unknown Odyssey of Polish Jews (2007), directed by Slawomir Grunberg. USA, 56 min.]

Estimates of the overall number of Polish Jews who were deported in these operations vary considerably, from a high of 200,000⁷⁰ to a more modest 100,000.⁷¹ The lower number would seem to be closer to the ‘real’ figure. Indirect support for this is the fact that of the memoirs I read for this article, only five out of the fourteen authors had been taken in the deportations of 1940.

The camps to which the deportees arrived were invariably in remote locations with the number incarcerated in each ranging from a few hundred to several

thousand. The inmates often included both Jews and ethnic Poles. Anna Bruell writes that she experienced little anti-Semitism in these circumstances, which she attributes to the fact that ‘we were all, so to speak, in the same boat.’⁷²

In writing about the Siberian camps, most authors list the numerous hardships: the long hours of labour in forests, mines and farms; the high work quotas expected and the minimal food rations earned even when these were achieved; the extremes of climate faced, particularly the brutal Russian winter; the serious epidemics, particularly typhoid and malaria that swept through the camp population; and, almost everyone mentioned the extreme infestations of bedbugs and lice that they endured. With reference to the latter, the following brief anecdote from *Kuba*, the only interviewee in Naomi Rosh White’s study who spent time in a Soviet labour camp, manages to be both richly evocative of the experience, as well as blackly humorous in tone:

One very important feature of our life was to reduce the lice population on our bodies and clothing. We had to do it every night. If we didn’t, we were finished. The first indication of a person who had given up was that he no longer did it ... Lice in Russia have been a perennial problem. Lenin said once that either the revolution will kill the lice, or the lice will kill the revolution. From what I saw, the half-time score was one-one.⁷³

Significantly contributing to the anxiety and despair experienced by many of the deportees was the uncertainty around their future: how long would they remain in this place, under these conditions?⁷⁴ This was not helped when they were repeatedly told by their guards or by Soviet officials that they must accept as reality that they would never be leaving the camp, much less the USSR.⁷⁵

The conditions were certainly harsh and some died of hunger and disease – one recent estimate suggests that 10 per cent of the Jewish refugees did not survive the experience.⁷⁶ And while the age of the refugees was biased towards young adults, the camp populations also included some adolescents and even young children. Anna Bruell recalls: ‘Few babies survived in our camp in Siberia. I can only remember a few young children, undernourished and mostly kept indoors because of the freezing weather and lack of warm clothes.’⁷⁷

Chaim Künstlich remembers there were children old enough to work in the camp he was in, with the youngest around twelve years of age. He recalls that one child died but overall – unlike some – he remembers the camp experience in relatively benign terms, adding, ‘but nobody died from hard work’. In the same vein he continues: ‘No one froze to death in their bunks, like in some gulags. We had heaters in our rooms and there was the whole forest to burn for fuel.’⁷⁸ Similarly, Anna Bruell who, despite her long exposition on the many difficult conditions faced in the camp, concludes: ‘Yet despite these hard conditions few people got

sick in the winter – there was no flu or other contagious diseases. The worst we got was frostbite, sometimes very serious ...’⁷⁹ Some reported that they were even able to communicate from the camps by mail to contact family and friends back in Poland, and to receive assistance packages of goods and food sent to them.⁸⁰

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

A few deportees were school-age adolescents, and even while in a labour camp, were given the opportunity to continue their education. So Larry Wenig, aged sixteen, began attending school at the commencement of the academic year in September; although he does also note that extensive ‘communist indoctrination’ accompanied the lessons and that ‘dissent’ was not well tolerated.⁸⁴

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

Most of the Polish deportees spent more than a year as involuntary inmates under the strictly controlled regime of these remote labour camps, but their lives took another twist after 22 June 1941 when Germany turned on their former ‘ally’ and mounted a massive military attack on the Soviet Union.

Surviving the war under the Soviets (1941–45)

In the previous section the focus was on the Jews originally from German-occupied Poland who, in 1940, were deported from Soviet-controlled Poland and assigned to carry out hard labour in remote camps scattered throughout the Soviet Union. But there were now two other groups of Polish Jews whose circumstances and locations, in the previous two years, had diverged considerably from those experienced by the deportees. These included Polish Jews who had chosen to take the offer of work inside the USSR, some of whom had also accepted Soviet citizenship; and also some among the permanent residents of Eastern Poland who, as ‘class enemies’, had been imprisoned and deported very soon after the Soviets took control of these areas in 1939.

But when Germany attacked the USSR, the survival options available to all of these groups still inside Soviet-controlled territory began to merge together again.⁸⁶ The reasons for this had a lot to do with broader geo-political events that ensued as a consequence of the Soviets joining the anti-German coalition and therefore seeking strategic and military assistance from, and coordination with, the western governments who were now their new allies.

Of particular significance was the signing of a Polish-Soviet agreement on 30 July 1941 with the Polish side represented by the London-based, Polish Government-in-exile, led by General Sikorski. At the discussions, there was considerable disagreement between the two parties on a number of issues, particularly as to the exact location of a future – meaning post-war – Polish-Soviet frontier. However, with the British applying considerable pressure on the parties to come to some agreement on this and on other points in dispute, including the freeing the Polish prisoners and detainees in the USSR, a series of acceptable, if deliberately ambiguous, compromises was finally reached.⁸⁷

So shortly afterward, on 12 August 1941, the Soviet Government officially declared a general ‘amnesty’ for Polish citizens in the USSR. Those detained in prisons and labour camps were to be freed and permitted to re-settle in other parts of the Soviet Union, with the exception of the large cities in the west. As these were in the ‘European’ portion of the USSR already under fierce attack from the German military, they were unlikely in any case to be the most desirable locations for those seeking a safe haven from the hostilities. Not surprisingly then, the general path followed by most of the refugees was to travel in the direction of the Soviet Republics of Central Asia (in particular Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan)⁸⁸ where the climate was much more temperate and where there was supposedly work available. A further incentive was the Soviet defence strategy that included moving many vital industries into these regions to provide them greater protection from enemy attack. For the Jews, another attraction included the geographic vicinity of these areas to the Soviet frontiers with India and Iran. Some were hopeful that it would be possible to escape from the USSR across

what they assumed, somewhat naively, would be more permeable border areas.

But of critical importance to the refugees who had been deported was a re-instatement of their Polish citizenship, a status to which they had desperately sought to cling and the major reason for the Soviet decision to deport them to the labour camps. Representatives of the Polish Government-in-Exile were permitted to set up 'embassies' throughout the Soviet Union to assist with the process.

Zev Katz describes how, soon after the German invasion of the USSR, the inmates of their labour camp in the Altai mountains of Siberia are assembled and informed that they are now 'Polish citizens and allies'. After some weeks they are finally provided with a tangible recognition of their Polish identity, 'a precious piece of paper'. Representatives of the Polish Government arrive at the camp and inform them that a special train will soon be arriving at a nearby station 'to take us to the warm lands in Central Asia.'⁸⁹ At the station they receive a certificate from the Internal Affairs Ministry stating they are 'under the auspices of the Embassy of Poland' and 'have the right to travel, reside, work, rations etc. much like any other citizen'. Zev and his family choose to settle in Kazakhstan in the 'first major city out of Siberia', where the climate is attractive and although geographically still in 'Asia', a 'predominantly Russian city'.⁹⁰

When the amnesty is announced Larry Wenig's family are in a 'gulag style' camp in Russia's far north. They are told by camp officials that they will soon 'receive special documents enabling us to leave the camp as free people. We were to select a place where we wanted to settle. They would make travel arrangements.' The family chooses the far eastern port of Vladivostok with the hope of finding a way to the USA from there. When this destination is rejected they settle on Uzbekistan, both for the warmer climate and the possible chance of escaping across the border and eventually reaching Palestine or America.⁹¹

In her Siberian camp, on receiving the news that they are free to leave, Anna Bruell and most of her fellow 'prisoners' look to go somewhere in 'Soviet South Asia', even though 'most of us knew nothing about South Asia, just that it was sunny and warm, far from Europe, from the war and from the Germans.'⁹² After a three-week-long train ride, Anna settles in a small town in South Kazakhstan populated by Kazakhs and Russians, where she remains for the next five years.⁹³ Similarly, Fela Steinbok and Chaim Künstlich leave their Siberian labour camps and are each able to find a home in different small towns in Kazakhstan.⁹⁴

Escaping from areas of the Soviet Union threatened by the rapid German advance and into the relative safety of Soviet Central Asia was also a path taken by the few Polish Jews able to do so. A small number, like Moshe Ajzenbud's alter ego, 'Michael', are among those few able to escape the systematic round-up by the Gestapo and the SS of almost the entire Jewish population of Eastern Poland, very soon after the German military quickly gain control of these areas. Michael manages to flee eastwards across the old Poland-Soviet border into Russia, first on a bicycle and then continuing his journey by train until he reaches his final

destination, a small town near Samarkand in Uzbekistan.⁹⁵

Moshe Grossman initially flees into Eastern Poland in 1939, but because of his reputation as a Yiddish writer and ‘intellectual’, is soon arrested and imprisoned by the Soviets in Archangel in Russia’s far north. In June 1941 he also benefits from the ‘amnesty’ and sets out by train towards Central Asia. He writes: ‘In the train there were also Poles who had been released from the camps. They had just been liberated from prisons and camps together with the Polish Jews, but they had not been able to get rid of the habit of flinging “cursed Jew” in the faces of their comrades in fate.’⁹⁶

After a journey lasting seventeen days, he arrived in Samarkand ‘in the land of sun, grapes and frontiers’. There was an official Polish office nearby ‘which issued Polish Passports to all former Polish citizens who had been in Soviet territory since 1939 and had not adopted Soviet citizenship. This meant all those who had been in prison, camps and exile.’⁹⁷ Grossman notes how important it was for all the Polish Jews there to be in possession of their official documents (release certificates). When they were stolen (as often happened) ‘people became absolutely desperate’. However, forged papers could be bought at the Samarkand bazaar – in someone else’s name and often without a photograph.⁹⁸ With his literary eye he also wryly observes that even among refugees in such impoverished and desperate circumstances, an inevitable status hierarchy quickly emerged:

The Russian Jews grabbed the big courtyard ... They would not admit any Polish Jews there. First because we were dirty, second because according to them we were all thieves. And third, we were not evacuees after all but released prisoners! ... The Lithuanian Jews also regarded themselves as a higher class in the lineup. They didn’t like the Poles either. Even the Bessarabian Jews did not hold with us, while among the Polish Jews themselves there was a struggle between the Galicians and the Congress Poles. What was more, there was quite a special dispute between those who talked Polish and those who talked Yiddish.⁹⁹

Another important initiative that came out of the 1941 agreement between the Soviets and the Polish Government-in-Exile was the formation of a separate Polish Army made up of Polish citizens now inside the USSR, and placed under the leadership of General Władysław Anders (himself only recently released from a Soviet prison). One of the major recruiting centres was to be in Buzuluk, near the city of Kuybyshev (now known as Samara), deep inside Russian territory and near the northern border of Kazakhstan. The imminent existence of such a force quickly attracted the attention of some of the Polish Jewish refugees, particularly as it soon also become widely known that, once formed, this army was to be moved out of the USSR and then through Iran, to join up with the Allied forces in the Middle East under British command. As Yisrael Gutman has written: ‘From the

very beginning of the recruiting, thousands of released Jewish prisoners and exiles flocked to the collection points', most acting on their own initiative.¹⁰⁰

Some Jews who volunteered were accepted. However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that there was an ingrained bias against taking Jewish recruits shared by leading officials of the Polish Government-in-Exile, and also among the Polish military command, from General Anders down; this was aided further by some cunning political strategies employed by the Soviet leadership, designed to discredit General Sikorski's 'anti-Semitic' policies in the eyes of their western allies, resulting in Jewish recruitment into the army coming to almost a complete halt after the first few months.¹⁰¹ There is certainly considerable support for this in personal experiences around these events reported in the autobiographical memoirs.

