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CHAPTER 10

Neither “Victims” nor “Survivors”: Polish Jews Reflect on Their Wartime Experiences in the Soviet Union During the Second World War

John Goldlust

Across the extensive geographical landscape of Europe through which the Nazis maniacally pursued their notorious “Final Solution”—the total annihilation of Europe Jewry—the shadow of the terrible fate of Poland’s Jews during the Second World War looms large. Within the territory of the reconstituted post-First World War Poland that fell under the military and administrative control of occupying German forces between September 1939 and January 1945, the feverish and unrelenting application by the Nazis of their genocidal plans resulted in the direct murder, or led to the deaths, of ninety percent of the prewar Jewish population of Poland, by far the largest national Jewish community in Europe. When Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies in May 1945, of the three and a half million Jews in Poland in 1939, only a few hundred thousand remained alive.¹

1 While a precise figure remains elusive, recent estimates suggest the number lies somewhere between 350,000 and 425,000. Thus Laura Jockusch writes: “Of a surviving remnant estimated at 350,000 Polish Jews, some 30,000–50,000 found themselves in Polish territory upon liberation.” In addition, between 70,000 and 80,000 Polish Jews were freed from camps in Germany and Austria. See, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 85. At the higher end,

All available sources confirm that, at the end of the war, only a relatively small number of Polish Jews emerged from the territory of prewar Poland, or from the abandoned Nazi camps recently liberated by the Allies. While as many as 250,000, representing between half and two-thirds of all Polish Jews who managed to survive, only did so because through a fortuitous combination of circumstances—both micro (personal agency, age, physical condition, stamina, luck, chance) and macro (geopolitical maneuverings, military contingencies, shifting national interests, security concerns)—for much of the Second World War they found themselves under the authority of the Soviets rather than the Nazis.²

At the time it was widely known that, of the Polish Jews still alive in 1945, by far the numerically dominant cohort consisted of either those who fled into, or had been living in, the Soviet controlled areas of eastern Poland and, through various trajectories, later moved inside the USSR where they remained for much of the period of the European war. So an important question I wish to address here is: why, given the intense scrutiny over many decades of various “modes” of Jewish survival in wartime Europe—as a focus for scholarly study and research, as well as the subject matter of cinema, television and other forms

Albert Stankowski draws on a range of documentary sources to arrive at a final figure of 425,000 Polish Jews still alive at the end of the war, of whom more than half had survived in the USSR. See, “How Many Polish Jews Survived The Holocaust?,” in *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944–2010*, eds. Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 215.

2. Again, there is no definitive figure for the number Polish Jews who survived the war in Soviet controlled territory. Nora Levin recognizes this necessary imprecision when she writes there were “200,000 or so” Polish Jewish refugees who survived in Soviet Russia. See, *The Jews in the Soviet Union Since 1917: Paradox of Survival*, vol. 1 (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 378. Laura Jokusch (*Collect and Record*, 85) puts the number at 230,000; while Joanna Michlic begins with a total of 380,000 Polish Jews who survived the war, of whom 70 percent did so in the territories of the Soviet Union, suggesting a number approaching 270,000. See, “The Holocaust and Its Aftermath as Perceived in Poland: Voices of Polish Intellectuals, 1945–1947,” in *The Jews Are Coming Back: The Return of the Jews to their Countries of Origin after WWII*, ed. David Bankier (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005), 209. More recently, in a critical overview of the often ambiguous and inconsistent documentary sources, Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik conclude: “The most conservative estimate, then, would be for, at the very least, 157,000 Jews from Poland who would not have survived the Nazi genocide had it not been for the existence of Stalin’s state [. . .] Including those who remained in the Soviet Union and taking into account higher estimates, their maximum number might have been as high as 375,000, but was more likely somewhere in between these two signposts.” See, “Saved by Stalin? Trajectories and Numbers of Polish Jews in the Soviet Second World War,” in *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*, eds. Mark Edele et al. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 123.

of popular culture—has this group’s unusual and significant mode of escape from the Nazis been relegated to a largely under-examined and shadowy presence within the larger Holocaust narrative?³ And, as I have noted elsewhere, it is “not that the ‘story’ has remained unknown or untold but rather that [. . .] 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.”⁴

Neither “Victims” . . .

A considerable number of both the Polish Jews who had survived the war under the Nazis, as well as the larger number who were in the Soviet Union during those years, found themselves together again—if only briefly—in Poland, soon after the war ended. But, as Eliyana Adler has observed, “their experiences during the war were in fact distinct. Over time one narrative, that of the Holocaust, came to dominate, and the other largely disappeared.”⁵

In this chapter I focus on some possible reasons why this has also meant muting, marginalizing and “privatizing” the “survival stories” that detail the manner and circumstances through which several hundred thousand Polish Jews in the Soviet Union managed to evade the fate of the three million Polish Jews who died or were murdered in Nazi occupied Poland.⁶

3 The more intensively studied and most frequently portrayed survival “modes” tend to focus on: Jews who managed to stay alive in, or occasionally escape from, concentration and labor camps; those who remained in hiding among the local populace, with or without false papers; and some who participated in resistance activities against the Nazis, either independently, with other Jews, or with one of the local partisan groups.

4 John Goldlust, “A Different Silence: The Survival of More than 200,000 Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during World War II as a Case Study of Cultural Amnesia,” in *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 32.

5 Eliyana Adler, “Crossing Over. Exploring the Borders of Holocaust Testimony,” in *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 266–267. See also, 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; and, 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, in which the authors give considerable attention to identifying and discussing possible reasons why, given the obviously expanding interest in Holocaust stories both in academic and broader public circles, this one has remained so under-explored.

