

**»Topography, Experience, and Memory of Life in Transition:
Polish Jews in the Soviet Union (1939–1959).«**

Subject and Relevance

Already in 1958, the Israeli historian Meir Korzen called for a historical analysis of the fates of Polish-Jewish expatriates in the Soviet Union in an article in the leading journal on Holocaust Studies ›Yad Vashem Studies‹.¹ In his article, Korzen demanded the inclusion of this important chapter of Jewish history in the field of Holocaust Studies. His appeal, however, yielded little resonance among historians for many years to come.

The political transformation following the collapse of the Soviet Union not only led to an opening of archives, more importantly, it also spurred Jewish survivors into dealing with their experiences and memories of life in the Soviet Union from 1939–1959. Moreover, several research institutions (including the Yad Vashem Archive, the Hoover Institute Archive at Stanford University, the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation or Ośrodek Karta – Archiwum Wschodnie in Warsaw) displayed far-reaching interest in the topic, collecting and publishing numerous interviews with Polish-Jewish survivors of Soviet exile. This relatively new field of research was at first preoccupied with describing the deportation of non-Jewish Poles to the USSR and their later ›repatriation‹, analyzing Polish-Jewish relations directly after the war as well as portraying the fates of survivors in German and Austrian DP camps. In recent time new publications and essays appeared on single aspects of the history of Polish Jews in Soviet exile (Davies/Polonsky, 1991; Tych/Siekierski, 2006; Kaganovitch, 2010; Ruta, 2013, Grossmann/Edele, 2017; Aleksiu/Adler, 2018/ Nesselrodt, 2019). One of the most important works on the topic to date was an article by Laura Jockusch and Tamar Lewinsky.² In it, the authors remark on the necessity of researching this largely disgraced topic, particularly focusing on the role the Soviet experience played in the post-war reality.

¹ Korzen, Meir: *Problems Arising out of Research into the History of Jewish Refugees in the USSR during the Second World War*. In: *Yad Vashem Studies* 3 (1959), 119.

² Jockusch, Laura and Lewinsky, Tamar: *Paradise Lost? Postwar Memory of Polish Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*. In: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 3 (2010), 373–399.

Alexander Brenner who for many years served as the head of the Jewish community in Berlin was born in 1925 in Tomaszów Lubelski. Very shortly after the outbreak of the war Brenner with his family left Tomaszów and escaped to the Soviet occupied Rawa Ruska. In 1940 the NKVD deported the 15 years old Alexander and his family to Siberia. In an interview he described his war experiences thus:

»Deportation was a stroke of luck for us, because there were no gas chambers in Siberia. Most of our folk who stayed were gassed at Bełżec.«³

Like Alexander Brenner, Judith Karliner-Gerczuk, born in Berlin in 1927, found shelter in the Soviet Union during the World War II. Her parents, Elias and Klara, were Polish nationals who had moved to Germany soon after the World War I. In October 1938, the family was arrested in Berlin and deported to Poland. At first, the Karliners were forced to stay in the refugee camp in Zbąszyń. Not until the summer of 1939 were they allowed to leave the camp and join their relatives in the town of Stanisławów in Eastern Poland (which is today the Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk). When the World War II began, the town was occupied by the Soviets. As the situation there became increasingly precarious, Judith's father volunteered to go to the interior of the Soviet Union as laborer. In January 1940, the Karliners, along with thousands of other Polish nationals, were brought to the Caucasus in cattle cars. From there, the family was subsequently transferred to Saratov (on the River Volga). In an interview, Judith Karliner-Gerczuk recalled these events as follows:

»Hitler had a very good teacher in Stalin. [...] I want to let known the future generations what was going on. Because some people say, »Oh, you were not in a camp, so you did not go through so much.« But for me it was a trauma practically from childhood on.«⁴

Alexander Brenner and Judith Karliner-Gerczuk were among the approximately 230,000 Polish Jews who survived the Shoah in the unoccupied territories of the Soviet Union. Most of them had either fled from the part of Poland occupied by Germany at the beginning of the Second World War

³ Interview with Alexander Brenner, conducted on August 14, 2004, in Berlin, author's archive.