Zyga Elton, who accepted Soviet citizenship in 1939, had his studies at a teachers' college in Western Ukraine rudely interrupted by the German attack on the Soviet Union. After being slightly wounded while volunteering and being assigned to an auxiliary role supporting the Soviet military in their somewhat ineffective attempts to defend against the Germans, Elton hears about the recruitment for the Anders Army in Buzuluk. He makes his way there with the hope that by successfully volunteering he will also be able to regain his Polish citizenship. However, when he arrives after a long train journey he is told he cannot join because he is carrying a Soviet passport. But he is sure that the 'real reason for the refusal was that we were Jews, and the acceptance of Jews into the Polish Army was limited to a very small number, mostly former officers.'¹⁰² Larry Wenig tried twice to join the Anders Army without success.¹⁰³

Moshe Grossman writes: 'Everybody wanted to go and volunteer for the Polish Army... But Jews were not accepted.' Only a tiny number was able to enter and it was widely believed that the only way in was either through bribery or a certificate of conversion.¹⁰⁴ Leo Cooper lends support to this with a personal anecdote. As a Polish Jew who accepted Soviet citizenship and found work in Soviet Belorussia, when the German military starts to advance, he begins to move further east and, by November 1941, is on a train towards Uzbekistan. When stopped at the city of Buzuluk, he discovers, by chance, that this is to be the headquarters for the Polish Army being formed by General Anders. While still at the railway station he meets a fellow Polish Jew, also now a Soviet citizen, who suggests they join up as a way out of the Soviet Union. However, Cooper soon discovers that recruiters are rejecting those who admit to being Jewish. His new friend learns that one can easily get around this by just going back again and this time presenting oneself as a Catholic, but Cooper is reticent to employ this strategy.¹⁰⁵ He comments: 'Apparently the number of Jews wanting to join the Polish Army was quite substantial and there was apprehension among the Polish general staff that, should a large percentage of Jews enlist, the Polish Army might be deprived of its purely Polish character. Jews had not been considered as being Polish.'¹⁰⁶

Eventually, more than 70,000 military personnel recruited into the Anders unit together with another 50,000 family members, including children, were able to leave the Soviet Union by the summer of 1942. This included around 6000 Jews – 3500 soldiers and 2500 civilians – many of whom, in another strange twist, found themselves suddenly under British military control and stationed in Palestine in the summer of 1943. Once there, and with the encouragement and assistance of local Jewish settlers, keen to recruit well-trained soldiers, many of the Jews who left the USSR with Anders Army deserted and quickly disappeared into Jewish towns and *kibbutzim*. So, for the small number able to take advantage of the circumstances, the alliance between the Soviets and the Polish Government-in-Exile, and the formation of the Anders Army, provided them with both an escape route from the USSR and an opportunity to bypass the British Mandate restrictions designed to severely limit further Jewish immigration into Palestine.¹⁰⁷

The movement of Polish Jews into Soviet Central Asia added only a tiny fraction to the overall number of people moving into these areas in the months following the German attack on the USSR. Almost immediately, the Soviet Government put into effect a gigantic evacuation plan so that by December of 1941, at least 10 million Soviet citizens had been moved from ‘European’ into ‘Asian’ areas of the USSR.¹⁰⁸ This, together with the movement of troops and military support towards the front, meant that the major roads and railways across the USSR were filled with the constant flow of people heading in both directions.

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

In Kyzl Orda on the way to Tashkent we met a large convoy of cattle wagons full of people, left on a railway siding ... Most were poorly dressed and some were in tattered clothes, their bare feet covered in cloth. They were Polish citizens freed from concentration camps and settlements in accordance with the term of an agreement between the Polish Government-in-Exile and the Soviet Union. They were escaping the severe cold of the snow-covered Siberian expanse. Their only chance of survival was to reach the mild climate of Central Asia and last out till the end of the war. These people were hungry and had not eaten in days. Some were sick, and without medical help. They hoped to travel as far as Aschabad, and from there to the Persian border. These hopes were the product of delirious minds, as the borders were strongly guarded against any trespass ... We returned to our train, grateful to have escaped their fate.¹⁰⁹

But despite their currently impoverished state, as noted in the book by Moshe

Ajzenbud, the former Jewish deportees had one reason to feel optimistic about the future: they were carrying their ‘Release Certificate’ affirming that they were Polish citizens. ‘They assumed that the others, the Soviet citizens, could expect very little to change – they would have to remain always in Russia. For us, they thought, it is different: we are Polish citizens, and we will have to be allowed to go home after the war.’¹¹⁰

Certainly, as many of the memoirs suggest, day-to-day survival for the refugees in the Central Asian Republics was sometimes quite stressful and difficult. Writing about life in a small town in Kazakhstan, Anna Bruell mentions serious illnesses such as typhoid, dysentery and the ever-present bedbugs and lice. And, while a wide range of work was available, the pay was often insufficient to meet basic nutritional needs, more so if some members of the family or group brought in no income.¹¹¹ Many found jobs in a local *kolkhoz* that required them to take on unfamiliar, physically demanding agricultural work and were paid in accordance with the rules of the particular collective. Moshe Grossman describes working, together with hundreds of other refugees, in the cotton plantation of an Uzbek *kolkhoz* in ‘primitive’ living conditions and receiving ‘meagre food’.¹¹² Some moved on from these locations to take up other jobs in the local towns, in offices and factories, or even, on occasion, as small-scale merchants.

A number mention that they resorted to illegal activities in order to enable them to supplement their impoverished diets. Anna Bruell comments: ‘Everybody stole from each other. There was bribery and cheating on the small and grand scales.’¹¹³ A widely shared observation, often based on personal participation in the practice, is that the ‘black market’ trading of goods usually acquired through stealing and reselling materials from one’s workplace was endemic throughout the Soviet Union. As Zyga Elton observes:

A whole culture developed which rationalised the lifting from factories and government enterprise, as these were common property, and partly owned by the perpetrator. This would be distinguished, in people’s minds, from lifting privately owned property which was considered morally wrong ... Being in charge of goods for which there was a great consumer demand would further enhance one’s well being.¹¹⁴

David Kay was a young boy when, in 1939, he was transported with his mother to a small Siberian town where he became involved with a gang of young thieves and petty criminals. He holds the view expressed by many others that theft was ‘endemic’ to Russian life. His mother also soon began to participate in illegal activities and shrewdly established ‘business’ relationships with powerful men in the town with whom she could make mutually beneficial ‘deals’. Kay writes: ‘She was imprisoned many times for her black marketeering, but her bribes and contacts saw her released fairly quickly.’ He also contends that ‘thieves did not receive severe treatment from police and magistrates’ because their offences

were not as bad as ‘capitalist’ crimes such as speculation. In particular, from the Soviet ideological perspective, ‘distributors’, that is, merchants, were perceived as ‘nothing more than speculators’. The producer should sell directly to the consumer and thereby eliminate the ‘parasitical’ middle-man.¹¹⁵

Inevitably the Jews had some contacts with the distinctive ‘ethnic’ groups that made up the various components of the local populations. In the memoirs, few deal in much detail with these ‘indigenous’ groups such as the Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Tajiks, not to mention the ‘Bucharan’ Jews. When these groups do appear in the narratives, it is often in terms of their Muslim or, more frequently, their Asiatic ‘exoticism’.¹¹⁶ Fela Steinbock observed that the ‘local’ (meaning Bucharan) Jews ‘seemed almost unaware that there were Jews in other parts of the world. They lived with the local people, spoke their language, dressed like them’.¹¹⁷ Moshe Ajzenbud found it intriguing that in the small town near Samarkand where he lived these ‘Buchara Jews’ dressed in European clothes (unlike the local Uzbeks) and ‘had biblical names like Moses or Jacob’.¹¹⁸

Anna Bruell found the Kazakhs a ‘very hospitable and generous people with whom we got on very well. They had nothing against Jews or Poles but hated Russians passionately.’ However she also notes their widespread poverty, ‘superstitions’ and ‘quaint’ child-caring practices; and felt less comfortable with their ‘low hygiene standards’. With regard to these she pointedly mentions that, although they were invited to eat with their Kazakh landlords, ‘no matter how hungry we were, we could never bring ourselves to share the meal.’¹¹⁹ Chaim Künstlich also found the Kazakhs ‘welcoming and very good to the Polish people’.¹²⁰

Some of the memoirs include quite lengthy ‘ethnographic’ descriptions of the local living conditions, dress and customs. Zyga Elton, who had come to Buchara in Uzbekistan, observed that ‘most living quarters were built of clay, patched together with small windows, low ceilings and doors. One had to bend to enter.’ Not surprisingly, it was the local *Chaikhanas* or teahouses that operated as hubs for most social and community interaction, although restricted to males. He also observed that the visually impressive and ancient tiled mosque was ‘now abandoned and the front a major market site.’ As for the people: ‘The inhabitants of these parts, the Uzbeks, were dressed in long quilted kaftans, worn in winter on top of other kaftans and in summer, on bare bodies. The headgear called “*tyubiteika*”, had the shape of a squared dome and was richly embroidered with local motifs.’¹²¹

