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Choosing the Lesser of Two Evils: Jewish Refugees in Soviet Occupied Poland 1939–1940

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Abstract: Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939 triggered a substantial eastward movement of refugees. Among them were approximately 300,000 Jews who found themselves stranded in territories occupied by the Soviet Union. In accordance with the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, which outlined the partition of Poland, the Red Army also advanced into Polish territory on 17 September. The Soviet authorities perceived the mass arrival of predominantly Jewish refugees – classified as *bezhentsy* – not only as a socio-economic burden but also as a considerable security threat. Concentrated largely in border cities these displaced persons came under the scrutiny of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, which regarded them as potential sources of instability. In the spring of 1940, over 65,000 Jewish refugees voluntarily sought to return to the German-occupied zone of Poland as part of a broader population exchange. However, as they were not accepted by the Germans, they were deported by the NKVD to the Soviet interior. Drawing on the experiences of those affected, this paper investigates the question of why, in the spring of 1940, tens of thousands of Polish Jews made the seemingly paradoxical decision to return to territories under Nazi control, despite the evident risks of persecution.

Keywords: Polish Jews; German occupation; Soviet occupation; Jewish refugees; Soviet deportation of Polish Jews

1 Introduction: The German Invasion of Poland – Jewish Dilemmas of Flight and Survival

> A new regulation has been issued: All refugees from former Poland must register. Everyone is obligated to indicate whether they wish to become a permanent Soviet citizen, to remain here,

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> on Soviet soil, or if they want to be sent back to their previous place of residence! […] The majority of refugees have left their wives and children, their closest family behind on the other side – so how can one decide to accept Soviet citizenship, which means to remain here permanently?! To part with home, with the closest ones forever?! (Grosman 1949, 83)

In his memoirs, published in 1949, the journalist Moishe Grosman provides a detailed account of the experiences of the Jewish population in eastern Poland under Soviet occupation. Following the German invasion of September 1939, approximately 300,000 Polish Jews – predominantly men – sought refuge in the Soviet-occupied territories. In the spring of 1940, the Soviet authorities confronted these refugees, commonly referred to as *bezhentsy*, with a stark choice: to accept Soviet citizenship or to register for return to the German zone of occupation. Grossman also underscores the acute dilemma posed by this Soviet decree. Many of the Jewish refugees had fled eastwards, leaving their families behind in the widespread conviction that the Germans would not harm women and children. To accept Soviet citizenship, however, entailed the near certainty of irrevocable separation from their loved ones. Primarily on these grounds, more than 65,000 Polish Jews chose the path of so-called "repatriation," only to be deported shortly thereafter to Siberia by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). This essay examines this hitherto largely overlooked dimension of the Holocaust, which simultaneously reveals a striking intersection of German and Soviet occupation policies in Poland.

After the Stalinist Soviet Union and National Socialist Germany had carved up their spheres of influence in East-Central Europe via the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, Germany launched its attack on Poland on 1 September 1939. The mistreatment and murder of thousands of Jews by the German *Einsatzgruppen* (task forces) sparked a mass exodus to the east. Moreover, in a radio broadcast on the night of 6 September 1939, the Polish Army's chief of propaganda announced the evacuation of Warsaw and urged all able-bodied men to cross to the eastern side of the Vistula River in order to regroup. Approximately 200,000 men, including a substantial number of Jews, followed this call (Friedrich 2023, 609; Gliksman 1948, 24–25).

On 17 September, the Red Army invaded eastern Poland, exacerbating the general chaos. The Frontier Defence Corps, which was responsible for protecting Poland's external border with the Soviet Union, had received no instructions from Warsaw as to how it should behave in the face of the Red Army's invasion. The Polish government and the military leadership were preparing to flee to Romania and were in fact no longer able to act. Soviet propaganda initially framed the Red Army's invasion as a move to assist Poland against the German aggressor. Even before 17 September, Soviet operatives worked to ensure that the local population would warmly welcome the advancing Red Army as liberators – often under threat of reprisals. This effort, coupled with the staged elections of 22 October 1939, was

designed to lend a semblance of legitimacy to the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland (Gross 1988, 30–31).

The majority of the 300,000 Jewish refugees arrived in eastern Poland within the first eight weeks following the outbreak of the war. This, however, accounted for only a relatively small proportion of the total 1.7 million Jews in the German-controlled territories. The decision of whether to flee eastward was influenced by various factors. These included the existence of relatives or acquaintances in eastern Poland who could offer shelter, knowledge of the massacres carried out by the German *Einsatzgruppen*, and the level of violence experienced directly from German occupiers or non-Jewish neighbours (Nesselrodt 2021, 3–5).

The German Air Force subjected Polish territories to brutal bombardment. Jewish children who survived deportation to the Soviet Union and were later evacuated to Iran – eventually making aliyah to what was then the British Mandate of Palestine – provided accounts of German air raids that deliberately targeted civilian populations. These testimonies were collected during the war by staff of the Jewish Agency and are now preserved in the archives of Yad Vashem. Among these young eyewitnesses was thirteen-year-old Alter Zeidman, who lived with his family in Kałuszyn. According to Zeidman, thirty-two individuals – most of them Jews – were killed in a single day by German bombs while standing in a queue outside a shop. As the Germans employed incendiary agents, the town was swiftly consumed by fire. Zeidman and his family narrowly escaped the flames, which spread with alarming speed. The following morning, only smouldering ruins of the town were left, and human and animal remains bore witness to the inferno's toll. With considerable difficulty, Alter Zeidman and his brother located the remnants of their home. Among the ashes, only a few cooking pots and their father's sewing machine had survived the conflagration relatively intact (YVA O.12/51, 1–3).

In Siedlce, as in many other towns and villages, Jewish residents were rounded up, subjected to forced labour, or tortured for the occupiers' amusement. Among those affected was Gedalia Nieviadomski's father, who was subsequently interned in a camp along with other Jews. After several days, Gedalia's sister succeeded in securing their father's release by bribing German officials. He had visibly aged and was severely weakened, as the camp inmates had received scarcely any food. The mistreatment of Jews in the camp extended beyond neglect – many were summarily executed (YVA O.12/52, 2). In the village of Majdan Królewski, German forces encircled the Jewish quarter and rounded up all the Jewish men, driving them to the town's central square. There, they were handed cans of kerosene and compelled to set the synagogue alight, before being forced to dance around the flames in a grotesque display of humiliation. As the violence against the Jewish population grew steadily more severe, the father of the then approximately twelve-year-old Józef B. resolved to escape with his four children to Soviet-occupied territory. With the

assistance of smugglers, they reached Niemirów, where a friend offered them shelter (Grudzińska-Gross and Gross 1981, 220–221).

When the 18-year-old Feliks Rosenbloom encountered a friend who had recently been released from German captivity – emaciated, deeply traumatised, and scarcely recognisable – this friend urged him to escape the Germans without delay. Consequently, Rosenbloom boarded a train heading east with his cousin, after the German occupation authorities in Łódź began subjecting the Jewish population to escalating brutality. The rest of his family chose not to flee eastward – Feliks never saw them again. Acting on the advice of a Polish acquaintance, the two young men decided to jump from the moving train before reaching the border. At the train station of Małkinia, the German border police routinely intercepted trains arriving from Warsaw, segregating Jewish passengers, confiscating their valuables, and subjecting them to harsh mistreatment. Heeding the warning, Feliks and his cousin disembarked prematurely and continued on foot, joining other refugees who had adopted the same strategy. In the no man's land between the borders, they were intercepted by a German border patrol which, after inspecting their documents, nonetheless allowed them to proceed. According to Rosenbloom, the Germans apparently saw it as only logical to rid themselves of Jews (1994, Part II, Chapters 4–5). The expropriation and displacement of the Jewish population from German-occupied Poland formed an integral component of the Reich's policy of "Germanisation," a programme that underwent progressive radicalisation from 1939 onwards (cf. Aly 1998; Stiller 2022).

