Contents

Note on Translations, Transliterations, and Place Names

Translations

Given the transnational and the multilingual character of this subject, many primary sources are written in languages other than English. Each contributor was responsible for the correct translation from the original into English.

Transliterations

Concerning the spelling of non-English words, we tried to follow well-established guidelines in transliterating Yiddish, Russian, and Hebrew into English. We used the transliteration systems by YIVO for Yiddish, the Library of Congress for Russian, and Encyclopedia Judaica for Hebrew. An exception was made with Polish characters, which we left unchanged.

Place names

Many cities and towns of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia were subject to frequent border changes in the time period covered in this volume. Since names of cities and towns are a sensitive matter in this context, we tried to stay as neutral as possible. As a rule, we use the spelling of a town or city as it was commonly used before the outbreak of World War II and added today's name in parentheses. Those city names that are familiar to a general English reader such as Warsaw or Moscow have remained unchanged.

Foreword

Antony Polonsky

As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him.
(Amos 5:19 [King James Version])
What was one to do—to flee to Russia or to remain at home under the protection of God?
(Reuven Katz)

This important and moving collection of essays deals with a topic which is now attracting scholarly interest—the fate of those Polish Jews who survived the war by fleeing or being deported to the interior of the Soviet Union. There is a large literature both on the Holocaust and on the fate of Poles in the Soviet Union during World War II, but the history of this "Siberian odyssey of Polish Jewry" seemed until recently to have largely disappeared from public memory, particularly in Poland. In recent years it has aroused increasing attention, one product of which is this volume. It was the subject of a conference at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in October 2018 and has begun to create an impressive body of scholarship which is documented in the introduction to this book. In particular, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of archives have acted as a major stimulus to research.[1]

The great majority of Jews who survived the Nazi genocide in Poland did so in the interior of the Soviet Union. According to the research of Albert

1 Among recent works on the topic, one could mention Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossmann, eds., *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017); Markus Nesselrodt, *Dem Holocaust entkommen. Polnische Juden in der Sowjetunion,1939–1946* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019); Eliyana Adler, *Survival on the Margins. Polish Jewish Refugees in the Wartime Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020) and Lidia Zessin-Jurek and Katharina Friedla, ed., *Syberiada Żydów polskich. Losy uchodźców z Zagłady* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2020).

Stankowski and Piotr Weiser, the prewar Jewish population of Poland in 1939 numbered 3,330,000 of whom some 425,000 survived the war—a figure which some have seen as too high, with others giving a figure of around 380,000.[2] Indeed, it should be stressed that all population estimates of those who spent the war in the Soviet Union and subsequently returned to Poland need to be treated with caution. According to the records of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce, CKŻP), the principal Jewish body in postwar Poland, around 74,000 people had registered with it by June 1945. Of these, 5,500 had returned from concentration camps in Germany, 13,000 had served in the pro-communist Polish Army established in the USSR after the withdrawal of the Anders Army, about 30,000 had made their way back from the Soviet Union, 10,000 had been freed from concentration camps in Poland, and the remainder, just under 16,000, had survived on the "Aryan side."[3] In the next two years nearly 137,000 Jews returned from the USSR and by July 1, 1946, nearly 244,000 Jews had registered with the CKŻP.[4] By the end of the year, an additional 35,000 had been repatriated from the Soviet Union. They were part of a much larger group of Polish citizens who by 1946 numbered around 1,016,000 who moved from the Soviet Union to Poland after the war. Detailed figures based on the now-open Soviet archives are to be found in an article by Albert Kaganovitch.[5] A further group of 19,000 Polish Jews returned to Poland in the years between 1956 and 1959 but very few remained in the country.[6] In all, if we add the number who remained in

2 Albert Stankowski and Piotr Weiser, "Demograficzne skutki Holokaustu," in *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010,* ed. Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2011), 15–38. For the lower figure, see Shimon Redlich, *Life in Transit: Jews in Postwar Lodz, 1945–1950* (Newton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 54.

3 Józef Adelson, "W Polsce zwanej Ludową," in *Najnowsze Dzieje Żydów w Polsce w zarysie (do 1950 roku),* ed. Jerzy Tomaszewski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1993), 388–389. The figure for those who survived in hiding is certainly too low because many Jews either retained their new identities after the war or for other reasons did not register with the CKŻP or registered subsequently. It should probably be doubled or even trebled. It would give a figure of 32,000–48,000 Jews who survived thanks to Polish assistance. It may have even been higher.

4 Jan Czerniakiewicz, *Repatriacja ludności polskiej z ZSRR 1944–1948* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1987), 12, 54, 58–59, 102–103, 130, 154–155.