The Uzbek language, ‘a Turkish derivate’, was incomprehensible to the newcomers, and overall, Elton found the locals ‘not particularly welcoming to the Polish refugees, or for that matter, the Russian evacuees.’¹²² Larry Wenig agrees, noting that the social distance between the two groups was such that ‘the Uzbeks on our street did not talk to or look at us.’¹²³ Moshe Grossman, in Samarkand, at first presents a similar view, noting considerable hostility between the local Uzbeks and the refugees, even down to the children, who are continually throwing stones at the Jewish children: ‘The little Uzbeks hated the Polish children because they

were better dressed and received clothes and food from America.¹²⁴ However, he soon tempers this by observing that, over time, the relationship between the two groups began to warm:

It took a long time for the Uzbeks and the Jews to get to know one another better. Once we were accepted as guests at their festivities, both people saw that you must not judge in a hurry or superficially by the people you meet by chance in the street or the bazaar. Among them, as among ourselves, there were decent, modest, fine folk of high morality and culture.¹²⁵

Overall, relations between the Jews and ‘ordinary’ Russians, with the general exception of those in authority positions and NKVD officers, tended to be mostly cordial and friendly. Anna Bruell observed that most of the Russians in these areas were also often quite impoverished, and except for those ‘in charge’ not much better off than the local Kazakhs.¹²⁶ David Kay was only a young boy when he and his mother were transported from their home in Eastern Poland to their place of exile in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, where they remained for almost six years. David found it easy to make friends there with boys his own age and experienced little overt discrimination against Jews. The locals were generally hospitable, even prepared to share what meagre supplies of food they might have, leaving him with the impression that ‘individually, Russians are remarkably good people.’¹²⁷

Zev Katz had already shown his determination to take advantage of what the nominally egalitarian Soviet system had to offer with his letters to Stalin requesting access to education while still an inmate of a Siberian labour camp. He pursued these ambitions further when he and his family were ‘amnestied’ and moved on to Semipalatinsk in Kazakhstan. By September 1942 Zev gained entry as a student in a teachers’ training college linked to the University of Kazakhstan, from where he was able to graduate with his degree four years later. During this period, life for him and his family regained some sense of ‘normality’. There were cultural institutions operating – the National Theatre of Kiev was resettled and performed in the town, cinemas regularly showed movies, including even some from America. But he also remained conscious of the enormous contradictions inherent in Soviet society: the difficult working conditions and immense poverty and hunger of most workers and ‘peasants’ that were in sharp contrast with the material advantages open to the privileged classes (the *Nomenklatura*), who were able to enter closed shops to purchase goods that were unavailable to the rest.¹²⁸

Despite their parallel experiences during their time in the USSR, the relationship between Polish Jews and ethnic Poles continued to follow the mostly separate, mutually distrustful and often openly hostile pattern frequently remarked upon already in a number of the autobiographical memoirs cited. But there are also some who present a different image. After the 1941 amnesty for Polish refugees, Felix Rosenbloom, unable to get to Central Asia, instead relocated to Bijsk in central

Siberia, where he remained for several years. There were also other refugees in the town, including non-Jewish Poles, with some of whom he developed warm and lasting friendships: 'I could not vouch how they felt about Jews in general, but I believed that their friendship to me was genuine. We remained good friends until I left Bijsk.'¹²⁹

Obviously, both Jews and Poles came into the wartime situation with long-established, strongly held views about, and personal experiences with, members of the other group that inevitably contributed to how comfortable and open they were likely to feel now. So, Chaim Künstlich might be seen as somewhat atypical when he writes about his life in pre-war Poland: 'I never experienced any difficulties as a Jew attending Polish schools, because Krakow was a very nice city and the Polish people were very nice.'¹³⁰ Later, when he is settled in a small town in Kazakhstan he is again careful to resist placing emphasis on any 'ethnic' differences within the refugee population: 'There was a Polish community, but the Jewish community was very small and we really didn't know who was Jewish and who was not ... There was no anti-Semitism there.'¹³¹

After April 1943, with the Germans now in retreat from the USSR, the already intense ambivalence felt by many of the Jewish refugees with regard to their past and present identity as Poles, not to mention their future relationship with an as yet unknown, post-war Poland, were put to a further test. For reasons that lie outside the scope of this article, but revolve around irreconcilable differences on the exact location of the future Poland-USSR borders, the Soviet Government's already uneasy relationship with General Sikorski's Government-in-Exile fractured completely.

Even before this final break, the Soviet political strategy had already turned toward making effective use of the Polish refugees inside the USSR as part of their broader geo-political ambitions to establish a predominant influence over a compliant, post-war, communist Poland. To these ends, the Soviets assisted in the setting up of two important new Polish institutions: the first was the formation of the Polish Army in the USSR, to be drawn entirely from Polish refugees, that would fight alongside the Red Army in the liberation of Poland from the Germans; the second was a political organisation, the Union of Polish Patriots (known also by its acronym in Polish as the ZPP), aimed at recruiting any Polish communists who were still alive, and other Poles whose political credentials met Soviet requirements, to be trained to play leading roles in a future Polish Government.

On 8 May 1943, two weeks after they broke off all relations with the Polish Government-in-Exile, the Soviet Government announced the formation of the first military unit of the 'new' Polish Army which was to be under the command of Colonel Zygmunt Berling and strategically named, after the Polish national hero, the Tadeusz Kosciuszko division.¹³² The number of recruits continued to grow so that by the summer of 1944, when this 'new' Polish Army re-entered Poland alongside Soviet forces, it consisted of more than 100,000 soldiers. In the

recruiting process there was considerably less discrimination against Jews than had been the case with the earlier Polish Army under General Anders, and it is estimated that around 12,000 Jewish soldiers served, with a high Jewish representation amongst the officers.¹³³

Fela Steinbock's brother was 'drafted' into the Kosciuszko unit in 1944.¹³⁴ But Zev Katz presents a less sanguine view of this 'new' Polish Army, suggesting anti-Semitic discrimination was still in evidence. When he and his brother tried to volunteer, they were rejected and told that the recruiters had been warned that the Polish Army 'had too many Abramoviches already, they do not need any more.'¹³⁵ Felix Rosenbloom also writes that he was rejected when he tried to join the Polish Army in 1944.¹³⁶

Jews were, however, well represented in the ZPP, leading one academic author to suggest: 'The best period for Polish Jewish refugees was from May 1943 until the end of July 1946 because Stalin had assigned them a role in the process of transforming Poland into a "peoples" republic and a Soviet satellite.'¹³⁷

Zyga Elton joined the ZPP soon after its formation and late in 1944 was recruited as an assistant to the local branch secretary in Buchara, Uzbekistan. He writes: 'My task was to organise cells at workplaces where there were at least five Polish citizens working. I had to call and attend meetings at which we were to enlighten the members of the merits of The Polish Committee of National Liberation,¹³⁸ and the future of the new Polish Democratic Republic.' He was assigned to visit collective farms outside Buchara 'with substantial Polish-Christian populations who were generally little interested in what I had to say, except with regard to what was on their minds: repatriation to Poland'. The hostility towards Elton as a representative of the Soviet-sponsored organisation was so intense that he felt 'hatred in their eyes'.¹³⁹ After these experiences he came to realise that the ZPP had no standing within the Polish-Christian community for whom: 'As an organisation of former communists and Jews, ZPP was a complete anathema.'¹⁴⁰

Larry Wenig, in another town in Uzbekistan, observed that the ZPP opened their own schools in areas where there was a Polish refugee population into which Polish-speaking students were encouraged to transfer. The schools took care that the educational curriculum followed was supportive of Soviet ambitions for the direction of the 'new' Poland.¹⁴¹

By 1944 some Polish Jews were being 'called up' to serve in the Soviet Army, although they discovered they were to be assigned to a 'labour battalion' rather than a fighting unit. Often this meant being recruited to work under conditions not dissimilar from those in the regular Soviet 'labour camp'. On being drafted, Leo Cooper was taken with many others by train from Uzbekistan to a camp not far from Leningrad where most of the other conscripts laboured in coal mines, while, because he was skilled, Cooper was assigned work in the maintenance shop.¹⁴² A similar story is told by Zyga Elton who also had a brief stint in a Red Army labour unit that involved a train journey of several weeks across the USSR followed by

work in a coal mine, before he was released from duty on health grounds.¹⁴³

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

During the years that I spent in Soviet Russia I had almost instinctively tried to pass through everything experienced by a considerable part of the citizens and above all by the Jewish refugees from Poland. I already had been in exile and in prisons, I had already been in hospitals and kolkhozes. Had worked at digging earth, at cotton plantations, I had carried clay and bricks, worked as a bookkeeper, served as a nightwatchman, sawn wood in the forests, worked as a sailor on a freighter, starved, slept in the streets, had been tortured and beaten during interrogation. The only thing missing to round matters off was a concentration camp.¹⁴⁴

Grossman was deported to a labour camp, but again fate intervened, in the form of Stalin's grander political ambitions. Two months after Germany's unconditional surrender in May 1945, the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union declared a new amnesty for all Polish citizens, including the right to be repatriated to the 'new' Poland. This even included persons sentenced to not more than three years imprisonment, so on 4 August 1945 Grossman was once again a free man.¹⁴⁵

Repatriation and Dispersion (1945–)

For the Polish Jews who had remained under Soviet control for the best part of six years, the belief that they would one day be free to leave the Soviet Union had seemingly ebbed and flowed with the political tides. By late 1939, if they were permanent residents of Eastern Poland, they were Soviet citizens by decree; and in 1940, if they were 'refugees' from German-occupied Poland, they either became 'voluntary' Soviet citizens or were deported to labour camps for refusing this honour. By the summer of 1941, they were all theoretically Polish citizens again; and by 1943, when relations between the Soviets and the Polish Government-in-Exile fractured, they were again Soviet citizens. As they were by now dispersed throughout the USSR and subject to various civilian and military authorities, who

often interpreted these sudden ‘policy’ shifts in unpredictable and idiosyncratic ways, it is not surprising that in the last few years of the war many Jews were perpetually confused and anxious about their precise status and fearful about exactly what might happen to them after Germany was defeated.