Until 17 September 1939, refugees could move eastward without hindrance. During the early weeks of the Soviet occupation, several Red Army units even facilitated the passage of refugees into Soviet-controlled territory (Friedrich 2023, 610). After the Soviet invasion, many Zionist youth movement groups, yeshiva students along with their rabbis, Jewish political party leaders, like the Bundists Wiktor Alter and Henryk Erlich, fled eastwards, most of them to Vilnius and the surrounding region. This territory was transferred to Lithuania in October 1939 and remained under Lithuanian administration until the Red Army invasion on 15 June 1940. During this period, approximately 14,000 Polish Jews sought refuge there, hoping to secure onward passage to Palestine or the United States (Levin 1995, 198–208). Furthermore, numerous communist Jews and leftist activists, some freshly released from Polish prisons, sought refuge in the now Soviet-occupied territory (Levin 1995, 179–181; Pickhan 1994). About a quarter of the 6,000 to 10,000 members of the Polish Communist Party were Jews, of whom many fled to Soviet-occupied territory, expecting to freely engage in political activity. However, they soon faced the harsh reality of Soviet life, which swiftly dampened their enthusiasm (Schatz 1991, 53, 149).

The German–Soviet Border and Friendship Treaty of 28 September 1939 established a final demarcation line along the rivers Pisa, Narew, Bug, and San. In the

three weeks between 17 September and 8 October 1939, the Red Army and the Wehrmacht advanced and retreated repeatedly, alternately occupying and evacuating towns. As the Red Army withdrew, it was accompanied not only by communists and collaborators who had supported the Soviet occupation, but also by a significant number of Jews fleeing the terror of the Nazi regime (Litvak 1997, 124–125). Zev Katz, who set out on foot to the small town of Oleszyce in search of asthma medication for his father, witnessed the German forces withdrawing westward, followed by the arrival of the Red Army. Although he found the Soviet soldiers disorganised and unkempt in appearance, he noted their kind and respectful behaviour toward the Jewish population (2004, 18).

Not all Jews departed voluntarily – tens of thousands were forcibly expelled by the Nazis across the newly established demarcation line (Browning 2004, 109). Among the displaced persons was Shmuel Labin, who had lived in Tarnobrzeg with his father – a kosher butcher – and his seven siblings. The town fell to the Germans on the Jewish holyday of Rosh Hashanah. After subjecting the Jewish community to brutal treatment and confiscating their belongings, the German police forced them to cross the San River in boats. Some of the vessels capsized, and their passengers drowned. By some miracle, Labin's family made it across, soaked to the bone, and eventually found temporary refuge in Radomyśl (YVA, O.12/15, 2).

Escape to the East was fraught with extreme difficulty and peril. In a letter dated 15 October 1939 to his friend Joseph Stein in Brooklyn, Artur Szlifersztein recounts his flight from Warsaw, which he left on 7 October accompanied by his two nephews. En route eastwards, they were apprehended by German forces and driven onwards, with Szlifersztein alluding only briefly to the brutal treatment they suffered. Eventually, they succeeded in evading their captors and reached Soviet-occupied territory. According to Szlifersztein, Białystok was already home to some 100,000 refugees (Friedrich 2023, 123). This figure, however, appears to be an overestimate; official data indicate that as of 5 February 1940, approximately 66,000 Jewish refugees were residing in the city (Radchenko 2025). The majority of them men, as the arduous nature of the escape rendered it virtually impossible for whole families to flee together (Friedrich 2023, 123; Litvak 1997, 124). Szlifersztein and his nephews trekked no less than 350 km to Vilnius, constantly exposed to machine-gun fire and aerial bombardment by German aircraft. His conclusion:

> Poland in a political sense no longer exists. The Ludwiks [Szlifersztein's two nephews, AP] and I will stay within the borders of Soviet Russia. The Germans have tormented us too much for us to entertain the desire to return. I am not making any plans. I don't know what awaits us. All I know is that we are being treated as humans, and that is what we all longed for (Friedrich 2023, 123).

On 1 November 1939, the Soviet authorities imposed restrictions on crossing the demarcation line into Soviet-occupied territory. From that point, Soviet border guards arrested hundreds of refugees each day, the vast majority of whom were Jewish. Many were forcibly sent back across the newly established border where they came under fire from German border guards and, in some cases, were shot dead. There were also individuals – with Jews making up only a minority – who attempted to cross the demarcation line into the German-occupied zone (Radchenko 2024, 35–37). On 1 December 1939, the Red Army and the border units of the NKVD – the Soviet secret police – hermetically sealed the border. The German task forces nevertheless continued to expel large groups of Jews – often several thousand persons at a time – into Soviet occupied territory. *Einsatzgruppe* I alone oversaw the expulsion of 18,000 Jews across the newly erected German-Soviet border. In Przemyśl, which had fallen under German control at the beginning of September, Udo Woyrsch's *Einsatzgruppe zur besonderen Verwendung* (task force for special purposes) executed 500 to 600 Jewish men between 16 and 19 September, while forcibly relocating several hundred Jews across the San River (Matthäus et al. 2018, 93–94; Wenig 2000, 66–67). Those repelled by Soviet guards often found themselves stranded in the no man's land along the demarcation line, left with little choice but to endure the harsh conditions. With temperatures dropping, many refugees tragically succumbed to the cold (Friedrich 2023, 187; Mallmann et al. 2008, 20–25, 75–76). The expulsions frequently devolved into brutal death marches, exemplified by events in October 1939 when portions of the Jewish population from Chełm and Hrubieszów were herded towards the Bug River. Along the way, many fell victim to German gunfire, while others met their end in mass executions (Pohl 1993, 56).

On 17 December 1939, the Soviet Deputy Commissioner for Foreign Affairs complained about these deportations, urging the German ambassador, Friedrich Werner Graf von Schulenburg, to immediately cease such actions (Friedrich 2023, 202).

The trajectories and motivations of Jewish refugees who fled eastward to the so-called Kresy Wschodnie (Eastern Borderlands of Poland) between September 1939 and June 1941 are relatively well documented and have been the subject of substantial scholarly inquiry. Individual historians, such as Bernard Weinryb (1953), began investigating this subject at an early stage. In *Revolution from Abroad* (1988), Jan Tomasz Gross devotes significant attention to the fate of Jewish refugees, drawing on an extensive collection of ego-documents from approximately 12,000 Polish citizens deported to Siberia or Kazakhstan in 1940, including many Jews. Following their evacuation with the Anders Army to Iran in 1942, these individuals recorded their experiences under Soviet rule for the Polish government-in-exile. Gross discovered these reports in the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University and, together with Irena Grudzińska-Gross, published numerous accounts by both children and