5 Kaganovitch, "Stalin's Great Power Politics, the Return of Jewish Refugees to Poland, and Continued Migration to Palestine, 1944–1946," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 26, no. 1 (2012): 59–94.

6 In accordance with the treaty between Poland and the USSR, over 260,000 Poles, including Polish Jews, returned to Poland between 1955 and 1959, see American Jewish

the Soviet Union, perhaps as many as 385,000 Jews survived the war there. This figure is, however, probably too high, as is clear from the research of Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik where the lowest figure for those surviving in the Soviet Union is given as 146,000.[7]

Some had fled the advancing German army heading east in September 1939, most believing the Soviets a lesser evil. Jews seem to have numbered between 300,000 and 350,000 of the total of 600,000 people who fled eastward, with the lower figure seeming more plausible.[8] Not all of them went to the areas recently annexed by the Soviets and around 13,000 refugees escaped to Vilna, which after six weeks of Soviet rule was transferred to Lithuania on October 28. In all 18,000 Jews fled after the outbreak of the war to Lithuania, which retained its independence until the summer of 1940.[9] A further wave of refugees accompanied the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Under the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression agreement of August 1939, the Soviets occupied considerable parts of eastern Poland and their goal was to

---

Joint Distribution Committee, Jerusalem, Sig. 76 B/R-501 Poland, Poland—Immigration and Emigration, Letter by Samuel L. Haber to Charles H. Jordan dated June 6, 1959. See also Gennady Estraikh, "Escape through Poland: Soviet Jewish Emigration in the 1950s," *Jewish History* 31 (2018): 291–317.

7 The most recent discussion of the existing estimates can be found in the article by Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik, "Saved by Stalin? Trajectories and Numbers of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union in the Soviet Second World War," in *Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*, ed. Mark Edele et al., 113. The authors estimate the number of Polish Jews saved from Holocaust by removal to the Soviet Union from around 146,000 to 384,600.

8 Maciej Siekierski, "The Jews in Soviet-Occupied Eastern Poland at the End of 1939: Numbers and Distribution," in *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939–46,* ed. Norman Davies and Antony Polonsky (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 116; Andrzej Żbikowski, ed., *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy, Vol. 3, Relacje z Kresów* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2000), 13; According to the documents issued by Soviet authorities the number of refugees was lower (150,000 to 200,000), see Gennadii V. Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina: Vlast' i antisemitizm* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2003), 187; Natalia S. Lebedeva, "The Deportation of the Polish Population to the USSR, 1939–41," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 16, no. 1–2 (2000): 36; Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik, "Saved by Stalin? Trajectories and Numbers of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union," 98. For a discussion concerning the flight to the East see Eliyana R. Adler and Natalia Aleksiun, "Seeking Relative Safety. The Flight of Polish Jews to the East in the Autumn of 1939," *Yad Vashem Studies* 46, no. 1 (2018): 41–71.

9 Šarūnas Liekis, "The Transfer of Vilna District into Lithuania, 1939," *Polin* 14 (2001): 216; Simonas Strelcovas, "Refugees: Between Myth and Reality," in *Casablanca of the North: Refugees and Rescuers in Kaunas, 1939–1940*, ed. Linas Venclauskas (Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2017), 46; Zorach Warhaftig, *Refugee and Survivor: Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988).

Sovietize these areas, described as "western Belarus" and "western Ukraine," as rapidly as possible. One way of doing this was by mass deportations of "anti-Soviet elements." Jews made up around 70,000 of the 315,000–325,000 citizens of the Second Polish Republic who were deported in four stages into the depths of the Soviet Union.[10] The opening of the archives of the NKVD and the Ministry of the Interior in the Soviet Union, has made it possible to confirm these figures as has the research of Edele and Warlik.[11] To them should

10 After evaluating the available NKVD reports, Grzegorz Hryciuk comes to the following ethnic distribution of the deportees: 181,200 Poles (57,5 percent), approx. 69,000 Jews (21,9 percent), approx. 32,900 Ukrainian (10,44 percent) and approx. 24,000 Belarusian (7,62 percent), Grzegorz Hryciuk, "Victims 1939–1941: The Soviet Repression in Eastern Poland," in *Shared History—Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941*, ed. Elazar Barkan et al. (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 195; Similar estimates can be found by Aleksandr Gurjanow, "Żydzi jako specpieriesieleńcy-bieżeńcy w Obwodzie Archangielskim 1940–1941," in *Świat NIEpożegnany. Żydzi na dawnych ziemiach wschodniej Rzeczpospolitej w XVIII–XX wieku*, ed. Krzysztof Jasiewicz (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2004), 109; Albert Kaganovitch, "Jewish Refugees and Soviet Authorities during World War II," *Yad Vashem Studies* 38, no. 2 (2010): 99.