By late 1944, with the territory of Poland retaken by the Red Army, supported by the Soviet-sponsored ‘Polish Army in the USSR’, the Polish Committee of National Liberation that Stalin had earlier sanctioned was installed in the temporary ‘capital’ of Lublin as the new government of communist Poland. For a range of strategic and political reasons, the Soviets considered it important to solicit the support of the more than a million Poles (including Polish Jews) who had survived the war inside the USSR.¹⁴⁶ After the end of hostilities, this approach was reaffirmed in the form of the announcement on 6 July 1945 declaring ‘the right of persons, Polish or Jewish by nationality, living in the USSR, to change their Soviet citizenship and be evacuated to Poland.’¹⁴⁷ In a recent article, Albert Kaganovitch suggests a few of the strategic rationales that probably influenced Stalin in taking this fateful decision:

In addition to relieving the USSR of a potentially unreliable group and increasing the population of its future satellite state, another consideration in permitting a large-scale emigration may have been Stalin’s desire to gain sympathy in the West during negotiations over Poland’s future borders, and thus to neutralise one basis for the hostility promoted by the London-based Polish Government-in-exile.¹⁴⁸

Not surprisingly, when the news of this latest ‘amnesty’ spread through the Polish exile population, there was a rush to register for repatriation. While some of the Polish Jews were suspicious that it might be another ruse by the Soviets and rather than be returned to Poland they would end up back in a labour camp,¹⁴⁹ they very quickly overcame these initial apprehensions.

Their path towards repatriation was smoothed further by the general looseness of the registration process, with virtually any form of documentation accepted as sufficient proof of former Polish citizenship. Even where there was no documentation, as Leo Cooper observed, ‘two witnesses who would confirm that they knew the person as a former Polish citizen’ was sufficient.¹⁵⁰ The final decisions were left to local Soviet bureaucrats often joined by members of the ZPP.¹⁵¹ Zyga Elton, who as a representative of the ZPP in Bucharra was placed in charge of organising the registration process there, notes that sometimes more creative assistance was necessary:

... we had to invent ways for those who had no documents, but who were genuine Poles, to get through the bureaucratic maze ... Any document with a slight indication of Polish locality was made valid. We even accepted medical prescriptions in the Polish language as valid documents ...¹⁵²

The complex logistics for repatriation took considerable time to organise, as most of the Polish citizens, in particular the Jews, required transportation from thousands of kilometres away. Some who, when the war ended, were located in the western parts of the USSR including Eastern Poland, managed to return in 1945, but most of the others did not gain access to available transportation until the spring and summer of 1946. Before they departed, many of the refugees were less than subtly encouraged by their Soviet hosts to consider and appreciate, upon their return to Poland, the benefits and assistance they had received during their stay in the USSR. Zev Katz was awarded his degree from the University of Kazakhstan before he was scheduled to depart in the summer of 1946. He recalls that after the graduation ceremony he was invited to the Dean's office and told:

You have been one of our best students. We have given you education and made a major effort to see that you graduate ... You will shortly return to Poland. A Polish student who graduated from a Soviet university, who studied Marxism-Leninism is very important to us. I am sure that you will be able to make a meaningful contribution for the good of both our countries.¹⁵³

Leo Cooper tells of a similar experience. Following the release of Poles being repatriated from working in a Soviet military labour battalion, at a celebration ostensibly to honour their imminent departure, local officials 'expressed the hope that we would remember with gratitude our stay in the Soviet Union and would continue to work for the cause of socialism in liberated Poland.'¹⁵⁴

The Soviet authorities employed other strategies designed to gain sympathy of repatriates, for example providing comfortable travelling conditions on the trains that took the refugees back to Poland including ample provisions, available medical support and even free clothing and footwear.¹⁵⁵ Commenting on her train journey in April 1946, Anna Bruell confirms that they were repatriated without being required to pay a fare.¹⁵⁶

In the end, while few of the Polish Jews were left with a particularly favourable view of Soviet communism as a political system, many did retain positive feelings about the people – Russians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and others – who, in the main had treated them decently and with compassion, and a heartfelt appreciation for the relatively safe and peaceful refuge they had been fortunate enough to find inside the USSR. In her memoir, Toby Klodawska Flam recalls her rather effusive parting words on the train leaving the Soviet Union in March 1946: 'Goodbye, my friends! ... Goodbye, friendly country! ... I'll never forget you, goodbye!'¹⁵⁷ Leo Cooper is more measured, but also quite open about feeling some ambivalence when it was time for him to take his leave of the Soviet Union. He recalls being 'overcome by a strange feeling. It was a feeling of uncertainty about what lay ahead mixed with sadness of leaving behind the people amongst whom I lived for over seven

years of my prime youth, of leaving my Russian friends who treated me with so much kindness and understanding.’¹⁵⁸

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

Spindler had moved into the Soviet-occupied part of Poland in 1939, but soon after returned to his family in German-occupied Poland. Working as an electrician in Tarnow he was employed by the German military, but when Jews began being rounded-up and a ghetto established, he obtained false ‘Aryan’ papers and moved to Warsaw. Now presenting himself as an ethnic Pole he again found work with a German company dealing in wheat. Some time later, he was contacted by Polish Partisans who persuaded him that, as a ‘Polish patriot’, he should assist their cause by diverting some of the company product for their benefit. The double irony here, as he notes, was: ‘Me, a Jew being asked to join the Polish underground! It had been made all too clear that Jews were not welcome in the organisation.’ Spindler was given a Polish code name and sworn in on the Holy Cross.¹⁵⁹ Events took an even stranger turn when in December 1944, the Soviets reoccupied the town and, as they considered the Polish partisan movement to be an ultra-nationalist and anti-Soviet organisation, Spindler was arrested. Despite his protestations that he was really a Jew hiding under false papers, he was transported to a ‘gulag’ inside the USSR and not released until late in 1947 when, as the beneficiary of another ‘friendly’ Soviet gesture towards the new communist Polish Government, he was finally allowed to return to Poland.

We last mentioned Ruth Turkow Kaminska in 1940, when she and her husband, Adi Rosner, were on a national tour with his jazz band. While many of the other Polish Jews were being deported to labour camps, they seem to have stumbled into an alternative universe, and were living the ostentatious and lavish lifestyle of the Soviet *Nomenklatura*, associating mostly with high officials, favoured artists, writers and other ‘celebrities’. After successful, lengthy seasons playing the two major cities, their tour continued into the ‘provinces’ covering the Soviet Central Asian republics and the ‘far east’. This also included a concert in the so-called ‘Jewish Autonomous region’ of Birobidzhan, the Soviet-created ‘Jewish Homeland’ referred to at the beginning of this article, where they found little evidence of ‘Yiddish culture’ and a noticeably impoverished living standard. At one point they were all flown to a Black Sea resort town and directed to perform a ‘special concert’ played to a completely empty theatre, except for one curtained box, which they later believed was probably occupied by Comrade Stalin himself. By 1944 they were being asked to provide entertainment relief for frontline troops

of the Red Army during its advance into Poland and, as a reward, gained possession of a 'war trophy' – a Ford automobile left behind by the retreating Germans.

Their musical careers and privileged lifestyle continued until the summer of 1946. They started to sense that the emerging Cold War rhetoric was casting their form of entertainment as at odds with the current ideological climate, so, having completed their contractual obligations, they requested permission to return to Poland along with the other repatriated refugees. They were scheduled to leave late in November, on one of the last repatriation trains from Lwow in the Ukraine, but on the evening before their departure they were paid a visit by NKVD officers who searched their apartment and arrested Adi. Within a short time, Ruth was also in prison. Both were sentenced to lengthy terms of imprisonment. Ruth served five years, the first part in prison, and later in exile in Kazakhstan. She was finally 'rehabilitated' after Stalin's death and only managed to return to her home in Warsaw in 1956.¹⁶⁰

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

The sense of desolation was undoubtedly amplified by the widely noted hostility they faced from their fellow Poles upon their return. Zyga Elton experienced a taste of what was to come as soon as the train bringing him back crossed over the Polish border: 'Wherever we stopped on the Polish side, we attracted the local population who stared at us, taunting and jeering, exhorting us to go back from whence we came ... We realised that our troubles were not yet over.'¹⁶¹ Leo Cooper points to a certain ironic symmetry in being warned by the Russian conductor on the train against returning to Poland, where Jews are already being killed by their fellow Poles, echoing the sentiments expressed in the story from 1939: 'Fools, where are you going?'¹⁶²

Almost every one of the memoir writers makes a point of reporting the coldness and rejection they encountered from 'ethnic' Poles, often quoting almost identical phrases of hatred and contempt as the first words with which they were 'greeted': 'You are alive? I thought all the Jews were killed?';¹⁶³ 'So many of you still survived?';¹⁶⁴ 'Where are all these Jews coming from? We thought Hitler finished all of them. Pity he didn't.'¹⁶⁵ While having his hair cut following his return to Cracow in 1945, Larry Wenig overheard a fellow Pole exclaiming: 'We must forever be grateful to Hitler. He got rid of the Jews.'¹⁶⁶ Zyga Elton was saddened by the total lack of empathy towards the Jews who had survived: 'I could not understand the mentality of these people who had witnessed the destruction

of their neighbours without showing any compassion. They could not find in their heart a word of consolation for those who survived.’¹⁶⁷

Using documentation now available, we still cannot be certain of the exact number of Jews who returned to Poland from the Soviet Union. In their recent article, Jockusch and Lewinsky estimate that 200,000 had been repatriated by late 1946.¹⁶⁸ Taking a longer time frame, as some Jews in the Soviet Union did not return to Poland until the later 1940s and even well into the 1950s, Dobroszycki has calculated that a total of ‘about 240,000–250,000 returned arriving at different points in time.’¹⁶⁹ There was also a much smaller number of Polish Jews liberated in the territory of the former Polish state – Jockusch and Lewinsky give a figure of 50,000 – either from the concentration camps, in hiding or with partisan groups.