adults (1981, 2008). These testimonies provide rare insights into life in the Soviet Union at a time when external knowledge was severely restricted. However, they often present a predominantly negative perspective and in particular children's testimonies can contain factual inaccuracies regarding locations and chronology. Since the late 1980s and during the 1990s, Ben-Cion Pinchuk (1978, 1990), Yosef Litvak (1986, 1991, 1997) as well as Dov Levin (1995) published substantially on the fate of Jews in eastern Poland. Norman Davies and Andrzej Polonsky engaged with this topic – Jews in eastern Poland, 1939–1946, also addressing Sovietisation and the welfare of Polish-Jewish refugees – in both a conference and a subsequent anthology published in 1991. In the 1990s and early 2000s the subject was also explored in several broader studies on Soviet forced migration and occupation (Boćkowski 1999; Ciesielski et al 1993; Głowacki 1997; Gur'ianov 1997; Jasiewicz 1998; Żbikowski 2006), also tackling *pasportizatsiia*, Soviet deportations and mass arrests of Jews. Over the past three decades, historians have increasingly engaged with Soviet archival materials that were previously either inaccessible or only partially available, thereby generating significant new insights into the experiences of Jewish refugees (Adler 2020, 2014; Adler and Aleksiun 2018; Goldlust 2017a; 2017b; Kaganovitch 2010; Kaganovitch 2022; Nesselrodt 2019; Nesselrodt and Friedla 2021; Dolhanov 2024[1]). Recent notable contributions include Hannah Riedler's 2024 thesis, a comparative study of the German and Soviet deportations scheduled for publication in December 2025 as well as Zeev Levin's 2020 anthology and Olga Radchenko's publications (2018 with Viktor Bilous, 2020, 2024[2]), that trace the trajectories of Polish-Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union.

Personal testimonies, which were written down during the war and are therefore extremely valuable, are published in Emanuel Ringelblum's underground Warsaw archive (Żbikowski 2018) and the document collections *Persecution and Murder of European Jews by Nazi Germany* (Friedrich 2023; Löw 2020). Unpublished material is used from the Yad Vashem Archives (YVA, O.12 Perlman Collection; O.3 Testimonies of Department of Yad Vashem). Polish Jews who survived and returned to post-war Poland were largely unable to publish their experiences as critical accounts of the Soviet Union were a taboo. Several memoirs were written in Yiddish and published abroad (e.g. Fuks 1947; Gliksman 1948; Grosman 1949); others were published many decades later (Katz 2004; Maschler 1991; Rosenbloom and Rosenbloom 1994; Wenig 2000). The passage of time tends to obscure and attenuate memory, smoothing its contours and blunting its emotional immediacy. Moreover, they are often shaped by later influences such as film, propaganda, or second-hand

1 I am sincerely grateful to Petro Dolhanov for the engaging exchange and for providing me with a copy of his book.

2 I am deeply grateful to Olga Radchenko for kindly making her book available to me.

information. Overall, however, all categories of sources involve inherent pitfalls and must therefore be examined with critical rigour.

While the reasons why Polish Jews fled the Nazis have been thoroughly examined, the question of why more than 65,000 Jewish refugees chose to return to German-occupied territory in the early summer of 1940 remains largely unresolved. This is due in part to the fact that many Jews who survived the war in this manner did not regard themselves as Holocaust survivors and were therefore less inclined to publish their recollections. Moreover, the initial Soviet occupation of eastern Poland was soon eclipsed by the German invasion of June 1941 and the subsequent systematic extermination of the Jewish population.

Accordingly, this paper will first analyse the motivations that prompted these Jews to voluntarily subject themselves once more to German rule, having only recently fled the terror of Nazi persecution. Following that it will examine the group of Jewish refugees who were deported to Siberia in June 1940, after having previously registered for repatriation to German-occupied territory. The broader trajectory of Polish Jewish flight through Lithuania, their experiences across the Soviet Union, and the later evacuation of many refugees with the Anders Army lie beyond the scope of this study and are not examined in detail here.

This article argues that the systematic extermination of the Jews, which commenced in the summer of 1941, was not foreseeable in early 1940 – particularly insofar as reports of German atrocities failed to circulate under Soviet rule. Moreover, the experience of Soviet occupation – with its stringent restrictions on economic life, religious observance, and personal freedoms – proved intolerable for many Polish Jews. Among Orthodox communities, fears centred on cultural erasure by the Soviet occupiers while the prospect of physical annihilation – soon to be enacted by the Nazis – remained utterly inconceivable in 1940.

2 Life under Soviet Occupation

The influx of refugees swelled the Jewish population in eastern Poland to approximately 1.6 million people. Most congregated in the towns, like Lwów (Lviv), Białystok (Belastok), Równe (Rivne), and Luck, hoping to secure regular employment and housing. Eastern Poland thus became Europe's largest refuge for Jews, albeit only temporarily (Arad 2009, 42; Levin 1995, 179–180). This is all the more remarkable considering that at the Évian Conference only shortly before then, no country other than the Dominican Republic had agreed to offer asylum to even a fraction of the 500,000 German Jews. In this context, it is worth noting that, beginning in the late 1920s, the Polish government pursued policies aimed at encouraging the voluntary emigration of Jews. Following Józef Piłsudski's death in 1935, manifestations of

anti-Semitism and discriminatory practices against Poland's Jewish population intensified markedly (cf. Brechtken 1997, 81–164; Thies 2018).

While in autumn 1939 a considerable part of the Jewish refugees found accommodation with relatives or acquaintances, many – predominantly men – arrived in Soviet-occupied territories utterly destitute, some even starving, sick, and clad in rags. As in Germany, Jewish women were rather inclined to stay behind, as they did not wish to abandon their parents, whereas Jewish men were more likely to advocate for flight (Adler and Aleksiun 2018, 50–52; Kaplan 1998, 138–142). The psychological strain of worrying about their left-behind families weighed heavily on many. Although local Jewish communities generally extended warm welcomes, organising shelter and sustenance, tens of thousands of Jewish refugees remained stranded, unable to secure accommodation (Levin 1995, 184). In October 1939, smaller towns were likewise confronted with an almost uncontrollable influx of refugees: Zdołbunów (Zdolbuniv), for example, received an estimated 15,000 individuals, Kostopol' (Kostopil') around 30,000, and Kremenets' (Kreminets') approximately 20,000 – figures which more than doubled the resident populations of these towns. However, this extraordinary demographic pressure proved to be temporary, as many refugees soon moved on in search of work and accommodation elsewhere (Danylenko and Kokin 2009, 242; Dolhanov 2024, 58).

The Soviet occupiers sought to "Sovietise" eastern Poland by fundamentally reshaping its political, cultural, and economic structures. The forced secularisation and nationalisation of the economy had particularly severe repercussions for the Jewish population (Gross 1991, 70). All Polish administrative bodies, associations, and institutions were dismantled and replaced with Soviet structures. Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian were introduced as official languages, while Yiddish was permitted as a language of instruction, and newspapers and other publications were allowed to print in Yiddish (Gross 1988, 126–129).

By a resolution adopted on 29 November 1939, the Soviet authorities extended Soviet citizenship rights to the newly acquired territories, covering all individuals present in eastern Poland as of 1–2 November, including Jewish refugees. This created opportunities for many Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews to assume positions vacated by Poles. Jews who had endured severe discrimination in interwar Poland, now found employment within the Soviet administration and local militias for the first time. However, this increased public visibility of Jews, especially in militia ranks, intensified anti-Semitic sentiment among segments of the non-Jewish population. Moreover, during the initial weeks of the occupation, Jews, Ukrainians, and Belarusians participated in acts of violence, including the murder of Polish landowners. Jewish involvement in such incidents had far-reaching consequences, reinforcing the stereotype of "Judeo-Bolshevism," which conflated Jews with communism and Soviet power. Subsequently, the scale of Jewish collaboration with

the Soviet regime was significantly exaggerated, despite comparable levels of collaboration among Ukrainians and Belarusians (Michlic 2007; Nesselrodt 2019, 76–77, 83).