11 Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik, "Saved by Stalin? Trajectories and Numbers of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union," 95–131. The literature on the deportations is fully reviewed in Stanisław Ciesielski, "Masowe deportacje z ziem wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1940–1941 i losy deportowanych. Uwagi o stanie badań," in *Wschodnie losy Polaków*, ed. Stanisław Ciesielski (Wrocław: DTSK Silesia, 1997), 85–116; Ciesielski et al., *Masowe deportacje ludności w Związku Radzieckim* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2003). Of particular value are Aleksandr Guryanov, "Cztery deportacje 1940–41," *Karta* 12 (1993): 114–136; Aleksandr Chackiewicz, "Aresztowania i deportacje ludności zachodnich obszarów Białorusi (1939–1941)," in *Polska–Białoruś 1918–1945,* ed. Wiesław Balcerak (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Współpracy Polska-Wschód, 1994), 133–160; Małgorzata Giżejewska et al., eds., *Społeczeństwo białoruskie, litewskie i polskie na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II Rzeczpospolitej (Białoruś Zachodnia i Litwa Wschodnia) w latach 1939–1941* (Warsaw: Inst. Studiów Politycznych PAN, 1995), 120–137; Nikolay Bugaj, "Specjalna teczka Stalina. Deportacje i reemigracja Polaków," *Zeszyty Historyczne* 107 (1994): 76–140; Albin Głowacki, "O deportacji osadników wojskowych w głąb ZSRR (w świetle materiałów NKWD)," *Mars* 2 (1994): 111–144; Albin Głowacki, *Ocalić i repatriować. Opieka nad ludnością polską w głębi terytorium ZSRR (1943–1946)* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1994); Albin Głowacki, "Deportacje obywateli polskich do Kazachstanu i ich osiedlenie w latach 1940–1941," in *Polacy w Kazachstanie. Historia i współczesność*, ed. Stanisław Ciesielski and Antoni Kuczyński (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1996); Stanisław Ciesielski, Grzegorz Hryciuk, Aleksander Srebrakowski, *Masowe deportacje radzieckie w okresie II wojny światowej* (Wrocław: Instytut Historyczny Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1994); and Ewa Kowalska, "Zesłańcze przesiedlenia obywateli polskich z Kresów Wschodnich II Rzeczpospolitej w głąb Związku Radzieckiego w latach 1940–1941 w świetle dokumentów Wojsk Konwojowych NKWD," *Dzieje Najnowsze* 4 (1994): 67–73.

be added those who were arrested by the Soviet authorities (approximately 23,600) and between 10,000 and 21,000 who were drafted into the Red Army; in addition, some 100,000 to 115,600 were deported to the Soviet hinterland after the outbreak of German-Soviet war, and approximately 50,000 had earlier volunteered to work in the interior of the Soviet Union.[12] In 1944, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimated that 52 percent of those deported were Poles, 30 percent Jews, and 18 percent Belarusian or Ukrainian, figures which do not diverge greatly from those of Grzegorz Hryciuk.[13] These people were sent to the famine-ridden steppes of Kazakhstan or to the taiga of the Komi Republic and other parts of Siberia where they were surrounded by totally alien and hostile natural conditions. The death rate in the convoys and across Siberia exceeded ten percent. The young men forcibly enlisted into the Red Army served as compulsory workers in construction battalions,[14] while tens of thousands of prisoners of war were employed as laborers in, to use the highly euphemistic phraseology of the period, "the distant regions of the Soviet Union."

Like the ethnic Polish deportees, many of the Jews lost relatives and found themselves in exile where they endured poverty, hunger, and disease—whether in the Soviet forced labor camps, in prisons, penal camps, and other sites of banishment or on collective farms and in urban industrial centers like Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, and Omsk. Others ended up in Central Asia in towns like Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand. In retrospect, however, most considered deportation to have been a blessing since it ensured their survival.

---

12 Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik, "Saved by Stalin? Trajectories and Numbers of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union," 15.

13 Hoover Institution Archives (HIA), Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych Records, Box 588, Obliczenie ludności deportowanej do ZSRR w latach od 1939 do 1941; Hryciuk, "Victims 1939–1941: The Soviet Repression in Eastern Poland," 195. Some of the statistics issued by the Polish government-in-exile, especially those regarding the deportations, are overstated.

