Introduction

On the Other Side

> Now the number of carts that pass through the street filled with people bound for the Other Side, increases from day to day. None of the tenants can sit home anymore, business and work are at a standstill, the remaining household possessions are sold, and everyone dreams only about going to the Other Side.
>
> —PERETZ OPOCZYNSKI

IN "HOUSE NO. 21," Peretz Opoczynski used his building and its residents as a microcosm for Warsaw Jewish society in the early weeks and months of the Second World War. Throughout the piece, filed with the underground archive of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941, Opoczynski's neighbors continuously discuss whether and when they should flee east: "By now this has become the sole topic of conversation in the tenement: in front of the gate, in sitting rooms by day and in beds by night."[1] In Opoczynski's original, the Polish Jews use the vague but laden Yiddish term *yener zayt* to refer to the Polish territory newly occupied by the USSR.[2] In a culture in which certain topics were best left unsaid, *yener zayt* allowed Yiddish speakers to gesture toward unspeakable concepts—such as death, prison, or Soviet territory—without naming them. Although Yiddish lacks capital letters, Robert Wolf's translation renders it the "Other Side," capturing the portentous connotation. Also contained within the term is the sense of the unknown. Even as they rehash rumors and pass around letters, the Jews in German-occupied Poland have very little idea what is going on across the newly established border in the Soviet zone.

Moreover, the Other Side provides a compelling metaphor to conceptualize the survival of as many as two hundred thousand Polish Jews, the bulk of the survivors of the largest Jewish community in Europe, deep in Soviet territory. Their choice to flee east—and subsequent choices—placed them outside the reach of the Nazi genocide. Yet it also placed them in a sort of netherworld of history and memory; on the *other side* of the stories we tell about the Holocaust and the Second World War. This book aims to recover and reintegrate their stories.

During the fall of 1939, following the dual invasions of Poland, well over 100,000 Polish Jews chose to flee from the areas conquered by the Nazis to those newly under Soviet control. Although they did not know it at the time, this decision effectively changed the trajectory of their lives. Unlike the Polish Jews who stayed behind, and soon faced ghettoization and death at the hands of Adolf Hitler's forces, those who fled to Soviet territory came under Joseph Stalin's fist. They were deported to labor installations in Kazakhstan and Siberia, amnestied to Central Asia, and later repatriated to Communist Poland. The decision to flee placed them not only beyond the reach of the Holocaust but also beyond the scope of Holocaust scholarship and memory. In a 1959 article for *Yad Washem Studies,* historian Meir Korzen reflected on this absence:

> The Holocaust that swept the Jewish communities of Poland and other countries during the Nazi reign has almost completely diverted the attention of contemporary Jewish historiography from another dramatic and interesting episode in the history of the Jews during the Second World War—that of the Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union.[3]

Just over a decade after the end of the war, Korzen was already concerned about the eclipse of one Jewish war story in favor of another. His article primarily focuses on telling the story of the Polish Jewish refugees. Even in 1959, Korzen felt the need to familiarize his readers with the war experiences of Polish Jewish refugees. He ends with a plea for further research and recommends distributing questionnaires to learn more about the experiences of the forgotten survivors.

Although I do not believe that anyone ever followed Korzen's recommendation, fortunately the former refugees themselves have written and recorded numerous testimonies and memoirs about their experiences in the Soviet Union during the war. As Nora Levin has pointed out, "The history of the deported Jews remains to be written, but a number of survivors have

recounted their experiences."[4] This book seeks to fill that gap, using autobiographical accounts and other available primary sources to present the story of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union and reflect on its marginal status in historical scholarship. Scholars generally agree that the majority of Polish Jews who survived World War II did so in the USSR, although the exact number of these survivors remains contested. Polish survivors, in turn, formed the majority of Jewish displaced persons (DPs) after the war and established many of the historical commissions and commemorative practices that set the stage for how the Jewish tragedy would come to be constructed and understood. How, then, is it possible that one chapter of that story was almost entirely displaced by another?