During the first Soviet occupation, Jews in eastern Poland faced political persecution at rates disproportionately high in relation to their share of the population—surpassing those of both Belarusians and Ukrainians. They were not only more frequently subjected to deportation, but also to arrest – second only to Poles in terms of scale. Of more than 110,000 individuals arrested between September 1939 and May 1941, over 23,000 were Jews. The majority of these arrests were linked to attempts to cross the German–Soviet demarcation line, which the Soviet authorities deemed illegal (Gorlanov and Roginskii 1997, 82, 89).

Among the politically persecuted Polish Jews, one particularly prominent figure was Menachem Begin, leader of the Revisionist Zionist youth movement *Betar*, who would later serve as Prime Minister as well as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Defence of Israel. Like thousands of Zionist activists, he fled to Vilnius to escape both German and Soviet occupation. In the autumn of 1939, Moscow transferred Vilnius – formerly part of Poland since the Treaty of Riga – to Lithuania. However, in June 1940, the Red Army occupied the entire Baltic region, including the Vilnius region. In September 1940, Begin was arrested, interrogated by the NKVD and ultimately sentenced to eight years in a camp in Vorkuta in Northern Russia. In the summer of 1941 he was released under the amnesty granted pursuant to the Maiskii–Sikorski Agreement (Begin 1979).

The *Bund* leaders, Wiktor Alter and Henryk Erlich, had already been apprehended shortly after crossing the demarcation line in autumn 1939. Alter's brother, Jerzy Gliksman, also fled eastward from Warsaw. Upon reaching Równe, he learned of his brother's arrest and sought to intervene with the Soviet authorities, presuming it to be the result of a misunderstanding or error. He proceeded to Kovel, where – entirely unversed in the workings of the Soviet secret police – he naively approached the NKVD. Having been treated with marked hostility, he attempted to return to Równe but was arrested at the railway station before he could depart. His detention was likely due to his own affiliation with the *Bund* and/or his efforts on behalf of his brother, which may have led the NKVD to regard him as an "unreliable element". All three were eventually released under the provisions of the already mentioned Maiskii–Sikorski Agreement. However, in early December 1941, both Alter and Erlich were rearrested. Alter was reportedly executed in the spring of 1943, while Erlich is believed to have died by suicide (Gliksman 1948, 23–38; Pickhan 1994, 155).

However, Soviet authorities did not limit their repressive measures to so-called "unreliable elements" – a category that frequently encompassed Jewish *bezhentsy*. Their policies extended to the systematic dismantling of Jewish cultural institutions,

which had far-reaching consequences for Jewish communal life. In interwar Poland, the *kehillot* had exercised a circumscribed yet meaningful degree of autonomy in managing Jewish communal and cultural affairs. Following the Soviet occupation, they played a pivotal role in the immediate provision of food and shelter to Jewish refugees, particularly during the initial weeks of displacement. Under Soviet occupation, however, they were systematically dissolved as part of the broader secularisation of the annexed territories and supplanted by Soviet structures: the Gorkombezh (municipal refugee committee) and the Kompombezh (refugee assistance committee). While ostensibly established to provide aid to displaced persons, these committees also served a surveillance function, operating in close coordination with the NKVD.

Simultaneously, the local authorities sought, wherever feasible, to integrate refugees into the labour force. Several factors were instrumental in this endeavour: during the interwar period, the Polish government had neglected the healthcare and educational systems. With the implementation of the Soviet healthcare system, numerous vacancies emerged for doctors, nurses, caregivers, pharmacists, and various other professions, as well as administrative roles (Levin 1995, 184–188). At the beginning, however, the restructuring of the system seemed to unfold in a rather chaotic way. Henryk Maschler, for instance, was unable to find work as a doctor in Lwów. Instead, he initially took a job as a labourer, clearing out old files and cupboards from the social insurance building to make way for the NKVD. Later, upon hearing of a vacancy in Kalusz – and amid rumours that the unemployed faced the threat of deportation – he decided to relocate there. His wife Ilana, however, struggled to find employment in Kalusz, as most positions were quickly filled by Soviet personnel from the East. These – commonly called *vostochniki* (easterners) – were assigned to serve in the newly conquered territories, further exacerbating the housing shortage. They flocked to the newly annexed territories, where the standard of living was still higher than in the "old" Soviet Union (Budnitskii et al. 2022, 19; Maschler 1991, 82–83, 132, 210–211).

The rapid expansion of the Soviet educational system at all levels generated a substantial demand for qualified teaching personnel. Numerous refugees secured employment in this sector, among them Helena Kagan from Warsaw, who had crossed the demarcation line with the assistance of a smuggler in order to join her husband in Lwów. Despite lacking proficiency in both Russian and Ukrainian, she was admitted to a teacher training programme of several months' duration and was awarded a stipend of 150 roubles – a sum that appears particularly generous in light of the average monthly salary of approximately 300 roubles. About one-third of the programme's participants were Jewish (Levin 1995, 86; Żbikowski 2018, 455–462). The acute shortage of qualified teachers – compounded by the dismissal of nearly all Polish educators – had a detrimental effect on the quality of instruction, particularly

during the initial months of the occupation. Although the Soviet school system was officially open to all, which primarily benefited the Jewish population, its principal aim was to indoctrinate the younger generation. Disciplines such as mathematics and physics, however, remained relatively insulated from ideological influence (Gross 1988, 126–130; VHA USC interview Cyker; VHA USC interview Eichenholz). Furthermore, a significant proportion of Jewish refugees secured positions in newly created administrative roles or were employed as clerical staff and supervisors in department stores operated by large enterprises. The Soviet emphasis on developing crafts and industry created a range of employment opportunities for refugees with technical expertise, who frequently found work in existing or newly established artels – cooperative associations of artisans and craftsmen (Levin 1995, 188–189).

However, despite concerted Soviet efforts to integrate the *bezhentsy* into the labour market, tens of thousands remained homeless and unemployed, as eastern Poland lacked the economic capacity to absorb such a large influx of refugees. From the perspective of the Soviet authorities, this situation represented not only a social burden but also a significant security risk, as there was widespread suspicion that numerous spies were hiding among the refugees (Danylenko and Kokin 2009, 84–85). Moreover, the Soviet administration – already overwhelmed by the multitude of tasks associated with territorial expansion – lacked both the capacity and the political will to take the specific circumstances of the Jewish refugees into account (Pinchuk 1990, 107). To remove the *bezhentsy* from the newly conquered territories, the Soviet administration organised the recruitment of refugees for labour in industrial and mining centres across the Soviet Union (Głowacki 1997, 363–369; Levin 1995, 189). Tens of thousands of *bezhentsy*, among them a substantial number of Polish Jews, registered for this programme – due in no small part to the significant pressure the authorities placed on unemployed refugees to comply (Żbikowski 2018, 63–67). However, most of these "guest workers" soon became bitterly disillusioned by the harsh realities they encountered, which bore little resemblance to the assurances they had been given. The employment assigned rarely corresponded to their skills or expectations, and wages were barely sufficient to cover basic living costs (Rosenbloom and Rosenbloom, Part II, Chapter 6; Żbikowski 2018, 178–211). Even the NKVD, which closely monitored the "guest workers" from eastern Poland, noted in its reports the poor organisation of workers' accommodation. Adequate housing was scarce, and existing facilities were often overcrowded, unsanitary, and unheated. In addition, food provision at construction sites was insufficient, and wages were frequently delayed, all of which had a particularly detrimental effect on workers' morale (Danylenko and Kokin 2009, 813–815). Within a short period, thousands of *bezhentsy* had become so despondent that they chose to return to eastern Poland. Many of them sold their last possessions – sometimes even the

clothes on their backs – to afford the cost of a train ticket (Głowacki 1997, 363–369; Żbikowski 2018, 194–204).