⁴ Judith Karliner-Gerczuk, Interview 26867, March 3, 1997, Melbourne, Australia, Tape 2 (22:00 Min.) and Tape 4 (00:50 Min.), USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive.

or, having been denounced as ›class enemies and political undesirables‹, were arrested in the part of Poland occupied by the Soviets between 1939 and 1941 and then deported to the interior of the USSR. In addition, some Polish Jewish refugees moved further into the Soviet territory as they fled from the advancing Wehrmacht following the German invasion, while others went to the Soviet Union individually, mostly in search of work. Whether they fled, were deported, or were evacuated, most of the Polish Jews who survived the Shoah and the horrors that followed the German invasion of their country in fact entered the Soviet Union.

Even if Alexander Brenner in retrospect, like most of these survivors, considers the deportation of his family to the Soviet Union a fortunate event, the years of banishment brought about painful and traumatizing experiences. Most of the refugees lost their relatives and their homeland and after the war, were compelled into statelessness. Many suffered poverty, hunger and disease – whether in the Soviet forced labor camps, in prisons, penal camps and other sites of banishment or on collective farms and in urban industrial centers such as Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk or Omsk. The elderly and children were dying of exhaustion.

The majority of them, however, considered themselves belonging to the »She'erit Hapleta«⁵ (last survivors) of Eastern European Jewry, who were able to survive the war because they had been granted harsh and unsought refuge under Stalin. Following the end of World War II, the Polish and Soviet governments agreed on 6 July 1945 that most of the Polish-Jewish survivors were to be »repatriated« to Poland. About 200,000 Jews had already returned to Poland by the end of 1946 in hundreds of transports from the Soviet Union, among them Alexander Brenner and Judith Karliner-Gerczuk. A second »repatriation« wave followed in the years 1956–1959, when another 19,000 Polish Jews returned to Poland.

In the post-war reality of the emerging Cold War, neither the general nor the Jewish public was interested in their stories and their experiences of exile in the USSR. This circumstances were politically and ideologically motivated, primarily determined by the context of political orientation of the post-war era. In Eastern Europe, even mentioning the Soviet wartime policies was considered taboo. This topic was off-limits not only in Poland, but also in the United States and the newly founded State of Israel, the destination of many Polish-Jewish émigrés, where these events were marginalized and driven out of the collective memory. The Cold War and the Western condemnation of Communism, as well as the tense political situation in the newly founded Jewish state, significantly contributed to the shift away from remembering their plight. Moreover, the

⁵ Hebr. She'erit Hapleta, (שאריית הפליטה) – ›the surviving remnant‹.

experiences of the survivors of National Socialist concentration and forced labor camps dominated the collective memory, essentially shutting out the memory and suffering of Polish Jews in Soviet exile. Specifically, to many returnees from the Soviet Union, life under the Soviets seemed like »paradise« compared to surviving Nazi rule. As a consequence, this group rejected the idea of identifying themselves as »Holocaust survivors.« In their view, the »real« Holocaust survivors were people who somehow survived the ghettos, concentration camps, and forced labour camps in German-occupied Poland and elsewhere in Europe. For many decades, they did not speak about their particular experience, which in their opinion was not worth mentioning, especially when compared to the »catastrophe of Auschwitz.«

Goals and Research Questions

The aim of the proposed research project is the presentation and historical classification of these to date largely under-researched events and experiences of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during World War II. They ought to be integrated in the general understanding of the Shoah, but as well as a part of Polish and European history while the multifaceted memory of expulsion, deportation, persecution and survival during and after World War II are analyzed. This project will form the basis of a monograph. The study is structured chronologically within the political context. Six subject fields can be derived against this backdrop, determining the research to be conducted:

1. Repressions: Polish and Polish-Jewish Deportees as victims of Soviet rule (1940–1946)
2. Siberia versus Central Asia: Life under the Soviet population (1940–1959)
3. Polish Government-in-Exile, ZPP (Union of Polish Patriots) and the Polish-Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union
4. Return to the »lost homeland« – How to recreate life? (1944–1959)
5. Memory of survival in Soviet exile since the 1940s

The findings will be generated on the basis of contemporary reports from the time of persecution and exile and from biographical accounts, at times compiled many years after the events described. Besides reporting experiences of expulsion, deportation, forced migration, and contacts with the Soviet system, as well as struggles as refugees in the USSR, the testimonial statements also reveal very important layers of information. They draw a broad picture of postwar life: the »repatriation«

from the Soviet Union to Poland, confrontation with the catastrophe of the Holocaust, another escape to the Displaced Person Camps in Germany or Austria, and their further emigration.