6 In doing so I draw upon my research into this area which has, so far, explored 14 published memoirs (nine written by Polish Jews who settled in Australia after WW2) and 50 video testimonies collected in Australia in the 1990s by *The Shoah Foundation* and now lodged in the *USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education* searchable archive. For

As tens of thousands of Polish Jews began returning to Poland from the USSR they were confronted with evidence of the unimaginable devastation and loss, along with the terrible realization that most, if not all, of their families, friends and even entire communities left behind only a few years before had vanished, leaving barely a trace. In their encounters with Polish Jews who survived the war in territories controlled by the Nazis, they now heard how they had been confined in ghettos, hidden in the forests; were in perpetual fear of imminent exposure after adopting a false “Aryan” identity; had been used as slave labor; starved and beaten in concentration camps; or, had somehow managed to evade the ghoulis “selections” that ended the lives of many they knew and loved in the extermination camps. So, understandably, from the Jews who had come back to Poland from the USSR there emerged a general reticence to share the relatively “benign” tribulations and hardships they had experienced during their wartime sojourn in the Soviet Union. Even more so as, among Jews who had survived in Europe and were now recounting and sharing their wartime stories, it would appear that a broadly accepted “hierarchy of suffering” very quickly established itself “with concentration camp experience at the top and the Soviet experience at the bottom.”⁷

Every Jew still alive at the end of the war recognized their *collective* group as the principal victim of the implementation by the Nazis of their “Final Solution” that led to the deaths of more than sixty per cent of the prewar Jewish population of Europe; and all were well aware that during the latter years of the war each of them had been a *potential* target of the Nazi plans. And while almost all the Polish Jews who spent the wartime years under the Soviets had suffered considerable hardship and deprivation, when they arrived back in Poland after the war they were quickly made aware who the “real Jewish victims” were, and so began consciously and deliberately to dissociate their own experiences from those of Jews who survived the war in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Atina Grossmann cites an early memoir by a Polish Jew who had been in the Soviet Union, in which the author, Esther Hautzig, observed: “Better to have been deported with them as a capitalist and enemy of the people than to fall into the hands of the Nazis as a Jew.” In the end, “we were alive. Our exile had saved our lives. Now we felt ourselves supremely lucky to have been

bibliographical details of the published memoirs see Goldlust, “A Different Silence,” note 12, p. 82.

7 See, Jockusch and Lewinsky, “Paradise Lost?,” 384. In their article the origins and early development of this hierarchy—which the authors suggest was already in place in the post-war European DP camps—are discussed in considerable detail.

deported to Siberia. Hunger, cold, and misery were nothing; life had been granted us.”⁸ Similar reflections emerge in quite a few of the later memoirs and testimonies I explored. When interviewed in the 1990s, one informant who had been in the Soviet Union observed that her friends still “talk all the time” about their lives during the war, but “my experiences were not so tragic against theirs, so I never open my mouth . . . because I see that their life was hanging on a very thin string.”⁹

After June 1941, with the Soviets now fighting on the Allied side against the Nazis, some Polish Jews (mostly younger males) were able to participate in military actions against the Germans. But fortuitously, many who had earlier been deported from Eastern Poland, along with some who, following the German attack on the USSR in June 1941 had managed to flee or be evacuated further into the Soviet heartland, were now far removed from the war zone, and therefore, as it turned out, no longer even “potential victims” of the Nazis’ genocidal intent.

But what about during their years under the Soviets when the Polish Jews were almost inevitably subjected to at least one, and often a number, of the following: arrest, imprisonment, deportation, forced labor? Despite the prevalence of such experiences, from my sample of published autobiographical memoirs and oral testimonies—most of which emerged since the early 1990s—in their extended reflections on their time under the Soviets I found few informants who placed much emphasis on “group persecution,” or of Jews as specifically targeted “victims” of Soviet wartime policies.

Indeed, among Jewish residents of the Soviet annexed areas of Poland, as well as the Jewish refugees who had arrived from German-occupied Poland between late 1939 and mid-1941, some responded very differently.¹⁰ As Ben Cion Pinchuk notes, a number benefitted from the “new rulers” abolishing

8 Atina Grossmann, “Remapping Relief and Rescue,” 74. Esther Hautzig’s memoir, “The Endless Steppe” was published in New York in 1968.

9 Interview with Cyla Fersht, September 21, 1997, Melbourne, University of Southern California, Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education (USC VHA), 35908. I encountered quite a few examples along similar lines in memoirs and testimonies from Polish Jews who had been in the USSR during the war. See also the discussion by Eliyana Adler (“Crossing Over,” 258) of the video testimony of Eva Blatt who, after the war, had returned from the Soviet Union to Lodz and tells of meeting a man there interested in starting a relationship with her. She notices, and asks about, the numbers on his arm: “So he started to tell the whole story. I thought I have a story, a better story than he. Then when I met him, forget it. I didn’t say nothing anymore.”

10 See also the chapter by Albert Kaganovitch in this volume.

“the discriminatory practices of the former Polish government.” Jews were employed in the Soviet administration, industrial enterprises, the health and the education sectors. Jewish professionals—especially engineers, doctors, pharmacists, accountants and teachers—“were now sought after.” Access to higher education “became free and accessible to Jewish youth.”¹¹ As Yisrael Gutman and Shmuel Krakowski suggest, “The new employment opportunities gave the Jews the sense of full equality in civil rights not enjoyed before.”¹² Among the younger Polish Jews, some took full advantage of the possibilities now open to them to receive education and training, apply specialist knowledge and expertise they already possessed, as well as acquire new skills, learn the local language and integrate into their new surroundings. Only a relatively small percentage among the tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from Poland chose to take up the offer of Soviet citizenship, but some who did reported that within a surprisingly short time they had settled reasonably well into Soviet life.

In a previous publication I cite from four autobiographical memoirs by Polish Jews in which each person writes of this early period under Soviet authority in a generally positive and appreciative tone. Thus: 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. 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 Soviet “passport” that listed his status as “resettled” person as distinct from “refugee.” 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 then his studies were interrupted by the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Toby Flam first took up a job that was offered to her in Soviet Belarus, 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.¹³

More significantly, as it turned out, when German troops attacked the Soviet Union in late June 1941, some of these Polish Jews who had earlier signed up for work and relocated out of the larger cities of eastern Poland were

11 Ben-Cion Pinchuk, “On Facing Hitler and Stalin,” in *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews During The Holocaust And Its Aftermath*, ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 66.