At last, frustration and discontent were widespread among both the Jewish refugees and the Soviet authorities. Participation in the labour campaign contributed significantly to the disenchantment of the majority of the *bezhentsy*. Simultaneously, the Soviet officials, who believed they had extended generous privileges to the Jewish refugees, were left disappointed by what they perceived as ingratitude (Levin 1995, 191–192).

3 *Pasportizatsiia* and the "Option"

When the initial strategy of assigning work placements in industrial regions failed to yield the desired results, the Soviet authorities resorted to more stringent measures to enforce the integration of the *bezhentsy*. Central among these was the so-called *pasportizatsiia* – a policy requiring the exchange of Polish identity documents for Soviet internal passports. From 29 November 1939 onwards, all individuals aged sixteen and above, residing permanently in urban centres, workers' settlements, or within a 7.5-km radius of the border, were mandated to hold a Soviet passport (Głowacki 1997, 78–82). In the Soviet context, the internal passport was of critical importance, serving as the essential form of identification that individuals were required to carry at all times and which was subject to frequent inspection by the militia. As Ilana Maschler notes, a widespread saying encapsulated this reality: a person in the Soviet Union was composed of three parts – the soul, the body, and the internal Soviet passport. Failure to produce this document on demand could even result in arrest (1991, 132–133, 143–144).

However, certain groups, including refugees, were issued Soviet passports that imposed restrictions on their freedom of movement, in accordance with Paragraph 11 of the Soviet Constitution, which prohibited them from residing in district towns. Compliance with these provisions was mandated within ten days, effectively compelling them to relocate eastward (Dolhanov 2024, 59; Karpenkina 2018, 162). A substantial proportion of Jewish refugees exhibited reluctance to accept the internal passport. The family of Zev Katz, for instance, initially opted for Soviet citizenship, but later reconsidered their decision after rumours circulated suggesting that Soviet citizens might be prohibited from leaving the Soviet Union following the war (2004, 41–42). Shula Komornik and her family, having been expelled across the River San, sought refuge with her grandparents in Nimrów. When the NKVD demanded that they assume Soviet citizenship, all their relatives acquiesced and accepted Soviet passports. Komornik's father, however, declined to comply and instead registered himself and his immediate family for repatriation to Jarosław. Unfortunately,

Komornik does not provide further insight into her father's motives. Given that all his family members were already in Nimrów, he had no dependents left behind and could rely on an established family network there. Consequently, other factors must have played a decisive role in his decision. One night, NKVD operatives arrived and escorted them to the railway station, where they were forcibly loaded into freight wagons and deported to Siberia. None of the relatives who had accepted Soviet citizenship survived the Shoah (YVA O.33/10818). Komornik does not elaborate on why none of her relatives survived, yet it is evident that they were first confined to ghettos and subsequently deported to extermination camps. In June 1941, only a small number of Jews had any realistic prospect of escaping the advancing Germans. Many did not seize this opportunity, partly out of weariness with life under Soviet rule (Pinchuk 1990, 117) and, crucially, because even at that stage they could not envisage the systematic extermination of the Jews, which commenced in the spring of 1942.

Many refugees had family members remaining in German-occupied territories and aspired to return to them as soon as circumstances permitted. These individuals preferred, at least temporarily, to settle in the district towns, hoping for greater employment opportunities. Others regarded the Soviet Union merely as a transit point on their intended journey to Palestine or the United States. Refugees who agreed to accept Soviet citizenship were issued passports bearing Paragraph 11, which prohibited them from residing in district towns or close to the border. Consequently, they were required to relocate eastward within just ten days. This regulation posed significant challenges for many *bezhentsy*, as for instance for Ilana Maschler's parents-in-law, who due to their advanced age and ill health were dependent on family support. Maschler petitioned the Soviet authorities for exemption from the movement restrictions on their behalf, however, the NKVD failed to process the application. Following the expiration of the deadline, the elderly couple moved into Maschler's room. This arrangement was fraught with danger, as she shared the flat with Misha K., an NKVD officer assigned from Kiev, tasked in part with overseeing the deportation of Polish citizens. It was imperative that he remain unaware of the presence of individuals classified as "enemies of the system" within his own household. Any discovery could have led to the immediate deportation of Maschler's parents-in-law – a threat that perpetually overshadowed their already precarious situation (1991, 133–151).

All those who refused to accept Soviet citizenship were given the "option" by the NKVD to register for repatriation to German-occupied territory. In her memoirs, Ilana Maschler recalls the long queues outside the NKVD headquarters on Verkhnaia Zelena Street, which she refers to by its former Polish name, Zielona Street (1991, 131). However, it remains uncertain whether Maschler's recollections, given the passage of several decades, may be subject to error, as Helena A. recalls that thousands of

bezhentsy gathered on Orzeszkowa Street in anticipation of the arrival of the German repatriation commission. Even before the commission reached Lwów, some 8,000 individuals – predominantly Jews – had already assembled. From among their ranks, a number of representatives were appointed, who, under the supervision of NKVD officials, compiled lists of those wishing to return to their homes in German-occupied territory. Once the commission had formally established itself, the number of prospective returnees surged to approximately 70,000. Despite the scale of interest, the commission focused its efforts primarily on registering "ethnic Germans" – who, according to Helena A., were in fact predominantly Ukrainians and Poles – while largely disregarding the tens of thousands of others seeking repatriation (Grudzińska-Gross and Gross 2008, 314–315). Only around 1,000 to 1,600 Jews were ultimately accepted by the German Repatriation Commission (Hryciuk 2005, 174).

Yosef Litvak has even argued that this episode constituted a German-Soviet collaboration designed to mislead the Jewish refugees. According to his interpretation, the Gestapo reached an understanding with the Soviet authorities to issue a public statement urging refugees to register for their organised return to their homes and families in German-occupied Poland. The ensuing transport was meant to foster the impression that the German occupiers would permit tens of thousands of Jewish refugees to resettle in German-controlled areas. To reinforce this deception, a transport of Jewish refugees from Brześć to German-occupied Poland was indeed carried out on 13 May 1940 (Litvak 1991, 67). Although this explanation appears plausible, it must be emphasised that Litvak does not adduce any evidence in its support.

According to Helena A., panic soon spread among those Jewish refugees overlooked by the commission. It dawned on them that, by registering, they had inadvertently disclosed their precise addresses to the NKVD, exposing themselves to potential scrutiny or persecution (Grudzińska-Gross and Gross 2008, 316). Thus, contrary to widespread assertions in the secondary literature, the majority of Jewish refugees did not register with the German Repatriation Commission, but with the NKVD, which had established its own registration commissions for this purpose (Låndau 2023, 169; Levin 2020, 41; Pinchuk 1978, 151–152).

Ilana Maschler herself received a passport that did not include the restrictive Paragraph 11, as she had been officially registered in Lwów prior to the outbreak of war – albeit under her maiden name. Her husband, Henryk, likewise received a "good" passport, his professional status as a physician having afforded him preferential treatment. The NKVD actively attempted to persuade Jewish doctors who had fled Nazi-occupied areas to accept Soviet citizenship, as their medical expertise was urgently required. These efforts, though, met with limited success. In Kalusz alone, 20 of the town's 35 doctors declined Soviet citizenship, even though they had been offered unrestricted passports (1991, 133–151). Indeed, the Soviet authorities

demonstrated a pragmatic willingness to make exceptions in cases where refugees possessed specialised skills or professional qualifications deemed scarce or of strategic value (Karpenkina 2018, 165). Like many *bezhentsy*, the physicians in question operated under the assumption that, provided they maintained employment and secured housing, they would not be compelled to accept Soviet citizenship and could legally reside in the Soviet Union on a provisional basis without acquiring Soviet passports (Budnitskii et al. 2022, 33). The NKVD, however, proceeded to deport these medical professionals and their families to Siberia – a policy decision that significantly compromised the already strained provision of medical services in the region (Maschler 1991, 162–163).