As the comments from the memoirs cited above suggest, in general the homecoming was not a sweet one and many who did return stayed in Poland for a very short time. The official Polish Government policy was to direct the returning Jews towards settling in the western areas of Poland, such as Lower Silesia and Pomerania, that had been ‘cleared’ of their former high concentrations of ethnic Germans.¹⁷⁰ David Kay describes arriving in the virtually empty Upper Silesian city of Szczecin only a few weeks after it was taken by Soviet troops. Still only a young boy, he and his family were ‘dropped at the end of the street, told to choose whatever flat we wanted and to register with the police the next morning with details of the property we had appropriated.’¹⁷¹ Fela Steinbock, Chaim Künstlich and Anna Bruell were also first resettled in Silesia. Anna Bruell writes of the savage Polish reaction as more of the returning refugees from Russia began arriving in Szczecin: ‘After a few weeks the Poles started a real “pogrom”, attacking the traders at the market, robbing them and beating some savagely to death.’¹⁷²

Zev Katz found, to his dismay, that his family had been resettled in Lodz in a house that was previously part of the Jewish ghetto from which, only a few months previously when the Lodz ghetto had been ‘liquidated’, the former inhabitants had been expelled and transported to a Nazi death camp.¹⁷³ On coming ‘home’ to physically devastated Warsaw, Zyga Elton poignantly captures the feelings of total helplessness and despair that many who returned must have experienced:

As I was taking my first hesitating steps in the city of my childhood, now almost completely destroyed, I could hardly recognise the outlay of the streets ... An immense sadness descended upon me as I realised the enormity of the destruction and the tragic fate of my family. I could hardly see anything in front of me as my eyes filled with tears of helplessness ... There were only ruins where the apartment house stood when we said goodbye to my parents and sister, leaving them in their hour of need. It was then that I felt guilty and remorseful for leaving them on their own, powerless as they were to defend themselves. I wandered around aimlessly, trying to imagine what and how it all

happened. There was no one to whom I could turn for help.¹⁷⁴

It is in no way surprising then that most who came back also very quickly came to the conclusion that there was no place for Jews in the new Poland. The rejection and verbal insults they encountered were accompanied by serious outbreaks of violence; an estimated 1500–2000 Jews were killed in such attacks between 1945–47. The most infamous, the Kielce Pogrom that took place in that city on 4 July 1946, finally convinced many Jews who were still in doubt to leave Poland as soon as they could.¹⁷⁵ The extent of the flight was dramatic: overall, around 275,000 Jews were living in Poland for some period of time between 1944 and the spring of 1947,¹⁷⁶ but the post-war Jewish population reached its peak of around 240,000 in the summer of 1946 following the mass repatriation from the USSR; in the nine month period between mid-1946 and March 1947, 140,000 Jews left Poland for good.¹⁷⁷

A large number of these Polish Jews who were looking to leave quickly were assisted by a Zionist ‘underground railway’ known as the *Bricha*,¹⁷⁸ a network of more than 150 special emissaries sent from Palestine who helped them to make their way into Displaced Person camps in Germany, Austria and Italy.¹⁷⁹ From there they moved on to Palestine, or to other cities in western Europe, particularly Paris, and then some even further to other countries of immigration that began accepting European refugees in the late 1940s. Most settled in Palestine or the USA, but a smaller number, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, had managed to obtain the necessary documents providing them with permanent migration status for Australia, Canada or some of the countries of South America.

A Different Silence

I now return to the observation in the introduction concerning the historical and cultural marginalisation of the events, contexts and stories I have been recounting above. Awareness of this process is not new and was already being publicly commented on very soon after the war ended. Writing about the Jews in European Displaced Person camps in 1947, journalist Mordkhe Libhaber observed that the survivors in these camps ‘had not adequately addressed Soviet exile’. He saw this as a paradox, since he was aware that Polish Jews who had survived in the Soviet Union constituted the majority of the displaced Jews in Germany.¹⁸⁰ Yet, as recently as 2010, historian Atina Grossman makes an almost identical point, noting that the image of the ‘Holocaust survivor’, both through representations in popular cultural forms such as films, documentaries, novels, and museum exhibits, as well as in the academic and scholarly literature, ‘does not in fact reflect the historical experience of most survivors. This does seem to me rather extraordinary.’¹⁸¹

What are the individual and collective processes that seem to have cumulatively ensured that the experiences of so many Polish Jews who survived in the Soviet Union continue to be relegated to, at best, a historical footnote in the

history of the Holocaust? The difficulties faced by many Jewish survivors over many decades in articulating their experiences, both to their children and to ‘the world’ in general, has been captured in the well documented explanatory concept of Holocaust ‘silence’ – the central theme in Ruth Wajnryb’s book on intergenerational transmission of parental memories, emotions and experiences with which this article began. It seems to me that the events and stories that I have explored above are not widely known because they have often been buried underneath not one but three ‘layers’ of silence.

The first layer of silence is one that they share with all the other survivors – those who were in the Nazi camps, in hiding, in the forests – to which the major contributors are the feelings of grief, loss and guilt around those close to them who did not survive.¹⁸² The experience of returning to Poland after their time in the Soviet Union to find their families and communities wiped out would have triggered a similar range of emotional and psychological responses as it did for all other survivors.

Also in this layer of ‘shared silence’, something common to all survivors who left Europe soon after the war and then immediately confronted issues associated with immigration and settlement in a new country – finding work, a place to live, learning a new language, bringing up young families – is that most ‘simply did not have time ... to record – let alone publish – their experiences.’¹⁸³ Some preferred anyway to follow the advice given in 1946 by Larry Wenig’s uncle when he came to meet his father on their arrival in the United States from a DP camp in Europe: ‘You’re in America now. Forget the past.’¹⁸⁴

Another aspect of ‘shared silence’ is related to language. Most of the Polish survivors who came to the west were not fluent in English, and many who settled in Israel spoke Hebrew as a second language. For almost all, their first language was either Yiddish or in some cases Polish, which increased the difficulty of effectively ‘communicating complex, nuanced “information”’ even to their own children, much less to their new non-European friends and neighbours.¹⁸⁵ As I noted above, the few early published accounts of the Jewish experiences inside the Soviet Union were almost exclusively in Yiddish.

The second layer is ‘politically motivated silence’. The Soviet Union, Stalin and the international communist movement all represented polarising global political symbols and Jews were just as divided about them as everyone else, perhaps even more so. As the Jewish refugees had been, for the period of the war, ‘guests’ of the Soviet Union, how were they to respond to the country and the political system that, for whatever reasons, saved them from likely extermination at the hands of the Nazis? A certain level of ambivalence was inevitable, as the journalist Mordkhe Libhaber already observed in 1947: ‘A feeling of strong gratitude towards the Soviet Government, mixed with accusations against it, is part of the problem.’¹⁸⁶

Many were fully aware that the intention behind the decision by the Soviet

authorities to deport them to labour camps was not to 'save' them, and that the reason they were still alive was the fortuitous combination of historical accident and good fortune. Their own limited agency in responding to their situation is captured in the realisation by Zyga Elton in his memoir: 'During the war years we were moved around under difficult circumstances, without exercising our own will. We lived from day to day, victims of war. We were not asked what we would like to do. We were always pushed by ensuing events.'¹⁸⁷

The ambivalence many felt was complicated further by the intensification of Cold War rhetoric in the west. While they remained in Soviet-dominated Poland it was best not to criticise the USSR, and when many of them moved to the west it was generally wise not to praise it. It is then not surprising that, at least publicly, most preferred to say as little as possible. It was only with the collapse of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s that 'the need for justification, political positioning, and settling scores with the Soviet Union became obsolete.' It is probably not coincidental that almost all the autobiographical memoirs cited above written by Polish Jews who spent the war years in the Soviet Union were published after 1990. 'The motivation to write these memoirs generally was not political; rather, the authors sought to leave personal testimonies for the second and third generations.'¹⁸⁸

The third layer of silence is the position of 'relative silence' both imposed upon and accepted by the Jews who returned from the Soviet Union in relation to other Holocaust survivors, that derives from what some observers have called 'the hierarchy of victimhood'. Many of the returnees were quickly made aware that, in the general context of what had happened to others, their 'suffering' had been relatively minor.¹⁸⁹ These sentiments are echoed in a number of the memoirs. Anna Bruell writes: 'Much later when we heard about the concentration camps and what happened to people there, we called ourselves lucky. Despite the hard conditions we still had a chance to survive – they had none.'¹⁹⁰ In the foreword to his autobiographical memoir, Felix Rosenbloom admits that he finally succumbed to the 'nagging' of his two sons who for years had wanted him to write down his 'life story': 'They did not agree with my approach, that I survived the war years in the comparative safety of the then Soviet Union, and that only people who were incarcerated in ghettos or concentration camps or had been in hiding from the Nazis, should leave eye-witness accounts of those terrible years.'¹⁹¹

Among Holocaust survivors there were socially sanctioned mechanisms soon in place that enabled them to very quickly bring their personal experiences and grieving to the attention of the broader general public and particularly to others within the local and global Jewish community. Already by the early 1950s, in Australia and elsewhere, there were ritualised communal forms of public commemoration of the Nazi horrors inflicted in the death camps and the ghettos. Certainly for almost all of the Polish Jews who survived in the Soviet Union, and also later for many of their children, there was an equally strong impetus to be

part of these, as many of them had lost most, and in some cases all, of the families who had remained in Nazi-controlled Poland. However, their own particular stories around their mode of ‘escape’ and ‘survival’ tended to remain a private and family affair. There was little impetus or desire from them to form organisations, to be with others who had similar experiences or, even though there were deaths of family and children while they were in the Soviet Union, to create any special public rituals of commemoration.

The diminished status assigned to the refugee experience in the USSR has, over many decades, permeated into many of the debates amongst Jews around Holocaust memory and appropriate commemoration. In most cases, those belonging to both groups have either colluded with or accepted the de facto ‘hierarchy of suffering’, already in place soon after the war, ‘with concentration camp survival at the top and the Soviet experience at the bottom.’¹⁹² Since then, we see in virtually every aspect of the memorialisation process, either the total exclusion of the Polish refugee experience from the status of ‘survivorhood’, as is often the case with museums and displays devoted to the Holocaust, or, at best, allowing some of the Poles who were in the Soviet Union to ‘slip into’ the ‘survivor’ category. This is what has occurred, for example, in accepting their oral testimonies as part of recently accumulated collections such as that undertaken by the worldwide Shoah Foundation project that houses more than 50,000 interviews, or among the more than 1300 that have been accumulated in the more locally oriented Phillip Maisel Testimonies Project at Melbourne’s Jewish Holocaust Centre. However, despite this, it is significant that were they to be attributed, or feel themselves as ‘deserving’ of, ‘full’ survivor status, they should constitute the majority of the testimonies. But my initial examination of the online information on the interviews conducted in Australia shows that, in each of these collections, Polish Jews who had been in the Soviet Union represent fewer than 15 per cent of all the Poland-born interviewees.