14 According to the statistics compiled by the Polish Foreign Ministry approx. 20,000 to 30,000 Jews were drafted into the Red Army, HIA, Poland, Ambasada (United States) Records, Box 30, Folder 8, Deportations of Polish citizens from Soviet-occupied Poland to the USSR; HIA, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych Records, Box 525, Folder 15, Obliczenie ludności żydowskiej wśród deportowanych do Rosji obywateli polskich, stan na 24.04.1943 r., sporządzono przez Min. Pracy i Opieki Społecznej, Londyn 28.09.1944. Estimates listed by Edele and Warlik are lower (10,000 to 21,000), Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik, "Saved by Stalin? Trajectories and Numbers of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union," 105. See also Kiril Feferman, "'The Jews' War': Attitudes of Soviet Jewish Soldiers and Officers Toward the USSR in 1940–41," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27, no. 4 (2014): 574–590.

The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union made Poland and the Soviet Union allies in the struggle against the Axis Powers. After protracted negotiations a Polish-Soviet agreement was signed on July 30, 1941, which made provision for an amnesty of Polish prisoners, the release of prisoners of war, and the creation of a Polish army on Soviet territory.[15] The signing of this agreement drastically changed the position of those Polish citizens who found themselves in the USSR, whether as prisoners of war, political prisoners, deportees, refugees, or "voluntary" workers. Their number may have been as high as 780,000 and included a substantial number of Jews, perhaps as many as 350,000.[16] Given the history of Polish-Soviet relations, it is not surprising that the implementation of the agreement should have led to disputes. The amnesty was duly proclaimed on August 12, and the Soviets agreed that the Polish government could provide relief supplies to its citizens on their release from captivity. This led, after some difficulties, to the establishment of a network of Polish welfare offices to supervise the distribution of relief supplies. These were also to be given to Jews with Polish citizenship.[17]

The deportees, including the Jews among them, were certainly in a perilous state, with a large proportion lacking any of the basic requirements for survival. Some, particularly women and children, died even before the amnesty was proclaimed while more perished while trying to make their way to the southern republics of the USSR (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadzhikistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) where the Polish Army was being created and where welfare supplies were more plentiful. The main priority was to provide food and medical supplies, clothing, and blankets. These could only be obtained from outside the USSR, and though there was great public goodwill in Great Britain, the British government had reservations about sending large quantities of goods

15 For this agreement, see Antony Polonsky, *The Great Powers and the Polish Question, 1941–45* (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1976), 18–20.

16 Włodzimierz Borodziej assumes there were around 700,000 Polish citizens who were affected by Soviet forced resettlements and found themselves in the interior of the Soviet Union, *Geschichte Polens im 20. Jahrhundert* (München: C.H.Beck, 2010), 195. The number of 720,000 can be found by Grzegorz Hryciuk, "Victims 1939–1941," 199. Daniel Boćkowski estimates their number from 750,000 to 780,000, *Czas nadziei. Obywatele Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej w ZSRR i opieka nad nimi placówek polskich w latach 1940–1943* (Warsaw: Neriton, 1999), 92.

17 The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum Archive in London, Akta Ambasady R.P. w ZSRR, 1941–1943, A.7.307/40, Report on the Relief Accorded to Polish Citizens by the Polish Embassy in the USSR with special reference to Polish Citizens of Jewish Nationality, September 1941–April 1943.

which were in short supply in Britain itself to the USSR. Appeals were made to the British public and also to Anglo-Jewry.[18]

The largest contribution to the relief effort came from the United States. Voluntary American organizations played a role, including Jewish bodies such as the Jewish Labor Committee, the Joint Distribution Committee, and the American Federation of Polish Jews.[19] The distribution of relief supplies proved a difficult task, and although it included Jews, who benefited greatly, some complained that these were not always fairly handed out. The activity of the relief network was often obstructed by mistrustful Soviet officials, and in the summer of 1942, as Polish-Soviet relations began to deteriorate, the Soviets arrested a substantial number of the welfare delegates. Although some were subsequently released, relief now tapered off and came to an end when the Soviets broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish government in London in April 1943.

The creation of a Polish army also proved a bone of contention between the Poles and the Soviets and ultimately it was allowed to leave the USSR rather than fight on the Eastern Front as had been the original intention of the Polish Prime Minister, Władysław Sikorski. On March 25, 1942, Stalin gave permission for 40,000 troops to be evacuated to Iran and by April some 33,000 soldiers and 10,000 civilians had left the country. Two weeks later he allowed the departure of the remaining three Polish divisions still in the USSR. By the end of August these too had left for Iran, numbering 45,000 soldiers and 25,000 civilians. From the start Jews had found it difficult to enlist in this army. The impact of the policy was apparent when the army was evacuated to Iran. Of the 78,000 soldiers, barely 3,500–4,000 were Jews while Jewish civilians accompanying the forces numbered perhaps between 1,700 and 2,500. Jews amounted to five percent of the soldiers (five percent of men, one percent of the officers) and seven percent of civilians.[20] Very few of these were to return to Poland after the war and many found a home in Palestine/Israel.