While scholars and survivors are aware of the Polish Jewish refugees, their stories of survival remain peripheral to the study of the Holocaust. Historians, on the whole, have noted their existence only when they exited, and then reentered, the more central story of the Nazi genocide against the Jews. For example, Saul Friedländer's masterful work on the Holocaust refers to the Polish Jews who fled to the USSR only in passing. He contrasts the deteriorating conditions in the German-occupied areas of Poland with the conditions experienced by Polish Jews under Soviet occupation:

> While the German grip over the Jewish population of the Warthegau and the General Government was tightening, in the Soviet-occupied zone of Poland, the 1.2 million local Jews and the approximately 300,000 to 350,000 Jewish refugees from the western part of the country were getting acquainted with the heavy hand of Stalinism.[5]

Refugees who stayed in the newly acquired Soviet territories reappear later in Friedländer's account, as they were murdered during the 1941 German invasion. Yet those who were deported into the Soviet interior disappear from the narrative entirely.

In his important work on postwar DPs, Zeev Mankowitz notes the return of the refugees, and even their large numbers, but focuses on the Holocaust survivors among the Surviving Remnant (She'erit Hapletah).

> It turns out that by the end of 1946 fully two-thirds of *She'erith Hapleitah* were repatriates who had not been personally and directly caught up in the Nazi policies of terror, torture and killing. They had endured harsh, and for some, fatal years of exile; in most cases they lost their families from whom they were separated and, on their return, found their homes occupied by

> others, their property stolen or confiscated and facing a world that had turned alien and implacably hostile. Their situation, nonetheless, was very different from those who had survived the horrors of the Shoah and their demographic structure, most particularly, was strikingly dissimilar to the founding nucleus of *She'erith Hapleitah*.[6]

After this key insight, however, Mankowitz, like other scholars of the survivor community, tends to treat the Surviving Remnant as if it were a group composed exclusively of those who survived under Nazi occupation.

Scholarship on the emigration of DPs abroad also tends to obscure the Polish Jewish refugees. Dina Porat has noted that "in 1951, one out of every two Israelis was a newcomer, and practically one out of four was a survivor. According to recent research, 25 per cent of the fighting forces in the War of Independence and 15 per cent of the casualties were survivors."[7] She acknowledges that no one was keeping track of the many new arrivals and their previous experiences. Even these approximate percentages, therefore, must assume the identities of the survivors based on where they came from. In these examples and many others the refugees are subsumed within the survivor population.

Indeed, Polish Jewish refugees who survived in the Soviet Union frequently disappear into larger or more prominent historical trends. Whether or not they count as Holocaust survivors, the "survivor" nomenclature used in many historical accounts does not effectively distinguish them as a subgroup. Throughout this book, therefore, I will refer to them by a number of names. Most often they will be called refugees or Polish Jewish refugees. Fleeing from western Poland inaugurated their wartime journey. Moreover, their status as refugees often lasted well beyond the war. Additionally, both at the time in official documents and later in historical treatments, they were often categorized as refugees. Although, as Olga Medvedeva-Nathoo points out, even this single term can have multiple meanings with the Russian (*bezhenets*) connoting constant movement and the Polish (*uchodźca*) suggesting one who has completed the act of leaving.[8]

Elsewhere they will also be referred to as Polish citizens, former Polish citizens, deportees, and repatriates, although each of these designations can also be confusing. Certainly they considered themselves to be Polish citizens, despite the fact that Poland no longer existed and the Soviet authorities tried, at various points, to force them to accept Soviet citizenship. Deportation, when applied to the Second World War, typically brings to mind

German cattle cars instead of Soviet freight wagons. And the term *repatriation,* although used in all of the documentation at the time, elides the fact that many Polish citizens who "returned" had to leave behind their homes and property in the annexed Soviet territories and move into regions that had been part of Germany before the war. Atina Grossmann has pointed to the irony of these Central European Jews being called Westerners (*zapadniki*) in the Soviet Union and then Asiatics back in Poland after the war.[9] Allied administrators of DP camps often referred to them as infiltrees. In narrating the postwar period I will also make use of the term *flight survivors* even though it is not in wide usage.[10] The lack of a simple appellation for this population illustrates the marginalization of their story, but also the ways in which that story touches on so many others.

My own engagement with this topic developed gradually. It began with individual, almost unbelievable stories. The relatively popular, and highly evocative, memoiristic novels—or novelistic memoirs—of Chaim Grade and Esther Hautzig tell remarkable tales of deportation or flight from Vilna and survival in exotic locales.[11] I also heard several fragments of stories from friends and acquaintances: the Polish Jewish father born in Magnitogorsk, the Ashkenazi rabbi who celebrated his bar mitzvah in Bukhara, the many Polish Jews who describe their own and their parents' survival in Siberia. It took a long time for me to realize that these experiences were ultimately all part of one larger story of the war and its displacements, and even longer to appreciate that I would be the one to tell it.