With the help of extensive sources, the research project will uncover new contexts and offer a new perspective, which include not only the experiences and stories of Jewish expatriates and deportees in the Soviet Union, but also deals with additional questions like:

- Gender
- Consequences of political affiliations
- Religious life under Soviet rule and inter religious encounters between Jews, Christians, and Muslims
- Polish-Jewish soldiers within the two Polish armed forces in the USSR
- Exiles as (no) survivors of the Shoah
- Relationship between Polish and Polish-Jewish Deportees and Refugees
- Shared or different experiences of Polish and Polish-Jewish Deportees

This approach promises valuable historical findings, which will offer new insights into the perception of the Shoah during and after the war and the variety of Jewish visions of restoring personal and communal Jewish life, which emerged after the war. Furthermore, this approach also provides a hitherto disregarded starting point for the historical analysis not only of the Holocaust, but also of the complex history of mass violence in Europe in the 20th Century.

Novel or original aspects

This project relates the experiences of Polish Jews, who survived the war in the Soviet hinterland. Over the course of the years 1939 to 1945, as well as throughout the postwar decade, this group of deportees/evacuees/refugees survived several fundamental, political transformational processes which deeply affected and irrevocably changed their lives. As Polish citizens and Jews, they were subjected to the horrors of the World War II. Their life trajectories were marked by difficult pathways and painful experiences, constantly being exposed to political ruptures and transformations: starting with the Nazi occupation and its atrocities, through their hard refugee life under the Stalin regime; and finally after 1945 being »repatriated« to Poland, which then transformed to a Communist country. There is an overall thread running through all the biographies of Polish Jews analyzed in this project, namely the issue of transition. Their transition experience

has a three-fold dimension: the major changes in their lives in spite of expulsion, forced migration, deportation, and displacement; the change in language and culture; and last but not least the movement of refugees from one state and place to another. The life trajectories of Polish Jews surviving in the Soviet hinterland reflects the history of the Holocaust in a transnational and multidimensional way. They not only open a window into the past and help us to better understand the special plight of this group of victims and survivors, but they also allow us to reflect more deeply, thoughtfully, and comprehensively on the present-day issues of forced migration, displacement, and refugee crisis.

Sources

In this research project, I will evaluate a broad spectrum of source genres. Documents authored by the Polish-Jewish expatriates themselves are the most important body of sources, building the foundation for this research as they allow selective insights into the past while documenting emotions and reactions people were preoccupied with at the time. They include: autobiographies, diaries, memoirs, witness testimonies, recollections, letters and interviews.

The reconstruction of the living conditions of Polish-Jewish refugees in Soviet exile but also the rebuilding their existence in the post-war Poland, based on the analysis of ego-documents, will be supplemented with extensive archival sources, official documentation (e.g. Polish government-in-exile, ZPP, NKVD, Joint, the Jewish Agency, Central Committee of Jews in Poland, Files of Polish Government after 1945) contemporary press articles and secondary literature.

The outlined research hypothesis require empirical verification in light of primary sources of various provenances. These are currently dispersed in archives and research institutes in several countries. I have already carried out archival research in manifold research institutions and archives in Israel (e.g. Yad Vashem, where I have been working for more than three years, The Central Zionist Archive, Ghetto Fighters House, Ginzah Kiddush Hashem), the United States of America (e.g. Hoover Institutions Archive, YIVO Archives NY, Joint Archives NY, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), United Kingdom (Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum Archive London, The Wiener Library London), Poland (e.g. Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Ośrodek Karta – Archiwum Wschodnie, Museum for the History of Polish Jews Polin Archive) and Russian Federation (e.g. The State Archive of the Russian Federation GARF, Russian State Military Archive RGVA), which hold most of both the published and unpublished archival materials that are so crucial for this project. In the last three

years I was able to explore and collect hundreds of interviews, testimonies and diaries of Polish-Jewish exiles in the USSR. Currently I am analyzing the collected material in Polish, Yiddish, Russian and Hebrew and continue writing on my book (habilitation).