---

18 On relief see Keith Sword, "The Welfare of Polish-Jewish Refugees in the USSR, 1941–43: Relief Supplies and their Distribution," in *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939–1946,* 145–160.

19 Atina Grossmann, "Joint Fund Teheran. JDC and the Jewish Lifeline to Central Asia," in *The JDC at 100: A Century of Humanitarianism*, ed. Avinoam Patt et al. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019), 205–244.

20 HIA, Poland, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych Records, Box 143, Folder 11, Report on Polish Refugees in Persia, April 1942 to December 1943.

After the departure of the Polish Army and the breach in Polish-Soviet relations in May 1943, Stalin sanctioned the creation of a communist-controlled military force, initially in the form of the first Polish (Kościuszko) Division, headed by a prewar Polish officer, Colonel Zygmunt Berling, which first engaged the Germans at Lenino in mid-October and, then, in the creation of two Polish armies. By April 1944, the force numbered nearly 100,000 soldiers and when it entered Poland on July 21, 1944, it was made up of six infantry divisions, five artillery brigades, one tank corps, and one tank brigade; in all nearly 108,000 men.[21] The presence of Jews in this army was considerable; many of them saw this as their only way to return to Poland. Some were encouraged to adopt Polish names to make their presence seem smaller. At the same time, strong efforts were made to dispel antisemitic prejudice. According to the deputy commander of the Second Division, "The heroism of the Jew, Bubental, was used to combat the antisemitic attitudes held by some soldiers."[22]

In February 1944, Jews made up over a fifth of recruits. By April 1944, this percentage had fallen to around twelve percent, or perhaps 13,000 soldiers. The Jewish percentage of the officer corps was still higher. There was a shortage of officers because of the murder by Stalin of most of those taken prisoner in 1939. Soviet officers, often of Polish origin, made up more than 50 percent of the officer corps in 1944 and of the remainder nearly half were Jews. In addition, many of the important posts in the political apparatus of the army were held by Jews, including Hilary Minc and Roman Zambrowski. In all, Jews probably made up around a third of the political officers.[23]

As we have seen, Jews made up a considerable proportion of the more than one million Polish citizens who were removed in stages after the war from the former Polish territories now annexed by the Soviet Union and from the interior of the country. Most of the Polish Jews who returned to Poland were resettled in Lower Silesia, now in Polish hands. However, they did not remain there but took part in the organized emigration to Palestine or fled to the Western zones of Germany because of their unwillingness to live in a coun-

21 On these developments see Klemens Nussbaum, "Jews in the Kościuszko Division and the First Polish Army," in *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939–1946,* 183–213.

22 *Organizacja i Działania Bojowego Ludowego Wojska Polskiego w Latach 1943–1945*, 4 volumes (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1963), vol. 4, 194.

23 See Kalman Nussbaum, *Ve-hafakh lahem le-roets: ha-Yehudim be-tsava ha-amami ha-Polani be-Berit ha-Mo'atsot* (Tel Aviv: Diaspora Research Center, 1984); Klemens Nussbaum, *Historia złudzeń. Żydzi w Armii Polskiej w ZSRR 1943–1945* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Tetragon, 2016).

try where an unpopular communist system was being imposed, where most of their relatives had perished, and which was marked by anti-Jewish violence in the immediate postwar period.

Many memoirs and literary works, both prose and poetry, of those deported to the Soviet Union during the war, which are extensively discussed in this volume, stress their suffering and the oppressive nature of the Soviet system. This was what most Polish Jews, like their non-Jewish counterparts, experienced but many also remarked on the hospitality and courage of ordinary Russians and other ethnic groups in Central Asia which led them to an understanding of why the Soviets, in spite of all the negative features of their political system, were able to mobilize their people to defeat the Nazi behemoth. Some express their support for the Soviet system. They also describe their often tense relations with their non-Jewish Polish fellow citizens. However, because most of those who experienced the war in the USSR did not remain in Poland their wartime experiences have, until recently, fallen into oblivion. In addition, they were at odds with the Polish nationalist understanding of the Polish experience in Siberia during World War II. Those in the Displaced Persons camps who wished to move to the United States also often remained silent about their wartime experiences for fear of being seen as communists.