In the first chapter of his groundbreaking book *Neighbors,* Jan Gross describes the passage of five years between his introduction to the primary document that formed the basis for his project and his willingness to accept its validity.[12] While this project does not require nearly as much suspension of disbelief or painful reckoning, my awareness of the story that I would tell also dawned slowly. Only once I understood that these stories of survival were part of the larger story of the Holocaust and World War II did I begin to conduct research to find out more.

Yosef Litvak, both a survivor of the experience and a historian, published the only full-length treatment of the Polish Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union in Hebrew in 1988.[13] The book was never translated and is now fairly difficult to obtain. Litvak's work is remarkably thorough, making use of all the archival documents available at the time. Although he does include references to autobiographies, he is chiefly concerned with explaining the ongoing political shifts in Soviet policy that dictated the refugees' status. This

is a tremendously complicated area, and one where the documents are not forthcoming. Litvak does an excellent job coaxing a narrative out of diplomatic, memoiristic, philanthropic, and other sources.

This work differs from Litvak's not so much in its access to sources but in its approach and focus. Some new documents have been released, and others discovered, since his pioneering study, but not as many as one might hope after the passage of thirty years. In the Soviet Union the Polish Jewish refugees were primarily overseen by the state security services. Unfortunately, neither the Russian Federation nor most of the other successor states to the Soviet Union have been willing to grant access to these records. This reticence stems, of course, from concerns about other potentially damaging information in their archives rather than any particular interest in this relatively minor tale. Somewhat ironically, the endurance of a surviving remnant of Polish Jewry under Soviet stewardship could provide a relatively positive angle on Soviet policies. I have even tried to argue this point with archivists in the former Soviet Union, to no avail.

However, the memoirs and testimonies that ground this study reflect on many realms of life that even the most thorough and voluminous government documents can never reveal. And while these accounts are certainly subjective, it is not necessarily true that archival material provides a more objective point of view. All documents contain bias, as do documentary repositories and their staffs. In Kate Brown's rendering, "archivists and historians know that documents can be inaccurate, obscurantist, aspirational, and sometimes just plain false, written to deceive. Historians are discovering that archives are not inert repositories, but contain their own narratives that are active in framing and determining the past."[14]

This may be even more true for Soviet sources, as Sonja Luehrmann explains: "In the case of Soviet documents, their relationship to what one might think of as social reality is further complicated by the fact that documentation of life in the USSR was never intended to be neutral or objective but to participate in transforming the reality it described."[15] Indeed, according to one group of scholars engaged in the use of oral histories to study life in the Soviet Union, "It is sometimes said, and is almost true, that 'for us the documents are subjective, and the only thing which might be objective are the memories.'"[16]

Additionally, as Joanna Michlic has noted, our sources determine the questions we can ask.[17] The present work is a social history, focused on the day-to-day existence of the refugees during the course of the war. How did

they live? With whom did they live? What characterized their relations with various other groups of locals, evacuees, and deportees? This book is also concerned with the many difficult choices, large and small, that the refugees had to make during the war years. These are the sorts of questions that can only be explored via autobiographical sources.

Allowing the voices of the former refugees to guide the narrative has necessarily determined its direction. As much as possible, this book follows their lead. As a result, it at times differs from previous scholarship and may defy expectations regarding its approach to periodization, chronology, content, focus, and perspective. For example, readers might expect the discussion on deportation and the experience of forced labor to primarily address the latter. The deportees spent at most two months in passage, whereas all spent roughly a year engaged in heavy labor. However, in their own oral and written testimonies, at least as much space is devoted to the shocking experience of deportation as to the exile itself. Deportation was a pivotal period of transition for the Polish Jewish refugees, who discuss its various stages at length and in detail. Chapter 3 defers to their priorities, split between the experience of reaching the labor camps and what they found upon arrival.

The subject of philanthropy, addressed in Chapter 4, also illustrates how adopting the refugees' perspective shapes the resulting account. Aid to the refugees from a variety of governmental, semigovernmental, and nongovernmental actors is one of the few areas for which ample archival records exist. Previous scholars, including Yehuda Bauer, Atina Grossmann, Shlomo Kless, Yosef Litvak, and Keith Sword, have prepared excellent work on the tremendously complicated political, bureaucratic, geographic, and other obstacles involved in providing material aid to the refugees during the war.[18] Yet the refugees themselves evince surprisingly little interest in this topic. Materials received from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Polish government-in-exile merit only cursory mention in their written and oral recollections, while packages from family members and friends loom large. The narrative thus focuses primarily on the impact of receiving items from loved ones within and outside the USSR.