Similarly, with the noticeable emergence of published autobiographical memoirs by Jews who had been in the USSR over the past twenty years. I have been able to locate fourteen of these for this article, and certainly more have been published, but again these figures must be considered in a broader context. As recently as 2004, the distinguished historian of the Holocaust, Yehuda Bauer, was careful to note in his foreword to Zev Katz’s autobiography that, compared with the many hundreds by Holocaust survivors, ‘not many Jews who fled or were deported to the Soviet Union wrote memoirs.’¹⁹³

My purpose in this paper, then, has been to try to counter the pervasive influence of the combined weight of the three layers of silence I have identified, that have for a long time relegated the experience of this very large body of Jewish refugees to the periphery of historical awareness and, I would suggest, clouded our ability to fully grasp and comprehend their experiences. In including material from some of the now available first-person memoirs I am belatedly responding

to the plea from historian, Meir Korzen, who more than half a century ago wrote:

The life of horror, the dramatic struggle for survival and the premature, bitter end the Jews eventually suffered under the Nazi regime, has overshadowed the fate of the Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union which has consequently been relegated to secondary importance ... And yet, this episode is definitely worthy of the historian's attention, not only because it involves so many human beings, but also because its study reflects particular experiences that have an impact on the present generation and are likely to impress future generations, no less in their way, than do the experiences and consequences of the Nazi regime.¹⁹⁴

Notes

- 1 Ruth Wajnryb, *The Silence: How Tragedy Shapes Talk* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2001), p. 236.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 40. This is the operational definition of 'Holocaust Survivor' she chose for the purposes of her research.
- 3 *ibid.*, pp. 212-13.
- 4 In their particular instance, they travelled by train from Lithuania all the way across the USSR from west to east as far as Vladivostok, then on to Japan and eventually to Shanghai. It is likely they were among the more than 2000 Polish and Lithuanian Jews who, together with a much larger group of around 17,000 mostly Austrian and German Jews, were able, between 1938 and 1941, to take advantage of the extremely loose entry requirements into the international settlements of Shanghai and, for the duration of the Second World War, found a relatively safe wartime refuge in this cosmopolitan 'Paris of the East'.
- 5 The recent revival of academic interest in the topic has yielded differing estimates of the total number who returned from the Soviet Union, as the proportion of all Polish Jews who survived the war. These range from around two thirds, see, Laura Jockusch and Tamar Lewinsky, 'Paradise Lost? Postwar Memory of Polish Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2010), p. 374; to a high of more than 80 per cent suggested by Atina Grossmann, "'Deported to Life": Reconstructing the Lost Story of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union During World War II', p. 2 of her personal notes for the paper she presented to the *Association of Jewish Studies Conference* (Boston, December 20, 2010), a copy of which she was kind enough to provide me. Most researchers agree that definitive figures are virtually impossible to ascertain, and tend to make do with rounded approximations, calculated using a range of available data sources of both the overall number of Polish Jews who survived the war and the number of these who returned to Poland from the Soviet Union.
- 6 This includes both the sections of Eastern Poland and Lithuania annexed by the Soviets after September 1939 and the 'greater' USSR itself.
- 7 Naomi Rosh White, *From Darkness to Light* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1988). The 1954 Australian Census recorded 6603 Poland-born Jews resident in Victoria,

compared with 2030 in NSW. See the figures in the table presented as Appendix IIIa in Charles Price, 'Jewish Settlers in Australia', *AJHS Journal*, vol. V (1964).

8 See the biographical notes on 'Kuba', in Naomi Rosh White, op. cit., pp. 44-5.

9 One of the earliest overviews, published in 1953, was that of Bernard Weinryb, 'Polish Jews Under Soviet Rule' in Peter Meyer et al (eds), *The Jews In The Soviet Satellites*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1953) pp. 329-69, in which he presents an extremely detailed historical chronology and politically well-informed outline of events. Another early contribution, an article by the historian Meir Korzen, was published in 1959: 'Problems arising out of Research into the History of Jewish Refugees in the USSR during the Second World War', *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 3 (1959), pp. 119-40. It is telling, given when it was written, that he begins by noting that the Nazi destruction of Jewish communities throughout Europe 'has almost completely diverted the attention of contemporary Jewish historiography from another dramatic and interesting episode in the history of the Jews in the Second World War – that of the Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union.' (p. 119). Following an extended discussion drawn from sources and material already available, Korzen concludes by urging interested researchers to initiate a new study of Polish Jews who had spent the war years in the USSR, even going so far as to provide them with an extremely comprehensive ten-page, thirteen section, sociological questionnaire they could apply to potential respondents, seeking more detailed information on a variety of locations and circumstances that confronted different groups among the refugees during their stay in the Soviet Union (pp. 131-40).

Interest in the subject by historians, political scientists and sociologists cooled over the next 20 years, but there was a revival that began in the late 1970s and has continued up to the present. Some examples of articles published between the late 1970s and early 1980s include two by Ben-Cion Pinchuk, whose attention is primarily concentrated on the period 1939-41 in Soviet-occupied Eastern Poland. The first is a more general paper: 'Jewish Refugees in Soviet Poland 1939-1941', *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2 (1978), pp. 141-58. Pinchuk's second paper: 'The Sovietization of the Jewish Community of Eastern Poland 1939-1941', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 56, no. 3 (1978), pp. 387-410, looks at the attempts by the Soviet authorities in Eastern Poland to politically 're-educate' the Jewish refugees. Another paper published during this period take a closer look at a very early document that illuminates aspects of the underlying political tensions between, and very different interests of, the Soviets and the Polish-Government-in-Exile in relation to the situation of Polish Jewish refugees in Eastern Poland: David Engel, 'An Early Account of Polish Jewry under Nazi and Soviet Occupation Presented to the Polish Government-In-Exile, February 1940', *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, (1983), pp. 1-16.

Academic interest in recent decades has been spurred considerably by the fall of the Soviet Union and the other Eastern European communist regimes in the early 1990s, which has opened up an enormous volume of new data and archival material to researchers. Some more recent contributions that have proved useful for my own study include: Lucjan Dobroszycki, *Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland: A Portrait Based on Jewish Community Records 1944-1947* (Armonk, NY, M. E. Sharpe, 1994) which is primarily a presentation of detailed data on Jewish survivors, in particular

children, but also includes a lengthy introductory overview essay; another detailed exposition of both the broader context and the sequence of events surrounding the Polish Jewish refugees survival inside the USSR can be found in Yosef Litvak, 'Jewish Refugees from Poland in the USSR, 1939-1946' in Zvi Gitelman (ed) *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 123-50; Jockusch and Lewinsky, op. cit., pp. 373-99, is the most extensive and comprehensive among recent contributions, and also seeks to identify and explore some the reasons why, given the obviously expanding interest in Holocaust stories both in academic and broader public circles, this one has remained so 'under-explored'; Albert Kaganovitch, 'Stalin's Great Power Politics, the Return of Jewish Refugees to Poland, and Continued Migration to Palestine, 1944-1946', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* vol. 26, no. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 59-94, provides a useful political analysis of the labyrinthine cross-cutting motives and interests of the major international players in the ultimate decision by the Soviets to allow the Polish Jews to leave the USSR after the end of the war.

10 Norman Davies and Antony Polonsky (eds), *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939-1946* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991) is an edited volume that includes papers presented at an academic conference held in Jerusalem in 1988, as well as a number of contributions commissioned later by the editors. It consists of fourteen chapters, each by different authors, and presents essays on an impressive range of specialist topics under the broad umbrella of the title theme. The book also includes 150 pages of relevant primary documents.

11 One of the earliest of these was by Moshe Grossman, a well-known Yiddish writer of novels and short stories from Warsaw, who was already in this mid 30s when war broke out and he fled into Eastern Poland. His memoir of the years he spent under Soviet rule is titled, with obvious irony, *In The Enchanted Land: My Seven Years in Soviet Russia* (Tel Aviv: Rachel, 1960) and was originally published in Yiddish in 1949. Grossman later settled in Israel and the book was republished there in Hebrew in 1951.

Presented as a fictional story of a protagonist named 'Michael', Melbourne Yiddish writer, Moshe Ajzenbud's thinly veiled memoir of his years in the Soviet Union, *The Commissar Took Care*, (Brunswick, Vic: Globe Press, 1986) was another quite early personal account, first published in Yiddish in 1956.

12 Of the fourteen published autobiographical works I consulted for this article, the authors of nine of the books are Polish Jews who settled in Australia. These include three recent publications that emerged from the ongoing 'Write Your Own Story' program initiated in the 1990s by Melbourne's Makor Jewish Library to encourage and assist older members of the local community to document their lives in print. With the exception of the very early book by Moshe Ajzenbud, op. cit., all of the other eight Australian-published autobiographical memoirs have appeared since 1994: Leo Cooper, *Stakhanovites and Others: The Story of a Worker in the Soviet Union* (Melbourne: Hudson Publishing, 1994); Fela and Felix Rosenbloom, *Miracles Do Happen* (Melbourne: Scribe, 1994); Anna Bruell, *Autumn In Springtime: Memories of World War II* (Melbourne: Printed privately, 1995); Zyga Elton (Elbaum), *Destination Buchara* (Ripponlea, Vic: Dizal Nominees, 1996); Arthur Spindler, *Outwitting Hitler, Surviving Stalin* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press,

1997); David Kay, *Tough Kid: Surviving Siberia in Style* (Caulfield South, Vic: Makor Jewish Community Library, 2005); Fela Steinbock, *My Life: Surviving in Russia* (Caulfield South, Vic: Makor Jewish Community Library, 2007); Chaim Benjamin Künstlich, *L'Chaim: Surviving Soviet Labour Camps to Rebuild a Life in Postwar Poland*, (Caulfield South, Vic: Makor Jewish Community Library, 2009). Of the five non-Australian publications, two of the authors immigrated to the USA: Ruth Turkow Kaminska, *Mink Coats and Barbed Wire* (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1979); and, Larry Wenig, *From Nazi Inferno To Soviet Hell* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2000). Two others settled in Israel in the late 1940s: Moshe Grossman, op. cit.; and, Zev Katz, *From The Gestapo To The Gulags: One Jewish Life* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2004). And one memoir writer settled in Canada after the war: Toby Klodawska Flam, *Toby: Her Journey from Lodz to Samarkand (and Beyond)* (Toronto: Childe Thursday, 1989).