12 Yisrael Gutman and Shmuel Krakowski, *Unequal Victims* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1986), 37.

13 See Goldlust, “A Different Silence,” 41–42.

now inside the pre-1939 USSR border, and a considerable distance from immediate danger. They also had a greater chance—by being evacuated or fleeing independently further to the east—of evading the SS roundups that accompanied the rapidly advancing German army.¹⁴ Their lives then mostly followed a pattern similar to the significant cohort of “amnestied” Polish deportees and prisoners, among whom were a considerable number of Polish Jews, gradually being released from labor camps and remote settlements after July 1941. By the end of the year several hundred thousand Polish Jews—refugees who had fled from the areas of Poland occupied by the Nazis prior to June 1941, as well as former residents of the eastern territories annexed by the Soviets in 1939—were located deeper inside the vast territory of the USSR. And notwithstanding further movement and dislocations a considerable number of both Jewish and non-Jewish Poles, now scattered across Siberia and Soviet Central Asia, managed to remain in these “safe havens” until the end of the war in Europe.

Of special significance to many Polish Jews was the very different social status they were accorded while they were in the Soviet Union. During their time under Soviet authority—and this point recurs in a number of memoirs and testimonies, even from some who were imprisoned or deported—*as Jews* they felt they were treated no differently from non-Jews in a similar situation. As Polish writer and political activist Aleksander Smolar wryly observed, the Soviet Union was seen “as a country that allowed Jews full civic rights, or, more precisely, deprived them of rights in the same measure as it deprived others.”¹⁵ In his video testimony, Abraham Amaterstein is keen to emphasize that although the wartime Soviet Union had been a “poor country,” everyone there was treated the same: “I didn’t get less and I didn’t get more. I feel this feeling of thankfulness and appreciation.”¹⁶

In the written and oral reflections by Polish Jews, more than a few expressed similar appreciation at having been treated as “social equals” by the Soviets. So, for example, I heard such views clearly and forcefully articulated in a number of the testimonies recorded in Australia in the 1990s:

As a refugee in Belarus, Joseph Eckstein had refused Soviet citizenship, was afterwards arrested as a “German spy” and sent to a prison camp near Novosibirsk. Yet, in his testimony he comments on the kindness of the local

14 See the chapter by Markus Nesselrodt in this volume.

15 See Aleksander Smolar, “Jews as a Polish Problem,” *Daedalus* 116, no. 2 (1987): 38.

16 Interview with Abraham Amaterstein, July 31, 1996, Melbourne, USC VHA.

Russians who did not discriminate against the prisoners as Jews and who helped whichever way they could with cigarettes or scraps of bread. Dora Huze, a refugee deported to a labor camp in Siberia notes that while some Russians were anti-Semitic, discrimination or using racist language was forbidden, and Jews were treated just like all the Russian prisoners. In the camp they were even permitted to have a “spokesperson” elected by refugees to pass on any complaints or suggestions to the authorities. In her video testimony, when the interviewer asks whether there was different treatment for Jews in her arctic Soviet labor camp, Anna Kalfus replies with a firm “no”—and then adds that the authorities made it clear to inmates that not even the derogatory word “*Zhid*” was permitted to be used.¹⁷

Comments like these stand in marked contrast to the way many of the same Jewish informants reflected on the situation in 1930s Poland where they had either personally experienced, or were certainly made acutely aware of, the widespread increases in both personal prejudice and discriminatory practices directed against Jews by ethnic Poles. Despite their formal status as full citizens of Poland, many Jews felt ethnic Poles had not treated them as equal members of the “Polish Nation.” Many of the younger Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during the Second World War had grown up in the new Polish state, re-established in 1918 in the aftermath of World War I, and supposedly committed to a policy of “ethnic pluralism.” However, in a recent article, Kamil Kijek points out that: “Although it was meant to be democratic and all its citizens were to enjoy equal rights, the failure to put this into practice fully led to serious tensions between the ethnic minorities and the government, which defined the new polity in exclusivist terms as the state of the Polish nation.” So, in practice, the

“democratic promise” of the Second Polish Republic was offered to young Jews, while at the same time, they were made aware that this promise would in no way be fulfilled. There were two basic reasons for this failure. The first was the dominance of the ethno-religious concept of the Polish nation and the lack of a similarly strong narrative of the communal bond linking all the state’s citizens. The other was widespread antisemitism. Because of the strength of these two

17 All the citations are from video testimonies collected in Australia in the 1990s by *The Shoah Foundation* and now lodged in the *USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education* archive. John Goldlust, “Identity Profusions: bio-historical journeys from ‘Polish Jew’/‘Jewish Pole’ through ‘Soviet Citizen’ to ‘Holocaust Survivor,’” in *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 225.

factors, school in some ways provided a foretaste of what young people would encounter in adult life, in the job market, in politics and in social life.¹⁸

This is important, I would suggest, for understanding why the more typical Jewish evaluation of their wartime Soviet experience differs so markedly from how this period is generally depicted within the mainstream historical narrative of the “Polish nation.” It was not only Jews, but also an even larger number of non-Jewish Poles who were caught up in the Soviet deportations and “forced exiles” of 1939–41, and many thousands from both groups chose to move voluntarily into Soviet controlled areas rather than remain in the Polish territory under German occupation.¹⁹ Indeed, the wartime vicissitudes experienced by ethnic Poles during their years in the Soviet Union were, in the main, not that dissimilar to those confronted by the Polish Jews.

However, in both historiographical and personal narratives, ethnic Poles tend to place considerable emphasis on valorization of the “heroic victims” who died in the Soviet Union.²⁰ Polish experiences under the Soviets are typically recounted as an endless litany of forced deportations, deprivations, exploitation, starvation and misery that resulted in an extraordinarily high death rate amongst this group, while the ultimate fate of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Poles, presumed to have been permanently trapped or imprisoned somewhere deep inside the USSR, still remains unknown.²¹ So the entire episode is often contextualized as another bitter chapter in the long-standing and ongoing

18 Kamil Kijek, “Between a Love of Poland, Symbolic Violence, and Antisemitism: The Idiosyncratic Effects of the State Education System on Young Jews in Interwar Poland,” in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 30 (2018): 237, 263.

19 The first Polish citizens, approximately 55,000 refugees from central and western Poland were displaced in October 1939. Many were resettled in the eastern region of Ukrainian and Belorussian SSR. See Daniel Boćkowski, “Przesiedlenie ludności uchodźczej—tzw. ‘bieżeńców’—do wschodnich obwodów Białoruskiej SSR jesienią 1939 roku,” *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, no. 1 (1997): 78.