In his memoirs, Nikita Khrushchev, at the time First Secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine and charged with overseeing the integration and Sovietisation of the "western territories," referred to the phenomenon of Jewish refugees registering for repatriation to the German-occupied zone:

> […] Serov came to me and said: "There are huge lines at the registration center for those wishing to return to Polish territory. When I approached the place I found it very painful, because most of the waiting line consisted of people from the Jewish population. What's going to happen to them? […] They give the Gestapo agents bribes to help them leave here sooner and return to their hearths and homes." The Gestapo agents did this quite willingly, took the bribes, enriched themselves, and accompanied these people directly to concentration camps. For our part we couldn't do anything because our words didn't count at all to these unfortunate people: They just wanted to go home. Perhaps for some of them there were still relatives back there (Khrushchev 2004, 242).

As this quotation demonstrates, Khrushchev and the Soviet leadership were fully cognisant of the Nazi regime's campaign of terror against the Jewish population. Nevertheless, this awareness did not deter the Soviet authorities from prohibiting any reference to such atrocities in their official media – a policy aligned with the terms of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact (Radchenko 2024, 38–39). Moreover, the Politburo had already decided on 2 March 1940 to deport those *bezhentsy* who refused to accept Soviet citizenship (Pikhoia and Gieysztor 1999, 377), as the NKVD understood the German authorities had no intention of receiving a large number of returning Jews. This was evident from a letter dated 9 February 1940, in which Ievgenii Chekmenev, head of the Resettlement Authority within the People's Commissariat, informed Molotov of German inquiries about whether the Soviet Union would take in Jews from Germany as part of a population exchange, while at the same time advising against such an arrangement (Löw 2020, 170–171; Polian 2008). The deportation, however, was postponed, and the intervening period was utilised to document the details of the *bezhentsy* wishing to return to German-held

territory as part of the mandated registration process. Thus, the "option" was not a genuine choice but simply a loyalty test (Pinchuk 1978, 151).

Yet, in stating that the refugees merely wished to return to their families, Khrushchev perceptively captured a central truth (Fuks 1947, 79–80; Ląndau 2023, 170; Radchenko 2024, 48–49). Thus, for instance, 14-year-old Khanan Shtrom and his father, who – unable to secure either accommodation or employment under Soviet rule – eventually resolved to return to the German-occupied zone of Poland. Their intention was to reunite with Khanan's mother and sister, whom they had left behind (interview of Shtrom, YVA O.3). While this constituted a key factor, it was by no means the sole determinant: the Soviet restructuring of the economic system deprived many Jews – refugees as well as locals – of their means of subsistence. On the one hand, prices for basic necessities rose sharply, exacerbated in part by the currency reform; on the other, private trade – a vital source of income for many local Jews and *bezhentsy* – was prohibited. A significant number of Jewish entrepreneurs, among them several members of Yechiel Sheinblum's family, were expropriated by the Soviet authorities in the aftermath of the occupation. Confronted with the impossibility of securing accommodation with his now-dispossessed relatives and having himself fled from the German-occupied zone of Poland, Yechiel Sheinblum ultimately resolved to register with the NKVD in order to return home (YVA O.12/20, 6).

Simultaneously, increasing numbers of Jewish "guest workers" returned to eastern Poland from industrial centres and mines in the Soviet Union, severely emaciated and reporting intolerable working conditions. Shmuel Labin, who spent eight months with his family in Lwów, noted the rapid deterioration of living conditions in the city. Consequently, his family also opted for the return to the German occupied territory (YVA O.12/15, 6). At the same time, Jewish refugees lacked information about the escalating German violence against Jewish communities, including mass deportations, expropriation, enforced social isolation, forced labour, the establishment of ghettos, and murder. Reporting on these developments was strictly prohibited under Soviet rule, leading many *bezhentsy* to mistakenly believe that conditions in the German-occupied territories had stabilised (Pinchuk 1990, 117–118).

Religious practice was officially prohibited under Soviet secularisation policies. Covert observance and instruction rarely escaped detection for long – as illustrated by the case of Zeev F.'s father, who was summoned and interrogated by the NKVD. As he persisted in his religious observance, the NKVD ultimately presented him with a "choice," either accept Soviet citizenship or be sent back to German-occupied territory (Grudzińska-Gross and Gross 1981, 230–231). The population was subjected to strict surveillance by the Soviet police apparatus, which rapidly expanded its surveillance networks, aiming to pre-emptively remove individuals deemed politically unreliable. The scale and operation of surveillance by the Soviet political police, the NKVD, was aptly captured by the words of Larry Wenig's cousin Faigele, who claimed:

> "the NKVD wants to find out who might be spying on them, helping the Germans. We hear every day of people disappearing. Sometimes for just making a simple complaint. They have put fear in everybody. Listen," […] "Don't ever criticize the Communist system. Trust no one. People are being forced to spy on one another. Even the superintendent of this building is an informer for the NKVD, reporting who comes and goes. Even the children, my son too, are being brainwashed in school to spy on their parents. [...]." (Wenig 2000, 84)

Journalist Moishe Grosman conveys similar observations in his memoirs, noting that one had to exercise extreme caution when speaking in public, as the number of informants had increased significantly. Moreover, agents provocateurs deliberately disseminated false information in the streets, making it impossible to know which rumours could be trusted (1949, 84).

Targets of repression also included Jewish refugees apprehended for crossing the border illegally or engaging in so-called "illicit" economic activities. A telling example of the latter is the case of Eliezer K., whose father, a Jewish butcher, was prohibited from practicing his trade under Soviet rule. To sustain his family, he turned to selling tobacco and vodka – activities deemed criminal by the Soviet authorities. The NKVD increasingly raided his home, regularly confiscating his remaining goods and ultimately threatening him with arrest. Consequently, Eliezer K.'s father was compelled to sell his remaining possessions to provide for his family (Grudzińska-Gross and Gross 1981, 221, 235). Under Soviet occupation, both the production and trade of kosher food were prohibited. This policy not only deprived numerous Jewish merchants, butchers, and bakers of their livelihoods, but also stripped Orthodox Jews of a fundamental aspect of their religious practice. This state-imposed secularisation was met with significant resistance from the majority of Orthodox Jews. Shmuel Labin's father, for instance, expressed profound discontent that his children neither prayed nor observed the Sabbath during their eight months in Lwów. This, among other factors, contributed to his decision to refuse Soviet citizenship (YVA O.12/15, 6).

In total, the German commission accepted only 66,000 individuals – primarily ethnic Poles, a few ethnic Germans, and reportedly 1,000 to 1,600 Jews – who were permitted to return to the General Government or the annexed territories by mid-June. However, more than 70,000 people, the majority of them Jewish refugees, were rejected by the commission (Hryciuk 2005, 173–174).

4 Deportation and Exile

The local authorities, already burdened with a wide array of responsibilities, struggled to cope with the additional challenge of refugee integration. Moreover, policy priorities lay elsewhere – chiefly in the economic restructuring of agriculture and industry. As a result, the integration of refugees was relegated to a secondary

concern; they were predominantly perceived as a social and security liability (Budnitskii et al. 2022, 13; Kaganovitch 2010, 105).