- 13 Poland's new borders and integrity as an independent nation-state were re-established immediately following the First World War. For more than a century before this all of the territory of Poland had been conquered and then divided, with sections subsumed under the authority of Imperial Russia in the east, the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the south and the Prussian, later German, State in the west.
- 14 Litvak, op. cit., pp. 122-24.
- 15 Zyga Elton, op. cit., p. 104.
- 16 While Elton was in Warsaw, Felix Rosenbloom was in Lodz and reports an almost identical experience there, only some days earlier: On Tuesday, September 5, 1939, radio announced a 'strategic retreat' of military units from Lodz and 'urged all able-bodied males, between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, to leave the city during the night and to head towards Warsaw, to help defend the capital of Poland.' Felix also heeded the call but observing the general atmosphere of disorganisation and panic with 'tens of thousands' on the roads, he soon returned home. Fela and Felix Rosenbloom, op. cit., pp. 61-2.
- 17 Zyga Elton, op. cit., pp. 104-17.
- 18 Bernard Weinryb, op. cit., p. 330.
- 19 Fela and Felix Rosenbloom, op. cit., pp. 67-72.
- 20 Toby Klodawska Flam, op. cit., p. 39.
- 21 ibid., p. 40.
- 22 ibid., p. 42. Perhaps the ease with which she was able to cross the border had something to do with when this took place. Pinchuk (1978), op. cit., notes that while the new borders between the USSR and Germany were drawn on 28 September 1939: 'During the month of October, the Soviet authorities did not object to the German practice of forcing entire Jewish communities to cross into Soviet Poland.' (p. 143). And: 'The Soviets were still ready to accept thousands of Jewish refugees, either those who had been expelled or were fleeing on their own.' (p. 144).
- 23 Fela Steinbock, op. cit., p. 73.
- 24 Leo Cooper, op. cit., pp. 12-18.
- 25 Fela and Felix Rosenbloom, op. cit., p. 71.
- 26 Zev Katz, op. cit., p. xiv.
- 27 Anna Bruell, op. cit., pp. 19-27.
- 28 Arthur Spindler, op. cit., pp. 23-30.

- 29 Naomi Rosh White, op. cit. See particularly the biographical information provided by her interviewees: Frania (p. 18), Wladek (p. 32), Kuba (p. 44) and Henryk (p. 50).
- 30 Pinchuk (1978), op. cit., p. 145.
- 31 Moshe Ajzenbud, op. cit., p. 5.
- 32 Anna Bruell, op. cit., p. 27.
- 33 Weinryb, op. cit. p. 333.
- 34 Notwithstanding the fact that the Polish Communist Party had been virtually destroyed in the late 1930s ostensibly because Stalin suspected it was controlled by ‘Trotskyists’.
- 35 This is discussed in considerable detail in: Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, and Kai Struve, ‘Introduction’ in Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, and Kai Struve (eds), *Shared History – Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941*, Leipziger Beiträge zur Jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur, no. 5. (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), pp. 13-42.
- 36 David Kay, op. cit., p. 3.
- 37 *ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
- 38 Zev Katz, op. cit., p. 32.
- 39 Pinchuk (1978), op. cit., p. 146.
- 40 *ibid.*, pp. 149-50. He notes that, in particular: ‘Teachers, engineers, technicians, accountants and physicians were in great demand.’
- 41 Zev Katz, op. cit. p. 45.
- 42 Leo Cooper, op. cit. pp. 21-9.
- 43 Zyga Elton, op. cit. pp. 162-3.
- 44 Toby Klodawska Flam, op. cit., pp. 43-6.
- 45 Leo Cooper, op. cit., p. 40.
- 46 Moshe Ajzenbud, op. cit., p. 39.
- 47 Larry Wenig, op. cit. p. 96. Both Ajzenbud and Wenig’s personal accounts find support in the academic overviews by Litvak, op. cit, pp.127-28; and by Pinchuk (1978), op. cit., p. 20, who notes that among the Jewish refugees who registered for work in the USSR: ‘quite a few among them came back. What might have been considered by the Soviet authorities to be a generous offer of conditions equal to their own citizens was believed by the refugees to be hard labor that they were not accustomed to performing.’
- 48 Ruth Turkow Kaminska, op. cit.
- 49 *ibid.*, pp. 9-39.
- 50 Korzen, op. cit., p. 123.
- 51 Litvak, op. cit. p. 128. The Soviets seriously suspected that some of the Jewish refugees who had fled into their territories could have been planted to undertake espionage on behalf of Nazi Germany or other Western countries, *ibid.*, p. 126.
- 52 Toby Klodawska Flam, op. cit., p. 40.
- 53 Chaim Künstlich, op. cit., p. 60.
- 54 Leo Cooper, op. cit, p. 30.
- 55 Pinchuk, (1978), op. cit., p. 152.
- 56 Leo Cooper, op. cit., p. 31. Pinchuk also mentions this same incident, which he

- reports is an 'authentic story'; see Pinchuk (1978), op. cit., p. 153.
- 57 Pinchuk (1978), op. cit., pp. 150-51. Litvak, op. cit. p. 129 writes: 'More than half the refugees from the German-occupied zone were registered to return to their homes on the German side. Most of those registered to return were lone individuals, hoping that in this way they might be united with their family members.'
- 58 Pinchuk (1978) op. cit., p. 153.
- 59 Litvak, op. cit. pp. 129-30. Especially targeted among permanent residents of Eastern Poland included: 'leading members of Zionist organizations as well as other political parties, especially the "Bund," former representatives of the Polish Sejm and senate and local authorities, some wealthy people and rabbis, as well as people who were suspected informants and collaborators with the Polish police against the Communists.'
- 60 Fela Steinbock, op. cit., pp. 84-5.
- 61 Anna Bruell, op. cit., p. pp. 38-41.
- 62 Zev Katz, op. cit., p. 45.
- 63 *ibid.*, pp. 47-8.
- 64 Weinryb, op. cit., p. 349.
- 65 Stephen A. Barnes, 'All For The Front, All For Victory! The Mobilization of Forced Labour in the Soviet Union during World War Two', *International Labour and Working Class History*, No. 58 (2000), p. 241.
- 66 Litvak, op. cit., p. 131.
- 67 Larry Wenig, op. cit., pp. 113-31.
- 68 *ibid.*, p. 105.
- 69 While most of the refugees in Eastern Poland had been deported by the end of June 1940, further deportations continued, but on a smaller scale, until the outbreak of German-Soviet War almost a year later. See: Norman Davies and Antony Polonsky, 'Introduction', in Norman Davies and Antony Polonsky (eds), op. cit., pp. 28-9.
- 70 This figure is given by Edward D. Wynot Jr in his article 'World of Delusions and Disillusions: The National Minorities of Poland during World War II', *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, vol. 7, no. 2, (1979), p. 188. He estimates that 80 per cent of all Polish Jewish refugees were taken in these deportations, which seems far too high a proportion. Similar figures, drawn from documents compiled by the wartime Polish Government-in-Exile based in London are cited in Maciej Siekierski, 'The Jews in Soviet-Occupied Eastern Poland at the end of 1939: Numbers and Distribution', in Davies and Polonsky (eds), op. cit., p. 113.
- 71 This is the figure provided in the recent article by Kaganovitch, op. cit, p. 63, and seems more accurate as a considerable number of refugees were able to avoid being caught up in the deportation dragnet by having already left the major cities of Eastern Poland, many to take up work inside the USSR. However, to this must also be added the 100,000 Polish Jews who were deported as 'class enemies' from Eastern Poland very soon after the Soviets took control in 1939, see, Jockusch and Lewinsky, op. cit., p. 373.
- 72 Anna Bruell, op. cit., p. 43.
- 73 Cited in Naomi Rosh White, op. cit., pp. 44-5. About bedbugs Larry Wenig, op.

- cit., p. 134, similarly observes: 'The war on the bug problem was continuous, with never a victory.'
- 74 This point is strongly argued by Eva Marks, originally from Austria, who is a young girl when the Nazis take control in 1938, and then moves with her family to Riga, Latvia. In 1940 the Soviets briefly take control of Latvia, but when the Germans invade in June 1941, she and her family are transported to Soviet labour camps, the first in Siberia and later another in Kazakhstan where they spend the next seven years. In her autobiographical memoir she argues that this situation can be psychologically more damaging than the one facing a 'normal' Soviet prisoner who knows precisely the length of their sentence: 'The fact that we had no ... definite sentence imposed on us, played continuously on our minds and caused incredible stress. In some ways, it was worse than physical deprivation.' Eva Marks, *A Patchwork Life* (Caulfield South, Vic: Makor Jewish Community Library, 2003), p. 60.
- 75 Words to this effect are recalled by both Anna Bruell, op. cit., p. 43 and, by Zev Katz, op. cit., p. 48.
- 76 Kaganovitch, op. cit., p. 63. Fela Steinbock, op. cit., pp. 87-8, recalls that: 'In Siberia there was a saying ... "If you won't get used to it, you'll die" and some who couldn't cope did.'
- 77 Anna Bruell, op. cit., p. 48.
- 78 Chaim Künstlich, op. cit., p. 63.
- 79 Anna Bruell, op. cit., p. 59.
- 80 Zev Katz, op. cit., pp. 66-7.
- 81 *ibid.*, pp. 55-64.
- 82 Larry Wenig, op. cit., p. 175.
- 83 Chaim Künstlich, op. cit., p. 64.
- 84 Larry Wenig, op. cit., p. 175.
- 85 Zev Katz, op. cit., pp. 71-6.
- 86 According to Weinryb, op. cit., p. 353: to these groups must also be added, between 120,000 and 180,000 local, meaning eastern Polish, Jews who fled into the Soviet Union ahead of the advancing German Army, thus swelling the number of Polish Jews in the USSR to at least 400,000.
- 87 Davies and Polonsky, 'Introduction', in Davies and Polonsky (eds) op. cit., p. 33.
- 88 Weinryb, op. cit., p. 355.
- 89 Zev Katz, op. cit., p. 79.
- 90 *ibid.*, pp. 81-3.
- 91 Larry Wenig, op. cit., p. 187.
- 92 Anna Bruell, op. cit., p. 70.
- 93 *ibid.*, pp. 71-83.
- 94 Fela Steinbock, op. cit., pp. 91-4; Chaim Künstlich, op. cit., pp. 70-1.
- 95 Moshe Ajzenbud, op. cit., p. 43-56.
- 96 Moshe Grossman, op. cit., p. 123. As Meir Korzen, op. cit., p. 129 points out, many of these ethnic Poles were 'former colonists, police constables, officials and well-to-do estate-holders' who had been forced off their property when the Soviet Army took over Eastern Poland in 1939. 'They had always been chauvinistic, and now their national pride had been hurt by the sudden and unexpected downfall of Poland, and embittered by personal misfortune they readily pointed to the Jewish

scapegoat, claiming indignantly that “the Jews had welcomed the Red Army” etc. Not even the bitter common fate that they shared with the Jewish refugees who, like them, had been made homeless and taken to remote forced labour camps and work villages, could abate their Jew-hatred.’