One issue which arose in these camps was the way those who had survived the Nazi occupation or imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps believed that their experiences entitled them to look down on those who had survived the war in the Soviet Union in somewhat less difficult conditions. I very much hope that this remarkable volume will remedy the unwillingness to see those who fled to the Soviet Union as also survivors of the Holocaust and enable us to understand all the complex aspects of the Siberian odyssey of Polish Jews.

Introduction

Katharina Friedla and Markus Nesselrodt

Rather than recounting the history of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union in this introduction,[1] we place our volume in the historiographical context. Why should we deal with the history of Polish Jews in Soviet exile today? More than 75 years after the end of World War II, we are now in a situation where understanding the Holocaust is less a matter of dealing with huge blank spots in research than making sense of libraries full of scholarly knowledge. A growing interest in a spatial turn of Holocaust Studies or a "remapping of the Holocaust"—as Atina Grossmann has put it—has given rise to new research perspectives.[2] The history of the Holocaust but more specifically the experience of those who escaped it outside Nazi-occupied Europe has received more attention on a global level. Holocaust refugee routes connecting Europe with every continent on earth opened up a new path to writing a global history of Jewish but also non-Jewish wartime experience.[3]

1 Norman Davies and Antony Polonsky, eds., *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939–46* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 1–59; Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossmann, eds., *Shelter from the Holocaust. Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 1–27; and Katharina Friedla and Lidia Zessin-Jurek, eds., *Syberiada Żydów Polskich. Losy uchodźców z Zagłady* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2020), 17–47.

2 Atina Grossmann, "Remapping Relief and Rescue: Flight, Displacement, and International Aid for Jewish Refugees during World War II," *New German Critique* 39, no. 3 (2012): 61–79. For a recent take on the spatial dimension of Holocaust studies see Natalia Aleksiun and Hana Kubátová, eds., *Places, Spaces, and Voids in the Holocaust* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021).

3 Just to name a few recent studies: Marion Kaplan, *Hitler's Jewish Refugees. Hope and Anxiety in Portugal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); Joanna Newman, *Nearly the New World. The British West Indies and the Flight from Nazism 1933–1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2019); Jochen Lingelbach, *On the Edges of Whiteness: Polish Refugees in British Colonial Africa during and after the Second World War* (New York: Berghahn, 2020).

This collection is hardly the first volume delving into the history and memory of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during and after World War II. It was inspired by the groundbreaking volume *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939–46*[4] published in 1991. Edited by Antony Polonsky and Norman Davies, the volume originated in the Cold War with many archives still closed and oral history collections only then emerging as an important source. Thirty years after it was published, we invited scholars of various disciplines—historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and linguists—to share their research on the topic. Indeed, in recent years scholars have been paying increasingly close attention to the fate of Polish Jews in the USSR. Until recently, this was true mainly for the Hebrew and English-speaking academic world.[5] In 2017, a group of scholars published *Shelter from the Holocaust. Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*[6]—part original research, part reprints of past work; a visible sign that the subject of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union became a focus of research in a variety of perspectives. Katharina Friedla and Lidia Zessin-Jurek's volume *Syberiada* Żydów *Polskich*[7] (The Siberian odyssey of Polish Jews) was the first of its kind in Polish. Similar to *Shelter from the Holocaust*, it includes several chapters that were translations of previously published articles into Polish. All three volumes inspired the shape and content of this collection. With regard to the subject of this book, Markus Nesselrodt and Eliyana R. Adler have published comprehensive histories of the Polish Jewish exile in the Soviet Union.[8] Katharina Friedla, Natalie Belsky, and others[9] will follow with the results of their research in the near future. But the rather late interest of scholars of the

4 Davies and Polonsky, *Jews*.

5 The first extensive analysis of the issue of Polish Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union during World War II was provided by Josef Litvak, *Pelitim Yehudim mi-Polin be-Berit ha-Mo'atsot, 1939–1946* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1988). In 1959, Israeli historian Meir Korzen called for a historical analysis of the lives of Polish Jewish expatriates in the Soviet Union and demanded the inclusion of this important chapter of Jewish history in the field of Holocaust studies. Korzen, "Problems Arising out of Research into the History of Jewish Refugees in the USSR during the Second World War," *Yad Vashem Studies* 3 (1959): 119. On the Jewish presence in the Berling Army see Kalman Nussbaum, *Ve-Hafah lahem le-Roeits: Ha-Yehudim be-Tsava ha-Amami ha-Polani be-Berit ha-Mo'atsot* (Tel Aviv: Diaspora Research Center, 1984).

6 Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossmann, *Shelter*.