Given the limited success of the *pasportizatsiia* campaign and the attempts to assign refugees to labour in Soviet industrial regions, the Soviet leadership had already resolved by early March 1940 to deport the *bezhentsy* to the interior of the Soviet Union. The implementation of this decision, however, was delayed. In a directive dated 10 June 1940, Lavrentii Beriia instructed the NKVD chiefs of the Belarusian and Ukrainian SSRs, Ivan Serov and Lavrentii Tsanava, to organise the deportation of all refugees who had submitted repatriation applications but whose requests had not been approved (Pobol' and Polian 2005, 151–152, 566–568). By registering for return to the German-occupied zone, these refugees had, in effect, exposed themselves to the Soviet security apparatus. From the perspective of the Soviet authorities, such actions were construed as a form of political disloyalty towards the Soviet Union – a state, which in its own ideological framing, had extended sanctuary to the refugees from Nazi persecution (Pinchuk 1978, 151). As a consequence, at the end of June 1940, approximately 78,000 Polish citizens were deported to Siberia and northern Russia, according to Soviet statistics 64,533 of them were Jews (StaBi Film R 94.1132-3,9479,1,4). Upon arrival, they were confined in so-called special settlements (*spetsposelki*) under the control of the NKVD (Gur'ianov 1997).

The deportation operation, meticulously organised by the NKVD, came to its peak at the end of June 1940. Single male *bezhentsy* were deported first and sent to labour camps. Next, families were taken to special settlements (Nesselrodt 2019, 119). According to contemporary reports, many refugees were summoned for interrogation, where they were presented with the "choice" to accept Soviet citizenship or to register for repatriation to German-occupied territory. Most, however, were arrested in their homes, usually at night (Grudzińska-Gross and Gross 1981, 231; Wenig 2000, 105; Żbikowski 2018, 462–463).

Among the deportees was also Henryk Maschler's cousin, who had refused to accept a Soviet internal passport. He was detained along with his ailing wife, their new-born child, his mother, and his mother-in-law, who was possibly suffering from cancer. Ilana Maschler found them at the railway station, already loaded onto a deportation train, and attempted to supply them with provisions for the involuntarily journey. As she tried to pass food and water through the carriage window, an NKVD officer attempted to drive her away. Enraged, Ilana lost her composure and began denouncing the NKVD as murderers, bandits, and criminals for deporting infants, the sick, and the elderly to Siberia. Her outburst could have led to her own arrest or deportation, but the NKVD officer did not understand Polish and eventually withdrew. Upon returning to her flat, Ilana Maschler encountered her flatmate and NKVD functionary Misha K., who had returned home earlier than usual. He had been

involved in that day's deportations, and was now sitting at his desk, visibly shaken, moaning and weeping aloud. Though she only caught fragments of his Russian, she heard him muttering repeatedly: *"Deti, bol'nye, stariki, za chto?"* – "Children, the sick, the elderly – what for?" – and again and again: *"Ia ne mogu bol'she, ia ne mogu!"* – "I cannot go on, I cannot" (1991, 149–150, 162). This rare episode offers a glimpse into the psychological toll such actions exacted even on members of the NKVD, suggesting that their brutality was not without moments of internal moral reckoning.

Among the *bezhentsy* were also those who neither applied to return to the German-occupied zone nor accepted Soviet citizenship. One such individual was Kazimierz Zybert, who had been living with his father and sister in Lwów since January 1940. By late June, Zybert observed with mounting anxiety that increasing numbers of refugees were vanishing. Although he tried to evade arrest by changing location nightly, the NKVD-men eventually located and deported him to the Soviet interior (Nesselrodt 2019, 118). Helena Kagan and her husband had applied for Soviet citizenship but had not yet received their passports. In the early hours of the fourth night of the deportation operation, the NKVD knocked at their apartment door. After inspecting their identity documents, the officer informed them that they were to be resettled in another Soviet city. Kagan succeeded in clarifying the misunderstanding, and the officer eventually confirmed that their papers were in order and that they could remain. This concession – uncharacteristic for the NKVD – may have been influenced by the officer's own Jewish background; he took his leave of the couple in Yiddish (Żbikowski 2018, 463–464). The parents of Elizabeth Jablonski (née Ruchale Kitajgrodska), by contrast, were deported despite having accepted Soviet citizenship. Although they had been issued Soviet passports containing a clause requiring them to leave Równe within ten days, local authorities had assured them they could remain in the city until their son – who had recently undergone surgery – was discharged from hospital. Nonetheless, they were arrested and placed in a freight car at the railway station. A young boy was sent to notify their daughter, Elizabeth, who succeeded in organising warm clothing – jackets and fur garments essential for their survival in Siberian exile (VHA USC Interview Jablonski).

Several of Ilana Maschler's colleagues at the UKRSBYTMESOPROM – a characteristically cumbersome Soviet abbreviation referring to "Ukrainian retail outlet for local industry" – were refugees who had declined Soviet citizenship. Each morning, their safe arrival at the workplace was met with palpable relief, and their supervisor even permitted them to spend the night in the office for reasons of personal security. One such colleague, Celine, narrowly escaped arrest by the NKVD at her home. A former elite athlete, she managed to flee by climbing out of a window and onto a neighbour's balcony. Initially suspecting that she had taken her own life, NKVD officers were puzzled by the absence of a body in the courtyard and instructed the

building's caretaker to report any signs of her return. When Celine, who had temporarily found shelter with relatives, reappeared several days later to retrieve her belongings, she was apprehended and subsequently deported to Siberia. Another employee, Ania, succeeded in avoiding arrest by the NKVD at her place of work, having been forewarned by Maschler. However, upon learning from her husband that his parents had been arrested, she made the deliberate decision to surrender herself to the NKVD in order to accompany her husband and parents-in-law on their forced deportation to Siberia (1991, 144–146, 151).

During the transport and in exile, the deported Polish Jews faced a myriad of challenges. Alongside severe food shortages, they grappled with the whims of Soviet authorities, harsh climates, and backbreaking labour in logging, mining, and camp settings. Accommodation was woefully inadequate, typically comprising draughty, lice-ridden wooden barracks, which were oppressively hot in summer and bitterly cold in winter. These conditions fostered the spread of diseases, often proving fatal due to the absence of adequate medical care (Goldlust 2017a, 47; Grudzińska-Gross and Gross 1981, 234–37; Ląndau 2023, 186–189).

On 30 July 1941, Polish Prime Minister Władysław Sikorski and Soviet Ambassador to the United Kingdom Ivan Maiskii signed an agreement granting amnesty to Polish citizens imprisoned within the Soviet Union. The accord followed diplomatic efforts by Winston Churchill, who, in light of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, persuaded Stalin to join the anti-Hitler coalition. In this context, Churchill also exerted considerable pressure on the Polish government-in-exile to pursue cooperation with the Soviet regime. The Maiskii–Sikorski Agreement thus provided for the release of all Polish prisoners and special settlers held in the Soviet Union (Kochanski 2013, 162).

News of both the German invasion and the amnesty reached the Soviet camps only after a significant delay. Eventually, detainees were formally informed that they were to be released on the grounds that Poland had now become a military ally of the Soviet Union. As a result, all Polish citizens were to be relocated to the southern regions of the Soviet Union. However, contemporary reports suggest that the Soviet authorities frequently showed little interest in facilitating these transfers. Zev Katz recalls that, following their release, many Polish Jews initially continued working in the special settlement. By autumn, however, fears mounted among them that the onset of winter would make departure impossible. In response, they organised a strike in an effort to compel the authorities to facilitate their relocation (2004, 77–81). While the majority of Polish Jews deported to Siberia recalled their time in the Soviet Union in overwhelmingly negative terms, there were isolated instances of more relatively favourable experiences. Zev Katz and Leo Cooper, for example, both succeeded in building careers during their time there – Katz completed his studies, while Cooper distinguished himself as a skilled labourer (Goldlust 2017a, 33; Katz 2004, 89–97).