- 97 Moshe Grossman, op. cit., p. 173.
 98 *ibid.*, pp. 125-7.
 99 *ibid.*, pp. 127-8.
 100 Yisrael Gutman, ‘Jews in General Anders’ Army in the Soviet Union’, *Yad Vashem Studies*, 12 (1977), p. 236.
 101 For an extended and comprehensive discussion providing detailed documentation of the internecine political maneuverings behind the severely restricted Jewish participation in General Anders’ Polish Army, see: Yisrael Gutman, op. cit., pp. 231-333; and also, the much briefer summary by Ryszard Terlecki, ‘The Jewish Issue in the Polish Army in the USSR and the Near East, 1941–1944’, in Davies and Polonsky (eds), op. cit., pp. 161-71.
 102 Zyga Elton, op. cit., p. 183.
 103 Larry Wenig, op. cit., p.215; p. 258.
 104 Moshe Grossman, op. cit., p. 210.
 105 Leo Cooper, op. cit., pp. 84-7.
 106 *ibid.*, pp. 88-9.
 107 See Gutman, op. cit., p. 285; and Terlecki, op. cit., pp. 166-8. One of the deserters when the Anders Army was stationed in Palestine was the future Israeli Prime Minister, Menachem Begin. Some Jews did not desert and remained in the Polish Army that later fought with the Allies in Italy. After the war, as a reward for their service to the British cause, veterans of General Anders’ Polish Corps were granted permission to settle in the UK rather than be repatriated to the ‘new’ and increasingly communist-oriented Poland. This was the path taken by *Kuba* (one of the interviewees in Naomi Rosh White’s study) who then spent five years in the UK before immigrating to Australia. Naomi Rosh White, op. cit., pp. 45-6.
 108 See, Rebecca Manley, *To The Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War*, (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 50.
 109 Zyga Elton, op. cit., pp. 188-9.
 110 Moshe Ajzenbud, op. cit., p. 77.
 111 Anna Bruell, op. cit., pp. 89-101.
 112 Moshe Grossman, op. cit., pp. 139-42.
 113 Anna Bruell, op. cit., p. 85.
 114 Zyga Elton, op. cit., p. 211. Also, according to David Kay, op. cit., p. 35, because they were extremely ‘nationalistic’ Russians avoided plundering any goods directed towards the military.
 115 David Kay, op. cit., pp. 28-31.
 116 So, for example, Moshe Ajzenbud, introduces a lengthy, literary description of the town of Zirbulack in Uzbekistan with the observation that: ‘he felt as though he had stepped back in time ... The streets were narrow and dusty between small scattered mud-house. The air was filled with unfamiliar sounds of camels and mules, used for transporting all kinds of goods. The small, state-owned shops that surrounded the market-place were uninteresting and sold poor-quality rugs and household

goods, but there were also shabby, privately-owned stalls that sold *catic* – a kind of yoghurt, tiny balls of butter and an abundance of delicious, exotic fruits which Michael had never seen before. There were honeydews and watermelon, cantaloupes, juicy grapes as long as your finger, figs, dates, pomegranates and many others. On the ground were bags of rice, nuts, and all kinds of vegetables which, having ripened in the hot sun of the region, tasted exceptionally sweet. In round, mud-ovens women baked *lepioshkas*, the Uzbek bread, and sold it on the spot. In another part of the market *shashlik* was cooked and Michael was surprised to see Uzbeks sitting on the ground around a big dish of plow – the traditional meal of rice, mutton and vegetables cooked in oil – and eating with their fingers.’ And further: ‘In time he grew accustomed to the people and their ways, even to the women who walked through the streets with their faces hidden by *parangas*, black muslin veils. Young women wore long, colourful dresses and delicately embroidered *tubiteykas* on their thick black hair that was braided into one single, heavy plait or into many tiny ones’. Moshe Ajzenbud, op. cit., pp. 56-7.

- 117 Fela Steinbock, op. cit., p. 63.
 118 Moshe Ajzenbud, op. cit., p. 57.
 119 Anna Bruell, op. cit., pp. 88-9.
 120 Chaim Künstlich, op. cit., p. 71.
 121 Zyga Elton, op. cit., p.193.
 122 *ibid.*, p. 194.
 123 Larry Wenig, op. cit., p. 246.
 124 Moshe Grossman, op. cit., p. 187.
 125 *ibid.*, pp. 202-03.
 126 Anna Bruell, op. cit., pp. 90-1.
 127 David Kay, op. cit., p. 35.
 128 Zev Katz, op. cit., pp. 81-114.
 129 Fela and Felix Rosenbloom, op. cit., p. 95.
 130 Chaim Künstlich, op. cit., p. 10.
 131 *ibid.*, pp. 70-1.
 132 For a detailed discussion of this new Polish Army, see: Klemens Nussbaum, ‘Jews in the Kosciuszko Division and First Polish Army’, in Davies and Polonsky (eds), op. cit., pp. 183-213.
 133 *ibid.*, pp. 194-208. Kaganovitch, op. cit, p. 62, contends that Stalin encouraged the enlistment of Polish Jews into the Soviet-controlled Polish Army ‘in part to boost the Soviet position in the imminent diplomatic struggle for Eastern Poland.’
 134 Fela Steinbock, op. cit., p. 68.
 135 Zev Katz, op. cit., p. 106.
 136 Fela and Felix Rosenbloom, op. cit., p. 106.
 137 Litvak, op. cit., p. 148.
 138 This was a Polish committee sanctioned by Stalin in July 1944 that subsequently became the new government of Communist Poland; see, Kaganovitch, op. cit., p. 66.
 139 Zyga Elton, op. cit., p. 238.
 140 *ibid.*, p. 245.
 141 Larry Wenig, op. cit., pp. 264-5.

- 142 Leo Cooper, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-20.
- 143 Zyga Elton, *op. cit.*, p.230.
- 144 Moshe Grossman, *op. cit.*, p. 320.
- 145 *ibid.*, pp. 380-83.
- 146 For an extended discussion of the likely geo-political rationales that lay behind Stalin's decision to permit Polish Jews to leave the USSR, see, Kaganovitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-83.
- 147 Dobroszycki, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- 148 Kaganovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
- 149 Anna Bruell, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- 150 Leo Cooper, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-42.
- 151 Kaganovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
- 152 Zyga Elton, *op. cit.*, p. 258. He also notes that there were 'some Polish citizens who refused repatriation and preferred to stay behind', either for family or ideological reasons. Many of those who remained in the USSR took advantage of a further opportunity to return to Poland provided in the late 1950s.
- 153 Zev Katz, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
- 154 Leo Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 146.
- 155 Kaganovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 72
- 156 Anna Bruell, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
- 157 Toby Klodawska Flam, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
- 158 Leo Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 150.
- 159 Arthur Spindler, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
- 160 Ruth Turkow Kaminska, *op. cit.*, pp. 39 ff. The marriage did not survive the prison terms, and after Ruth returned to Poland, Adi, who was released in 1954, remained in the Soviet Union as a musician, bandleader and occasional film actor, only returning to his native Germany in 1973. Ruth and her mother Ida eventually emigrated from Poland and settled in the United States.
- 161 Zyga Elton, *op. cit.*, p. 259.
- 162 Leo Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
- 163 Toby Klodawska Flam, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-80.
- 164 Fela Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- 165 Anna Bruell, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-28.
- 166 Larry Wenig, *op. cit.*, p. 304.
- 167 Zyga Elton, *op. cit.*, pp. 262-63.
- 168 Jockusch and Lewinsky, *op. cit.* p. 374. The last figure is supported by Kaganovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 75, who carefully calculated that 'during the first two stages of the repatriation in 1944-6 slightly more than 202,000 Jewish former citizens of Poland officially left the USSR, including those who cleared border control with false documents, children from orphanages (who had been registered separately), and Polish Jews who had served in the Red Army. Thousands remained in the USSR, even after several later repatriations, but this remains a subject for future research.'
- 169 Dobroszycki, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- 170 Jockusch and Lewinsky, *op. cit.* p. 376.
- 171 David Kay, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
- 172 Fela Steinbock, *op. cit.*, p. 104; Chaim Benjamin Künstlich, *op. cit.*, p. 92; Anna

- Bruell, op. cit., p. 131.
- 173 Zev Katz, op. cit., pp. 116-117.
- 174 Zyga Elton, op. cit., p. 261.
- 175 Joanna Michlic, 'The Holocaust and Its Aftermath as Perceived in Poland: Voices of Polish Intellectuals, 1945-1947', in David Bankier (ed) *The Jews Are Coming Back: The Return of the Jews to their Countries of Origin after World War II*, (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005), p. 211.
- 176 Dobroszycki, op. cit., p. 25.
- 177 Dobroszycki, op. cit., p.10; pp. 26-27. 90,000 Jews remained in Poland in 1947, but most of these also eventually left during three subsequent emigration waves: one in 1949-51; the next in the mid 1950s; and the last in 1968-9.
- 178 On the organisation and work of the *Bricha* see, Zeev Tzahor, 'Holocaust Survivors as a Political Factor', *Middle-Eastern Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (1988), pp. 432-44.
- 179 Jockusch and Lewinsky, op. cit., p. 380, write that Jews repatriated from the USSR made up two-thirds of the entire Jewish DP population and 85 percent of the Polish Jews among the DPs.
- 180 *ibid.*
- 181 Atina Grossmann, op. cit., p. 2.
- 182 As Naomi Rosh White, op. cit., p. 217 observed in relation to the survivors she interviewed in her Melbourne study: 'The deepest feelings of grief and anger are triggered by the interviewees' recollections of abruptly severed family contacts, of partings which turned out to be final. The most painful recollections for the interviewees who had been separated from their families were not those dealing with the deprivations that they had experienced themselves, but those that had been experienced by their families.'
- 183 Jockusch and Lewinsky, op. cit. p. 377.
- 184 Larry Wenig, op. cit., p. 319.
- 185 Ruth Wajnryb, op. cit., p. 134.
- 186 Cited by Jockusch and Lewinsky, op. cit. p. 381.
- 187 Zyga Elton, op. cit., p. 230.
- 188 Jockusch and Lewinsky, op. cit. p. 392.
- 189 *ibid.*, pp. 377-86. The origins and early development of this 'hierarchy' which was already in place in the European DP camps is explored here in some detail.
- 190 Anna Bruell, op. cit., p. 90.
- 191 Fela and Felix Rosenbloom, op. cit., p. viii.
- 192 Jockusch and Lewinsky, op. cit., p. 384.
- 193 Zev Katz, op. cit., p. vii.
- 194 Korzen, op. cit., p. 119.