20 See the chapter by Lidia Zessin-Jurek in this volume.

21 Under the same criteria as Polish Jews, ethnic Poles were of course eligible for postwar “repatriation.” And, according to Keith Sword, between 1945 and 1948, 258,000 returned to Poland from the USSR “interior” (meaning east of pre-1939 borders), and a further 245,000 came back in a later round of “repatriations” between 1955 and 1959. See, *Deportation and Exile: Poles in the Soviet Union, 1939–48* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 197. Yet, as recently pointed out, while highlighting their victimization in the USSR during the war, conspicuously absent is: “that for some ethnic Poles, too, flight or even deportation to the Soviet Union might have been lifesaving . . . how many of them might have been killed as a direct result of German occupation policies? Clearly, even where ethnic Poles are concerned, the

oppression and persecution suffered by the “Polish People” at the hands of “the Russians,” not only for centuries prior to the Second World War but continuing until the final collapse of the Soviet Union and other subservient “Eastern Bloc” communist regimes in the early 1990s.²²

Of considerable significance to the very different perceptions of “victimhood” later held by many Polish Jews and ethnic Poles, were a complex interplay of wartime confrontations and allegiances in Poland involving Germans, Poles, Jews and “Russians.”²³ For while Poland was invaded in 1939 and its

history of Soviet occupation and—later—liberation can be told in more than one way.” See, Mark Edele et al., “Introduction,” in *Shelter From The Holocaust*, 14.

- 22 The titles of a number of historical accounts, including some written or edited by professional historians, are indicative of the significant themes pursued in the content of these works: So, Sword, *Deportation and Exile*; Tomasz Piesakowski, *The Fate of Poles in the USSR, 1939–1989* (London: Gryf Publications, 1990); Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women In The Soviet Union During World War II* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002); Tadeusz Piotrowski ed., *The Polish Deportees of World War II: Recollection of Removal to the Soviet Union and Dispersal Throughout The World* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2004); Anna M. Cienciala, “An Unknown Page of History: The Poles Deported to the USSR in 1940–1941,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 22, no. 3 (2009): 301–314; Anna Kant and Norbert Kant, *Extermination: Killing Poles In Stalin’s Empire* (London: Unicorn, 1991). See also, the documentary film directed by Jagna Wright, *The Forgotten Odyssey: The Untold Story of 1,700,000 Poles Deported to Siberia in 1940* (London: Lest We Forget Productions, 2001). And worth mentioning is the interactive “Kresy-Siberia” website “dedicated to researching, remembering and recognizing the Polish citizens deported, enslaved and killed by the Soviet Union during World War Two. It was established by a number of survivors and their descendants to tell the stories of the ‘Polish Gehenna’ to the world.” The site includes a “Virtual Museum” (incorporating more than 1700 “survivor testimonies”) seen as necessary because: “one aspect of Poland’s wartime history is hardly known to most people—the deportation, imprisonment, and other repression of the inhabitants of the Kresy, or Eastern Borderlands, on Josef Stalin’s orders, to Soviet slave labor camps and Gulags in Siberia, Kazakhstan and eastern Asia. Almost two million Polish citizens suffered this ‘Gehenna’. Many died in the camps from hypothermia, lack of nutrition, or diseases like typhoid or malaria. Others survived to join the Polish Forces under Allied command battling Nazi Germany in Africa and Europe, or to see out the war in refugee camps in the Middle East, Africa, India, New Zealand and Mexico. Most never returned to their fatherland because it was annexed by the Soviet regime after the war.” See, <http://kresy-siberia.com>, accessed August 7, 2018. As Hanna Maischen observes, “The resurgence of a memory of victimhood under the Soviets during the war and after its end, which had been suppressed in Communist Poland, seems to pander to a national focus.” See, “The Historicity of the Witness: The Polish Relationship to Jews and Germans in the Polish Memory Discourse of the Holocaust,” in *Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe: Shared and Comparative Histories*, ed. Tobias Grill (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 232.
- 23 While the geopolitical makeup of the USSR incorporated numerous ethno-linguistic regions and distinctive communities, many Poles, including Polish Jews, preferred to use

territories divided between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, as Gutman and Krakowski emphasize: “The Poles saw the Russians and the Germans as occupiers, one as bad as the other. For the Jews the difference was enormous.”²⁴ Within the areas of Poland controlled either by the Nazis or the Soviets, the often already ambivalent relationships between Jews and ethnic Poles now found each group taking on reciprocal, but inverted, roles in relation to the other.

The Nazis unambiguously identified Jews as their “primary victims,” and by 1941 were implementing plans to exterminate them all. “The Poles, on the other hand, were to be reduced to slave labor, and even this goal was not largely achieved.”²⁵ Upon occupying the eastern territories, the Soviets presented themselves, ostensibly at least, as “liberators” of the local and “minority” populations—meaning Ukrainians, Belorussians and Jews—from the “yoke of their Polish oppressors.” In these circumstances the ethnic Poles became the “primary victims,” with the Jews (and other minorities) elevated to an “intermediary” role in the eyes of the Soviet authorities. So, given the very different political and ideological priorities of the two occupation regimes, the position of Poles and Polish Jews under the Soviets on the “hierarchy of victimhood” was the inverse of each group’s relative status under the Nazis.

What subsequently emerged from both situations, greatly encouraged by the policies put in place by these two highly authoritarian regimes, were parallel accusations between Poles and Polish Jews of “collaboration with the oppressor” and “treason.” These very soon became widely shared views held by considerable numbers of each group against the other and already well entrenched by the end of the war. Since then, both in mainstream historiography and popular memory, it would appear they have been amplified even further. A great deal of what became the normative “Jewish perspective” on Poland in the decades following the war was “shaped by survivor testimonies that often spoke of widespread Polish antisemitism and indifference to the fate of European Jewry

“Russians” as a shorthand, if inaccurate, collective noun when referring to Soviet civilians and military personnel.