7 Friedla and Zessin-Jurek, *Syberiada*.

8 Nesselrodt, *Dem Holocaust entkommen. Polnische Juden in der Sowjetunion (1939–1946)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019); Adler, *Survival on the Margins: Polish Jewish Refugees in the Wartime Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

9 Katharina Friedla, Natalie Belsky, Na'ama Seri-Levi, Serafima Velkovich, and Lidia Zessin-Jurek are currently working on monographs closely related to the subject of this book.

Holocaust and East European Jewish history in the topic raises two questions: Why has this story remained in the shadows of public and scholarly interest for so long and is it fair to say that this field of study is now reaching maturity?

"On the Margins of the Holocaust"[10]

There are four explanations for the delay in scholarly interest and publications examining the fate of Polish Jews in the USSR. Beyond political context, they all point to the global character of this particular scholarly endeavor. Both the primary sources and the early research on the topic are multilingual. In order to fully comprehend this story and access the relevant materials, scholars need to have fluency in Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Russian, German, and English. This is a difficult if not almost impossible task that calls for international and multilingual scholarly cooperation.

Moreover, the sources have been scattered across numerous countries. This was a result of Polish Jews migrating to various countries on virtually every continent after the war. Researchers therefore must either travel the world by themselves or again, cooperate internationally. So far, travel has been the preponderant approach but informal working groups have been established with centers in North America, Europe, and Israel. Scholars of Eastern Europe are all too familiar with the reality of closed archives and classified collections. Despite the opening of some archives in the territory of the former Soviet Union, many collections remain inaccessible to researchers, regardless of their language skills, funding opportunities, or level of international cooperation. At the same time, other archives have provided access to underexplored sources. We will return to the question of archival sources below.

There are two more reasons for the delayed historiographical and public attention: the effect of the Cold War on Holocaust memory and the establishment of Holocaust studies as a separate field in history. As Antony Polonsky notes in his foreword to this collection, it was very uncommon in the early postwar period to openly tell the story of survival in the Communist Soviet Union. While their goal of immigration to the United States led surviving Polish Jews to leave out their connections to the Soviets in their written records, immigrants to Palestine and later Israel equally faced a lack of public interest in their

10 This is what Israeli Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer called the story of Polish Jewish survival in Soviet exile. Bauer, foreword to *From the Gestapo to the Gulags: One Jewish Life* by Zev Katz (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004), XIV.

past.[11] Jewish returnees from Soviet exile were not alone in their survivor guilt or their strong will to look forward instead. Indeed, it was very common for Holocaust survivors in general to focus on establishing new lives in new environments before some of them began talking or writing about their wartime experiences.[12] While this does not mean that there was no discourse—even if limited—on the Holocaust, it was only in the 1970s that public interest in listening to survivors grew significantly.[13] An expanding body of Holocaust historiography, Holocaust museums, as well as works of art such as movies and books have created an environment in which survivors felt comfortable telling their stories.[14]

The last reason has to do with the evolving field of Holocaust studies, its scope, methodological assumptions, and focus. When Jewish survivors began collecting documents and testimonies by fellow Jews in postwar Europe, many of them were not professional historians with the exception of Philip Friedman,

---

11 Laura Jockusch and Tamar Lewinsky, "Paradise Lost? Postwar Memory of Polish Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24, no. 3 (2010): 373–399.

12 Beth Cohen, *Case Closed. Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007). It must also be stressed that in the early years after the Shoah some memoirs and recollections on the Soviet experience written in Yiddish were published. Moreover, the Soviet exile appeared in a few Yizker-bikher memorial books though not in great detail. Especially in the 1940s and 1950s, above all in South America and Israel, some Yiddish publishing houses produced an important body of literature which has not been used in research so far. Zusman Segalowitsh, *Gebrente Trit* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1947); David Lederman, *Fun Yener Zayt Forhang* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1960); Jakov Kahan, *Unter di Sovyetishe Himeln* (Tel Aviv: Farlag J. L. Peretz, 1961); Gershon Lustgartn, *In Vander un Gerangl* (Tel Aviv, 1968); Yizchak Ichiels, *Fun Bug biz Pyetshora* (Tel Aviv: Yehiels, 1966). Markus Nesselrodt has shown the importance of early postwar Yiddish poetry. Markus Nesselrodt, "'I bled like you, brother, although I was a thousand miles away': postwar Yiddish sources on the experiences of Polish Jews in Soviet exile during World War II," *East European Jewish Affairs* 46, no. 1 (2016): 47–67. For a similar approach towards literary sources: Magdalena Ruta, "Gułag poetów, doświadczenie uchodźstwa, łagrów i tułaczki na terenie ZSRR w twórczości polskich pisarzy języka jidysz (1939–1949)," in Zessin-Jurek and Friedla, *Syberiada*, 307–337; Magdalena Ruta, W*ithout Jews? Yiddish Literature in the People's Republic of Poland on the Holocaust, Poland, and Communism* (Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2018).