According to Soviet sources, 90,662 Polish Jews were released from camps and prisons between August 1941 and December 1942. For the vast majority of them the process of leaving the Soviet Union turned into an arduous and prolonged ordeal – nothing short of a modern-day odyssey (Adler 2020, 143–147; Kaganovitch 2010, 99–100). A significant number of Polish Jews succeeded in reaching the southern regions of the Soviet Union, where they sought to enlist in General Władysław Anders' Polish Army. However, given the prevalent rejection of Jewish recruits, many were compelled to conceal their Jewish identity and pass as Catholics in order to gain admission. Ultimately, Anders' army of 70,000 soldiers, along with their families of 50,000 individuals, was evacuated to Iran. Among them were 3,500 Jewish soldiers as well as about 2,500 Jewish civilians. From there, a considerable number of Polish Jews continued on to Palestine (Goldlust 2017a, 34; Kochanski 2013, 163–203). A further several thousand Jewish refugees from Poland served in the Berling Army established in 1943 (Budnitskii et al. 2022, 339).

According to Albert Kaganovitch, between September 1939 and June 1941, up to 100,000 Polish Jews were deported to the Soviet interior – either classified as "unreliable elements" during mass deportations or imprisoned as political detainees. Approximately nine percent of these deportees did not survive (2010, 100; 2022, 3).

The majority of the 136,579 Jews [this figure also contains Jews who were evacuated in summer 1941 to the Soviet hinterland, AP] who returned to Poland after the war did not stay long, as they were not welcome. They faced discrimination mainly from their Polish neighbours. In several pogroms, Jews were even murdered, as for instance on 4 July 1946 in Kielce. In the face of persistent anti-Semitism in the following decades, most Polish Jews were compelled to leave Poland once more (Szaynok 2013, 144–159).

5 Conclusions

The ensuing dual occupation by two ideologically radical regimes severely curtailed the freedom of movement and agency of more than three million Polish Jews. However, of the approximately 1.7 million Jews who found themselves under German rule, only around one-sixth – 300,000 – either fled eastward or were forcibly expelled by German forces across the newly established demarcation line. The motivations for flight were diverse. Many men of military age responded to mobilisation orders and moved towards the eastern front. Others sought to evade German aerial bombardment and the atrocities perpetrated by the *Einsatzgruppen*. Political considerations also played a role: individuals feared persecution due to their affiliation with various parties and social organisations. A considerable number – particularly communists and leftist activists, many of whom had only

recently been released from Polish prisons – crossed into Soviet-controlled territory for ideological reasons.

The Soviet authorities swiftly implemented a range of measures aimed at the Sovietisation of eastern Poland. This process entailed a thorough economic, political, and social transformation designed to align the region with the Soviet system. Enterprises were nationalised and all private commerce was outlawed. Simultaneously, the Soviet regime moved to dismantle traditional Jewish communal structures which included *yeshivas* and *kehillot* – longstanding institutions of religious and cultural life. The exercise of Jewish religious practice became increasingly untenable, owing to the prohibition of both religious education and worship.

However, these increasingly harsh conditions resulting from Sovietisation were not necessarily the decisive factor that drove many Jewish refugees to register for a return to the German-occupied territories. Rather, this decision must be understood in the context of the *pasportizatsiia* campaign, which entailed the conferral of Soviet citizenship on all individuals residing under Soviet rule. This process, however, involved a degree of coercion and imposed various restrictions. Certain population groups, including refugees, were issued passports containing Paragraph 11 that prohibited them from residing in district towns or in the immediate border zone. Yet many refugees were reluctant to leave urban areas, believing they would have better prospects for securing employment and housing there. They also feared that once they accepted Soviet citizenship, they would lose any possibility of reuniting with family members on the other side of the demarcation line – a concern that for many outweighed other considerations. Since the demarcation line was completely sealed and life under Soviet rule appeared untenable, bringing relatives into the Soviet-controlled zone did not seem feasible. Furthermore, as the Soviet press failed to report on the extent of German atrocities against the Jewish population, many Jewish refugees assumed that the violence in the German-occupied territories had diminished.

At the same time, few contemporaries were able to apprehend that the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 would inaugurate a systematic programme of extermination, ultimately culminating in the near annihilation of European Jewry. For many Orthodox Jews in particular, the Soviet regime's radical project of secularisation – evident in the dismantling of communal Jewish institutions and the criminalisation of religious observance – appeared to constitute a more immediate existential threat than the physical danger posed by the Nazis.

From the perspective of the Soviet authorities, Jewish refugees were not only a social burden but also a significant security risk, as they were suspected of harbouring numerous German spies. To mitigate this perceived threat, the Soviets implemented various measures to integrate the refugees and relocate them from strategically sensitive regions. These measures included assigning refugees to labour

in the Soviet interior and subjecting them to the *pasportizatsiia* campaign. When these efforts proved only partially effective, the authorities resolved in early March to deport all refugees who refused to accept Soviet citizenship to the Soviet interior. The deportations were carried out several months later and were preceded by a disinformation campaign, in which German and Soviet authorities may even have collaborated. Publicly, refugees were invited to register with the German Repatriation Commission to return to German-occupied territory. In practice, however, most registrations were handled by the NKVD, which knew from the outset that the Germans would not accept large numbers of Jews.

In reality, the so-called "option" to return to German-occupied territory functioned as a test of political loyalty – one that over 65,000 Jewish refugees who registered for it failed. They were subsequently arrested in a large-scale deportation campaign initiated in late June and transported to Siberia where they were confined in special settlements. In addition, tens of thousands of *bezhentsy* were sentenced to lengthy terms of imprisonment in the Gulag on charges ranging from illegal border crossing to involvement in political organisations, both alleged and real acts of resistance to Sovietisation, the observance of religious practices, and other behaviours deemed subversive by the Soviet regime.

However, the fact that 65,000 Jewish refugees chose to return to Nazi-occupied territory also indicates that far more than two-thirds of Jewish refugees were, to some extent, able to adapt to the prevailing conditions and accommodate the imposed restrictions – particularly those affecting religious practice. This process of adjustment was generally less arduous for younger, well-educated, and largely secular Jews than for older individuals with strong religious commitments.

For those affected, deportation represented a profound and traumatic rupture. Instead of reuniting with their families, the refugees were forcibly resettled in remote and often inhospitable regions of Siberia. In this way, Jewish refugees became victims of both totalitarian regimes: Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet rule. Yet a crucial distinction must be made between the two. While the Nazis were preparing the systematic extermination of the Jewish population, the Soviet authorities were primarily concerned with clearing the borderlands of individuals they deemed "politically unreliable." While numerous ethnic groups in the Soviet Union experienced comparable forms of repression, the Soviet government did not seek the total annihilation of the Jewish people.

Overall, the chances of survival under Soviet occupation were significantly higher than in German-occupied Poland. Over 90 percent of the deported Jewish refugees survived both the deportation and the following months or even years in exile. This survival, however, was accompanied by severe loss. Beyond the inhumane conditions and suffering during transport and forced resettlement, they lost the majority or even all their family members and friends. The latter fell victim to the

Nazis' policy of extermination – in ghettos, in the concentration and extermination camps, at execution sites, and during death marches.

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