24 Gutman and Krakowski, *Unequal Victims*, 38.

25 Konstanty Gebert, “Separate Narratives: Polish and Jewish Perceptions of the Shoah,” accessed April 6, 2019, http://www.rzym.pan.pl/images/files/artPDFvarie/Gebert_PJ_Narratives_UNESCO.pdf

during the Holocaust.” And furthermore, “Jewish historiography . . . tended to mirror popular memory about the degree of antisemitism in wartime Poland.”²⁶

Poles were accused of assisting the Nazis and further facilitating the persecution of fellow Jews, some of whom they knew personally or were acquainted with as neighbors. They did this in various ways: voluntarily identifying for the Nazis the Jews standing in food queues, or those seeking to evade forced labor round-ups or internment in ghettos; informing on Jews trying to pass as “Aryans”; betraying Jews in hiding or, after having taken payment from them, informing on Jews they had been hiding themselves; denouncing Jewish children placed in the care of Poles; taking advantage of Nazi deportations to acquire Jewish property and goods; and participating in, and on occasions instigating, the murders of Jewish victims.²⁷

From the other side we have the virtual mirror image of the above in the dominant narrative shared by many non-Jewish Poles, accusatory and resentful of the way Jews had behaved during the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland.

26 See, Joshua D. Zimmerman, Changing Perceptions in the Historiography of Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War, in *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews During The Holocaust And Its Aftermath*, ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 1, 3.

27 A pungent comment from a video testimony succinctly captures a widely shared Jewish view that the main difference between Germans and Poles behavior towards Jews was: “Poles didn’t kill, they just pointed.” From video interview with Jewish survivor, Lucy Goldfeld, March 22, 1998, Melbourne, USC VHA, 41758. See also: Barbara Engelking-Boni, “Dear Mr. Gestapo:’ Denunciatory Letters to the German Authorities in Warsaw, 1940–1942,” in *Inferno of Choices: Poles and the Holocaust*, ed. Sebastian Rejak and Elżbieta Frister (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza RYTM, 2011), 166–181; Andrzej Żbikowski, “Antisemitism, Extortion Against Jews, Collaboration with Germans and Polish-Jewish Relations Under German Occupation,” in *Inferno of Choices*, 182–235. Over recent decades more serious accusations have emerged in publications documenting instances of Poles directly instigating or participating in the killing of Jews. See, Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Barbara Engelking, “Murdering and Denouncing Jews in the Polish Countryside, 1942–1945,” *East European Politics and Societies* 25 (2011): 433–456; Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2013); Barbara Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day... – Jews Seeking Refuge in the Polish Countryside, 1942–1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2016). Recent scholarship draws our attention to a more complex and nuanced relationship between Poles and Jews in the former Polish territories overrun and occupied by the Nazis after June 1941. As Hannah Maischen points out, “Poles could have been victims themselves, could murder or harm the Jews and therefore be considered perpetrators, and they could also help the Jews and therefore be remembered as heroes.” See Maischen, “The Historicity of the Witness,” 225.

As Elazar Barkan and others noted, following the German attack on the USSR when both groups were together in the Soviet Union:

The prevalent view among Poles was that the Jews had joyously welcomed the Soviet invasion in September 1939; in addition, Jews supposedly had played an important role in the local Soviet power apparatus in the subsequent period, and in this role had contributed significantly to the persecution of the Poles, profited from their suffering and thus had committed “treason.” This narrative was already widespread among the Polish population during World War II. Apparently, it also constituted a central factor in the hostile attitude during the war toward the Jews under German occupation. After World War II, it remained alive in Polish memory.²⁸

As one writer points out “in the Polish unwritten code universally rejecting the occupation and in the call for at least passive resistance, there was no room for exceptions: who is not with us is against us. Given this attitude, every Jewish doctor, clerk, agronomist, or bookkeeper who accepted a job in a Soviet office took upon himself the odium of a collaborator.”²⁹

28 Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, and Kai Struve, “Introduction,” in *Shared History—Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941*, ed. Elazar Barkan et al. (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 26–27. Many writers and scholars have explored the broader historical context of the complex and often fraught relationship between ethnic Poles and Jews over many centuries leading up and since the Second World War. See, for example, Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2006). As Zvi Gitelman notes: “Whether it was by the Turks and Islam, by the Russians and Orthodoxy, or the conquering Germans, Austro-Hungarians, and Imperial Russians—and later the Bolshevik Russians (twice) or the Nazi Germans—Poles seemed to be under constant attack. Like other such groups, they regarded those who were living among them but who were very different as potential or real allies of their enemies. The most recent expression was the belief among some Poles that Communism was a Jewish conspiracy, the *Zydokomuna*, and that both the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland in 1939 and the installation of a communist government after the Second World War were the work of Jewish Bolsheviks.” See, “Collective Memory and Contemporary Polish-Jewish Relations,” in *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews During the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 274.

29 Andrzej Żbikowski, “Polish Jews under Soviet Occupation, 1939–1941,” in *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews During the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 59.

So, under the Germans some Poles were seen to "collaborate" with the Nazis against the Jews. And under the Soviets, some Jews were seen to "collaborate" with the Bolsheviks against the Poles. For both, these "collective memories" were widely shared within the group and hardened over the years, so that in reflecting on this period the examples have moved from "a few" or "some" to "all."

And for Jews, there are also strong memories of the hostility and violence directed at Polish Jews by ethnic Poles after the end of the war (including at least several hundred murders).³⁰ The Jews who returned from the USSR were both experiencing this widespread animosity and rejection, and at the same time hearing from other survivors of the part some Poles had played in "assisting" the Nazis in the victimization, exploitation and murder of Jews during the war.

For Polish Jews, the dominant narrative that emerged held the Germans to be the perpetrators of the genocidal assault on European Jewry, but also noted, with considerable bitterness, the role played by some of their Polish "accomplices." Around two-thirds of the surviving Jews stayed in Poland for only a short period of time after the war.³¹ Many who left carried these negative views with them wherever they later settled, and they were often passed on to later generations through personal reminiscences, oral testimonies and autobiographical memoirs.³² So, it is perhaps not surprising that, in the decades since the war, already existing grievances, antagonisms and resentments between

30 For extended discussions of antisemitism and outbreaks of violence against Jews in postwar Poland, see, for example David Engel, "Patterns Of Anti-Jewish Violence In Poland, 1944–1946," *Yad Vashem Studies* XXVI (1998): 43–85; Jan T. Gross, "After Auschwitz: The Reality and Meaning of Postwar Antisemitism in Poland," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* XX (2004): 199–226; Joanna Michlic, "The Holocaust and Its Aftermath," in *The Jews Are Coming Back: The Return of the Jews to their Countries of Origin after WWII*, ed. David Bankier (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005), 206–230; Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Cries of the Mob in the Pogroms in Rzeszów (June 1945), Cracow (August 1945), and Kielce (July 1946) as a Source for the State of Mind of the Participants," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 3 (2011): 553–573; Monika Rice, "What Still Alive?!": *Jewish Survivors In Poland And Israel Remember Homecoming* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017).