13 Hasia Diner argues that there has never been a silence among the survivors of the Holocaust within American Jewish communities. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

14 Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

Nakhman Blumenthal, Joseph Kermisz, and a few others.[15] Nevertheless, survivors, among them returnees from the Soviet Union, established several historical commissions whose archival collections are among the most valuable sources of information about the Holocaust and its aftermath.[16] One center of an early reflection on Polish Jewish survival in the Soviet Union were the camps for Jewish Displaced Persons (DPs) in Allied occupied Germany. Since the late 1990s, growing research on postwar DP history highlighted the fact that most Polish Jewish DPs had spent the war in the depth of the Soviet Union.[17] Preceding the research on Jewish DPs, the Holocaust had moved to the center of twentieth-century history writing in the United States and Western Europe.[18] Yet, wartime and postwar history have very much remained separated issues in Holocaust historiography. At the same time, research on refugee experiences in the Soviet Union, Iran, Palestine, China or elsewhere has contributed to widening the definition of the Holocaust and Holocaust survival. We will return to this matter later.

According to a well-known anecdote, Raul Hilberg, one of the pioneers of Holocaust studies, was told by his adviser that he was ruining his career by writing what became his masterpiece, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, in the late 1950s.[19] The history of the emergence of Holocaust studies was told elsewhere.[20] What is important in this context is that it took several decades to

15 Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Natalia Aleksiun, *Conscious History. Polish Jewish Historians before the Holocaust* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021).

16 Jockusch, *Collect.*

17 Some landmark studies were: Israel Gutman and Avital Saf, eds., *She'erit Hapletah 1944–1948, Rehabilitation and Political Struggle* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1990); Zeev W. Mankowitz, *Life between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Avinoam J. Patt and Michael Berkowitz, eds., *"We are here." New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), and Margarete Myers Feinstein, *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany, 1945–1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

18 Boaz Cohen, *Israeli Holocaust Research: Birth and Evolution* (London: Routledge, 2013) and Stephan Stach, "The Central Jewish Historical Commission and the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland," in *Crimes Uncovered. The First Generation of Holocaust Researchers*, ed. Hans-Christian Jasch and Stephan Lehnstaedt (Berlin: Metropol, 2019), 208–231.

19 Robert P. Ericksen, "'Ordinary Christians' in Nazi Germany," in *"Beyond Ordinary Men": Christopher R. Browning and Holocaust Historiography*, ed. Thomas Pegelow Kaplan, Jürgen Matthäus, and Mark W. Hornburg (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019), 45.

20 David Bankier and Dan Michman, eds., *Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics and Achievements* (New York: Berghahn, 2008).

establish international cooperation among key players within the multilingual field of Holocaust studies.[21] From the beginning of early Holocaust studies, discussion centered around methodological debates on how to incorporate them into a comprehensive approach to writing the history of the Shoah.

In 1997, historian Saul Friedländer introduced his concept of an integrated history of the Nazi genocide of European Jewry.[22] His idea was to combine various sources and perspectives—in this case victims, perpetrators, and witnesses of the mass murder—into one narrative. When Friedländer published his magnum opus on Nazi Germany and the Jews, this was a much-needed synthesis. An integrated history was necessary in order to simultaneously explain the perpetrators' motives and actions, give voice to the victims, and help understand the role of millions of Europeans who were in one way or another involved in the persecution and destruction of Jewish communities. It took four decades from the early groundbreaking works of Holocaust historiography to Friedländer's book which made extensive use of Jewish ego documents. Raul Hilberg himself—whose research relied on German perpetrator sources—indicated the need for a new direction in Holocaust research in 1988:

> Even if we keep searching for more documents in archives . . . or generate more testimony in oral history projects . . . the resulting picture will surely be more detailed, but it will not contain a sharply new perspective. And that is only half of the problem, because the question is not confined to *what* we should describe; it is also a matter of *how* we should write.[23]

One important reason for the challenges in developing methodological approaches to the study of the Holocaust was its scale and complexity. This is why Friedländer's work was necessary and may serve as a model for the history of Jewish flight and exile during World War II.

---

21 See for example the biennial Lessons and Legacies of the Holocaust Conference (since 1989), and the two academic journals *Yad Vashem Studies* (since 1957) and *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (since 1986).

22 Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. Vol. I: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

23 Hilberg, "I Was Not There," in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 20.