People often ask me how much the refugees deep in Soviet territory knew about the Holocaust in Poland. This is another area where the testimonies defy expectation. Although we now know that information about the genocide appeared in Soviet news outlets and was available to the refugees, they overwhelmingly describe grasping the destruction only upon return to Poland. Of course, these narratives need not be contradictory. People can and

do absorb individual facts without comprehending the bigger picture. Chapter 5 examines the ways in which news reached the refugees, as well as the experience of repatriation. While engaging with scholarly conversations to contextualize the refugees' access to information, it also endeavors to follow the lead of the testimonies themselves, acknowledging the ways in which the surviving refugees chose to frame their apprehension of the Holocaust.

In order to provide the fullest possible picture of refugee life in the Soviet Union during the war, I also seek to reflect the varied experiences of different groups within the larger community of exiled Polish Jews: older and younger refugees, men and women, religious and secular Jews, Polish and Yiddish speakers, those who came alone and those who traveled in family groups, and those of different levels of education and professional background. Testimonies produced during the war and immediately afterward are often short and unemotional. Some of the very first memoirs were produced by professional writers. Examining newer publications, as well as the wealth of oral testimonies, allows for a more diverse and representative sample.

For the sake of clarity, the book's narrative structure privileges what would become the most common path for Polish Jewish refugees: flight from Poland, resettlement in newly annexed Soviet territory, deportation to the interior, amnesty to Central Asia, repatriation to Poland, and then emigration to the West. However, there were also multiple junctures along the way where discrete groups of refugees forged different paths. For example, some refugees who fled to Soviet territory in 1939 stayed only long enough to reach unoccupied Lithuania. Although most were still there when the Soviet Union invaded in 1940, a few were fortunate enough to get visas allowing them to reach Shanghai or other ports outside Europe. At another pivotal moment, in 1942, several thousand refugees, including hundreds of orphans, managed to evacuate the Soviet Union via Iran with the Polish Army. I endeavor to include these alternative routes throughout the narrative.

This book also seeks to engage with the genre of testimonial literature more broadly and contribute to the growing scholarly conversation about the use of testimonies in historical research on the Holocaust. A sophisticated theoretical and methodological discussion on how to read and interpret testimonies has begun to influence the field of Holocaust studies. Nevertheless, concerns remain about the subjectivity of testimonial sources. In

addition, some may hesitate to embrace these sources because of certain taboos about the Holocaust and survivors. It is my contention that the marginalized testimonies of Polish Jews who survived in the Soviet Union can shed light on the practice of reading Holocaust testimonies more broadly.[19]

Zoë Waxman's *Writing the Holocaust* is one of many scholarly works that has influenced my approach to reading testimonies. Waxman insists that Holocaust testimony is "contingent upon and mediated by" its own history, a claim that she develops through close reading of primarily published and translated Holocaust testimonies. Moreover, she highlights the heterogeneity of Holocaust experiences, as evidenced by these testimonies: "The Holocaust was not just one event, but many different events, witnessed by many different people, over a time span of several years and covering an expansive geographical area."[20] These claims are highly relevant to the testimonial literature of the Polish Jewish refugee experience in the Soviet Union.

Noah Shenker's application of these insights to testimony collection institutions, including the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Visual History Archive of the Shoah Foundation, has been similarly enlightening:

> The labor of testimony is not simply a matter of retrieving the past, but also of recording the ways by which one reenacts that past. Interviewers, archivists, and those who access these sources encounter the challenge of engaging how testimony is generated and performed as part of a mutual, contingent process—one that is embedded in both personal and institutional practices and which does not reveal a static or infallible notion of memory.[21]

As Shenker's study reveals, the findings of all testimonial collection efforts are profoundly influenced by their circumstances: the location, timing, goals, and methods of each project all play a role in the outcome, as do the personnel involved.