31 These included a considerable number of Polish Jews returning from the USSR who had arrived back in Poland not long before, or around the time of, the notorious "Kielce Pogrom" of July 4, 1946.

32 As Zvi Gitelman ("Collective Memory," 277) has observed, "Jews who have never been in Poland 'inherit' memories from relatives, or even from teachers, acquaintances, or books and films, and make them part of their weltanschauung."

ethnic Poles and Polish Jews have remained firmly rooted in each group's selective memories of the past.³³

. . . Nor “Survivors”

In their recent article exploring the conceptual history of the term “survivor,” with specific reference to the Holocaust, Alina Bothe and Markus Nesselrodt draw attention to its complexity and fluidity. They note that, both in relation to self-identification and acknowledgement by others, whether one is included in the “collective” of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust has been “subject to ongoing transformation since 1945.” A continuous reshaping, they suggest, has been taking place across four “spheres of discourse” identified as: “academic, politico-institutional, restitution and memory.” This process, they observe, reflects the “long-term tension” between Jews in Europe who survived the war, both as individuals and as a collective category, and the morally weightier “concept of *survivor*.”³⁴

In the sphere of academic discourse, by the time Polish Jews began returning from the USSR after the war a number of Jewish historical commissions in Poland had already begun collecting testimonies and administering questionnaires. Their intended purpose was to ensure the early documentation of individual Jewish memories that would serve as an irrevocable, cumulative record of the group's collective wartime experiences. Their attention was focused firmly on Jews who survived in Jewish ghettos and Nazi camps, by hiding in the forests, joining with partisan groups, or under a false identity on the “Aryan side.” They expressed little interest in “other groups of Jewish survivors, such as returnees from the Soviet Union, who were not mentioned in contemporary publications on the history of the Holocaust.”³⁵

As it was being constructed after the war, the category of “survivor” assumed any Jew who had suffered through these ordeals was also a “witness,” and therefore “one who carries the burden of speaking about her or his experi-

33 See, Piotr Wróbel, “Double Memory: Poles and Jews after the Holocaust,” *East European Politics and Society* 11, no. 3 (1997): 560–574. Also, Antony Polonsky, “Poles, Jews and the Problems of a Divided Memory,” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2004): 125–147; and, David Engel, “On Reconciling the Histories of Two Chosen Peoples,” *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 4 (2009): 914–929.

34 Alina Bothe and Markus Nesselrodt, “Survivor: Towards A Conceptual History,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 61 (2016): 57–82, here 58–60.

35 *Ibid.*, 69. See also, Jockusch and Lewinsky, “Paradise Lost?,” 376–387.

ences during the Holocaust.”³⁶ But the Polish Jews who had been in the Soviet Union through most of the war years could contribute few, if any, eyewitness accounts that might help document the physical and psychological horrors experienced by the Jews under the Nazis. And despite constituting around two-thirds of the Jewish population of the postwar DP camps in Europe and, during their years in the USSR, having endured difficult nomadic lives punctuated by considerable hardships that sometimes included periods of forced labor, “their suffering differed markedly from the concentration camp survivors who had lived under Nazi rule, which sought to kill them and to exploit their labor potential until exhaustion.”³⁷

It has been noted that, between August 1946 and December 1948, in ten issues and 1100 pages of *Fun Letstn Khurbn*, the widely circulated DP camp magazine that sought to document every aspect of the Holocaust: “Not a single article told the story of Polish Jews who had escaped to the Soviet Union,” while “the Jewish participation in the Red Army was passed over in silence.”³⁸ As Margaret Taft observes, by the late 1940s the question of ‘How did you survive?’ ceded primary authority to Jews “who survived the horrors of the camps and the deprivations of the ghettos” and now “held public ownership of survivor identity.” And more importantly, “it was a collective identity that was readily accepted and shared by other survivors.”³⁹

Following the rapid departure of the majority of the Jews who had gathered in Poland in the immediate postwar period—including many who had been in the Soviet Union—within a short time most emigrants re-settled in Palestine/Israel or the United States; and the rest departed for Australia, Canada, Argentina and elsewhere. Wherever they began their new lives, recently arrived Polish Jews became actively involved in establishing forms of collective memorialization that would enable all Holocaust survivors to express

36 Bothe and Nesselrodt, “Survivor,” 58. See also, Annette Wieworka, “From Survivor to Witness: Voices from the Shoah,” in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 129–141; and, Margaret Taft, *From Victim to Survivor: The Emergence and Development of the Holocaust Witness 1941–1948* (Middlesex UK: Valentine Mitchell, 2013), 165–171.

37 Na’ama Seri-Levi, “‘These people are unique’: The Repatriates in the Displaced Persons Camps, 1945–1946,” *Moreshet* 14 (2017): 54.

38 See, Ada Schein, “‘Everyone Can Hold a Pen’: The Documentation Project in the DP Camps in Germany,” in *Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics And Achievements*, ed. David Bankier and Dan Michman (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008), 124–125.

39 Margaret Taft, *From Victim To Survivor*, 168.

both personal grieving and participate in public mourning for lost families and extinguished communities. By the early 1950s, in scores of Jewish communities across the world, public rituals were in place to commemorate the loss and to honor the memory of the victims of the Nazi extermination camps and the ghettos.⁴⁰ Jews from larger Polish cities such as Warsaw, Łódź or Białystok, as well as some from smaller towns with sizeable prewar Jewish populations, helped create and participated in *Landsmanshaft* organizations. These groups often coordinated additional commemorations of special significance to Jews who came from their particular town or city in Poland. Almost every Jew who had survived in the Soviet Union shared these feelings of loss, mourning and guilt, remembering close family members and friends who had remained in Nazi-controlled Poland, most of whom did not survive. For them, and later for many of their children and grandchildren, there has remained a strong impetus to express feelings of collective solidarity through participation in their local Jewish community's Holocaust commemorations.

However, unlike the first-hand accounts and extensive public information describing, often in considerable detail, what had happened to the Jews in the towns, in concentration camps, during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising or the final "liquidation" of the Lodz Ghetto, the stories of Polish Jews who had been in the Soviet Union remained personal and individualized. The often complex and elaborate details surrounding their particular mode of escape and the convoluted pathways that led to their personal "survival" were rarely shared with "outsiders" and, if spoken about at all, usually remained within their immediate family.⁴¹ Importantly, unlike camp survivors or Jews who originated from the

40 Margaret Taft (*From Victim to Survivor*, 154) notes that in 1944: "Already, just one year after the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the anniversary of the event was being commemorated in diaspora Jewish communities. And these included public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne addressed by local politicians and prominent rabbis." For an extended discussion of how early and how widespread Holocaust commemoration and memorialization was taken up in US Jewish communities see, Hasia Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

41 A few Polish Jews who had been in the Soviet Union did write or record accounts of their experiences soon after the war, but mostly in Yiddish (or less frequently Polish). Two published examples, later translated into English: the memoir of Moshe Grossman (a well-known writer of novels and short stories from Warsaw), originally published in 1949 in Yiddish and titled, with obvious irony, *In The Enchanted Land: My Seven Years in Soviet Russia* (Tel Aviv: Rachel, 1960); and another early account from Melbourne writer Moshe Ajzenbud, first published in Yiddish in 1956, presented a fictional story of a protagonist named 'Michael,' what clearly is a thinly veiled personal memoir of the author's years in the Soviet Union, *The Commissar Took Care* (Brunswick, Vic: Globe Press, 1986). Magdalena

same city or town in Poland, or even others who had managed to escape from Nazi-occupied Europe (the multi-national group of Jewish refugees who spent the war years in Shanghai, or the *Kindertransport* children sent to the UK from Germany and other places in Central Europe in the late 1930s), this considerably larger cohort of Polish Jews who had been in the Soviet Union never developed or exhibited any sense of collective identity. There was no impetus coming from them to form special organizations, 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 for the Polish Jews who had died in the USSR.⁴²

All of these factors both reflected and further amplified the mutually agreed upon “hierarchy of suffering” which, as noted above, was in evidence almost immediately after the war among surviving Polish Jews, many of whom spent time together in the DP camps of central Europe in the mid and late 1940s. For Polish Jews who had been in the Soviet Union, their “place” in the “survival hierarchy” does seem, very quickly, to have become firmly embedded as part of their self-identity.⁴³ And in recent decades, even as they began, hesitantly, to declare their presence in the more expansive “memory discourse” around the Holocaust, by publishing written memoirs and recording oral testimonies, the lasting power of this tendency towards self-exclusion from the “real survivor category” remained very much in evidence. A clear and unequivocal example appears in a joint memoir by Fela and Felix Rosenbloom, published in Melbourne in 1994. Both Polish Jews, Fela was a survivor of Auschwitz under the Nazis while her husband, Felix, had moved into Soviet territory in October 1939, and later enlisted in the Soviet-sponsored Polish Army under General

Ruta notes in her recent book, *Without Jews? Yiddish Literature in the People's Republic of Poland on the Holocaust, Poland, and Communism* (Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2017) that there were published literary texts by Yiddish writers in postwar Poland that did reference the wartime Soviet experience.

- 42 While estimates for the overall death rate among the Polish Jews in the Soviet Union as high as 35 per cent have been presented in scholarly publications, no convincing documentary evidence has yet emerged to support such a figure. See, Albert Kaganovitch, “Jewish Refugees And Soviet Authorities During World War II,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 38, no. 2 (2010): footnote 121.
- 43 As Margaret Taft writes in relation to the immediate postwar years: “Those who survived while in hiding or fled to the relative safety of neutral countries, or those not occupied by the Nazis, did not during this period constitute part of the Jewish public’s equation of a ‘true’ survivor, one who had experienced the full brunt of the Nazis’ Final Solution. Even as late as the 1970s, the term ‘Holocaust survivor’ referred only to one who had survived death and witnessed death.” *From Victim to Survivor*, 165.

Berling. In a foreword that precedes their separate “stories,” Felix observes pointedly that, as he “survived the war years in the comparative safety of the then Soviet Union,” for decades he had resisted his family’s request to write down his experiences, because he firmly believed 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.”⁴⁴ Similarly, in his Shoah Foundation video testimony recorded in 1997, Mojsze Ganc tells the interviewer that when he first received the preliminary questionnaire he assumed he was “not suitable to be interviewed” because he had never been in a camp or ghetto, nor ever seen an SS officer in uniform.⁴⁵

In a recent publication, historian Eliyana Adler has focused particular attention on responses by Polish Jews who were in the Soviet Union to the very last section of the Shoah Foundation video interviews, at which point the informant is prompted by the interviewer for his or her personal “reflections on the Holocaust.” It is not merely self-effacement, Adler suggests, that lies behind the following anecdote she cites from the 1997 interview of Symcha Burstin. In his response to the final question, Burstin, who had settled in Australia after the war, recalls attending a professional conference with work colleagues, at which, following a dinner, he was asked about his wartime experiences in Europe. For the rest of a long evening he holds the rapt attention of his colleagues with stories of ghettos, camps and the destruction of the Jews by the Nazis, but tellingly says nothing of his own experiences in the USSR during the war.⁴⁶ Similarly, from another video testimony recorded in Melbourne in 1998, when asked by the interviewer if, in Australia, she ever talks about her wartime experiences, Stefania Chaskiel replies: “They [are] only interested in Germany.”⁴⁷

Yet, somewhat paradoxically, many comments cited above come from testimonies lodged with the Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive, the stated goal of which is to help document as many as possible of the personal wartime stories and experiences of Jewish “Holocaust survivors.” Indeed, as Bothe and Nesselrodt have noted, the numerous oral history projects that have sprung up all round the world since the 1980s now play a central role in both the “institutional” and “memory” discourses of the Holocaust, and have been extremely influential in broadening the definition of “who is a survivor.”⁴⁸

44 Fela and Felix Rosenbloom, *Miracles Do Happen* (Melbourne: Scribe, 1994), viii.

45 Interview with Mojsze Ganc, January 27, 1997, Melbourne, USC VHA, 26790.

46 Adler, “Crossing Over,” 263.

47 Interview with Stefania Chaskiel, March 29, 1998, Melbourne, USC VHA, 42862.

48 See, Bothe and Nesselrodt, “Survivor,” 73–82.

While previously more restrictive criteria predominated, particularly in the “academic” and “politico-institutional” spheres, the new guidelines emanating from these increasingly prominent and influential memorial institutions—in particular, Yad Vashem, the Shoah Foundation and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—present few barriers to Jews who wish to contribute oral testimonies about their wartime experiences to their archives. So according to current definitions a “survivor” is “no longer only a camp survivor but every Jew who lived on mainland Europe between 1933 and 1945.”⁴⁹

On this question, after examining a number of Shoah Foundation testimonies from Polish Jews who had sought refuge in the Soviet Union, Eliyana Adler suggests they fall into one of three categories: “most of the flight survivors interviewed clearly differentiate their own experiences from those of Holocaust survivors [...] a smaller number do consider themselves Holocaust survivors and claim that mantle proudly. The smallest group of witnesses do not seem to know to which group they belong, and so fumble over the questions.”⁵⁰

From my own explorations of memoir and testimony materials from Polish Jews who were in the Soviet Union during the war, I would offer a less categorical and considerably more ambiguous interpretation. I came across very few who were unequivocal in placing themselves in the category of “survivor.” Rather, direct articulations differentiating themselves from “Holocaust survivors” were much clearer and more pronounced.⁵¹ While confirmation of their eligibility from the Shoah Foundation now meant their interviews would be lodged in the same archive as Jews who had survived under the Nazis, this did not necessarily change their sense of liminality around whether they did, or did not, “belong” to the survivor group. They were pleased for the opportunity to place on record—mostly, they thought, for the benefit of their immediate families and perhaps later generations—more extended narratives thereby providing a more coherent chronology, detailed descriptions and personal observations about where and how they had managed to survive during their years in the Soviet Union, but in their own eyes this did not necessarily move them into the category of “Holocaust survivor.” Or, as Margaret Taft pointedly

49 Ibid., 80. As Anna Green has observed, “the interesting issue is not that individuals draw upon contemporary cultural discourses to make sense of their lives, but *which* ones, and *why*.” See, “Individual Memory and ‘Collective Memory’: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates,” *Oral History* 32, no. 2 (2004): 42.

50 Adler, “Crossing Over,” 257.

51 I cite a number of examples in my chapter “Identity Profusions,” in *Shelter From The Holocaust*, 234–235.

observes, in their communities and even amongst themselves: “Such people were no doubt seen as ‘survivors,’ but of a different order.”⁵²

Some who were interviewed not only welcomed the opportunity to “leave a testimony for future generations,” but also considered their stories and experiences important precisely because they *were* so “different from those who were under the Germans.”⁵³ And with the passing of many decades, as Bothe and Nesselrodt point out, Jews who continued to live long after the war became increasingly recognized within their families and communities both “for their survival and their value as keepers of memory.”⁵⁴

So, in the end: not really “victims of Soviet Communism” and not really “survivors of the Nazi camps.” And, while acknowledging there are questions around the reliability of memories set down so long after the events, the rich material now emerging through memoirs and testimonies from these Polish Jews can tell us a great deal that is not available from written documents about a very different kind of survival in a very different place, where they lived for a number of years in conditions that were invariably harsh and uncompromising. In contrast to the degradation, brutality and imminent death most Jews faced under the Nazis, as refugees in the Soviet Union they retained a certain degree of personal agency, but were also continuously confronted with difficult and potentially dangerous choices. Their lives were subject to the structural constraints and the bewilderingly impenetrable logic of decisions made by an ideologically driven, fiercely authoritarian regime. Many arbitrarily experienced deportation, hard labor, imprisonment, loss of citizenship, and various other punitive measures inflicted by the Soviet authorities. It is therefore unsurprising that very few Polish Jews departed the USSR after the war with a particularly favorable view of Soviet communism as a political system. Yet despite all of this, many decades later a number still expressed considerable gratitude to the refuge offered by the Soviet Union that in the end saved so many Jewish lives.⁵⁵

52 Taft, *From Victim to Survivor*, 165.

53 The quotations are from, Interview with Wolf Kamer, September 27, 1997, Melbourne, USC VHA, 35958, and Interview with Irena Feiler, March 16, 1995, Sydney, USC VHA, 1356.

54 Bothe and Nesselrodt, “Survivor,” 82.

55 As I have written elsewhere (Goldlust, “A Different Silence,” 69), “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 also a heartfelt appreciation for the relatively safe and peaceful refuge they had been fortunate enough to find inside the USSR. Toby Klodawska Flam, in her memoir, 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!’ [Leo] Cooper is more measured, but also quite open,

Most of these Polish Jews were well aware at the time, and certainly later, that both their fortuitous pathway to survival as well as the opportunity to leave the Soviet Union after the war came not because the Soviets had any special concern for the situation of the Jews. They were merely pawns in the gigantic geo-political chess game played out by the major powers during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath, yet at the end of it most of them were still standing.⁵⁶

In acknowledging the inherent contradictions, ambivalences and complexities that make the experiences of the Polish Jews in the Soviet Union such a fascinating and challenging area for research and further study, perhaps the last words should come from the poignant reflection offered by Felix Flicker in his Shoah Foundation video testimony:

[Compared] to German concentration camp survivors our sufferings were not of the same scale. But, for historical truth and for historical knowledge I feel that future generations must also know about the type of holocaust we went through. And the tens of thousands of Jews that died in the Siberian Steppes, in the gulags, where their bones are strewn all over the frozen country.⁵⁷

about feeling some ambivalence when it was time for him to take his leave of the Soviet Union. He writes: 'At this moment I was 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.'

56 Not only were they alive, but for many their years in the Soviet Union had not depleted their physical and psychological resources to the extent experienced by those who had managed to survive under the Nazis. In fact, as Atina Grossmann points out, certain positive attributes of the "repatriates" (Polish Jews who had returned from the USSR) were very noticeable in the postwar DP camps. "Many had grown used to working and supporting themselves while they were in the Soviet Union: some worked in professions they had learned while they were still in Poland, and others learned different professions in the Soviet Union." Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 161.

57 Interview with Felix Flicker, June 9, 1997, Melbourne, USC VHA, 32399.