The three major institutions in Shenker's study, along with Yad Vashem in Israel, all collected testimonies from survivors of flight into the Soviet Union. Yet the inclusion of these survivors was somewhat accidental. Each of these organizations has a mandate to document experiences of the Holocaust. While each has also conducted interviews with refugees from the Holocaust who left at various points, this is not their primary purpose. The Central Jewish Historical Commission, convened in 1944 in Lublin, also included interviews with Polish Jewish refugees, albeit for different reasons.

The underground archive of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Polish government-in-exile, on the other hand, purposely sought out these witnesses in the midst of the war for their testimonial projects. Politics played a major role in defining the projects of these groups.

Published and unpublished memoirs and autobiographies, while less directly mediated by historical or political institutions, are still very much the products of their time and culture. Texts produced by fervent political or religious activists, including Orthodox Jews and Zionists, might interpret the same events very differently. The Cold War waxed and waned its centrality to the testimonial literature produced in different locations and time periods. More generally, the refugees' individual memories and perceptions of their experiences varied depending on where and when they traveled across a vast geographical spread.

Henry Greenspan's myriad contributions to Holocaust testimony scholarship include highlighting the role of the listener. As Greenspan points out, "Survivors do not recount in a vacuum but always to an actual or imagined audience of listeners." He suggests, for example, that the concept of "survivor guilt" may be more "speakable" than other, deeper agonies. Its ubiquity thus reflects modes of retelling, and of hearing, rather than actual emotions: "For certainly it is easier for us to accommodate the guilty survivor than the utterly abandoned survivor or the rageful, indicting survivor."[22] Certain topics can be broached, while others are only hinted at.

Pascale Rachel Bos has called attention to the cultural processes that shaped witnesses and some of the resulting lacunae: "I suggest that the lens of gender accounts for the fact that similar events and circumstances were sometimes experienced differently, were remembered differently, and are written or spoken differently." Bos also recognizes the broader application of her claims about gender socialization: "The socialization of those involved, the discourses in and through which one is constituted and understands one's self, affect what kinds of narratives one employs to relate one's trauma."[23]

The trauma experienced by the flight survivors was not the same as the trauma experienced by Polish Jews who stayed behind. While the Polish Jews in the unoccupied regions of the USSR endured forced labor, imprisonment, starvation, disease, and the loss of loved ones, they escaped the genocide. Some certainly mention antisemitic incidents in the USSR, but they rarely faced active discrimination and only learned of the Holocaust on their return to Poland after the war. The testimonies produced by the

two groups are fundamentally different, although they start and end at the same point. Both groups of Polish Jews confronted the Nazi invasion in 1939, and both reeled from its effects in the aftermath of the war. In between, both groups were dislocated, divested, and disenfranchised by the war. I argue that it is possible to learn from, and to contribute to, the developing scholarly discussion on Holocaust testimony.

This work also benefits from the growing library of secondary research about particular aspects of the Polish Jewish experience in the Soviet Union. Numerous articles have treated perceptions of Jewish and Polish responses to the arrival of Soviet forces in 1939, as well as the reception of Jews in Polish military units during the war.[24] Soviet treatment of the Polish Jewish Bundist leaders Henryk Erlich and Wiktor Alter has also garnered attention, from the time of their disappearance to the present.[25] In addition to Litvak's book, a small but steady stream of articles on subsections of Polish Jewish refugee life in the Soviet Union have appeared since Korzen's plea for research in 1959. Yet the period following the fall of the Soviet Union has seen increased attention to the topic. This is part of a larger scholarly trend of interest in the war and Holocaust in the USSR, occasioned by the opening of Soviet archives, that has inspired a thorough rethinking of paradigms of the Holocaust. As a result, this research relies on insights from colleagues and is in conversation with their findings and publications.[26]

In addition to contributing to a more nuanced picture of the war and Holocaust in the Soviet Union, this work is in dialogue with the emerging scholarly interest in transnational studies of the Holocaust, as well as the field of migration studies. Undoubtedly, Timothy Snyder has made the most visible effort to rethinking national boundaries in approaching the eastern front of the war.[27] And while his research has also proven influential, it represents only one approach. Following the migration of Polish Jewish refugees necessitates expanding the compass of the war and its effects. Like other Polish Jewish victims, they began the war buffeted by the Nazi terror and were left homeless and powerless in the war's aftermath. Yet while these bracketing events associate them with other Polish Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, their forced and voluntary migrations across the steppes require different tools of analysis, maps of the war, and definitions of survival.

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Several years ago, when I was already deeply engaged in research for this project, an elderly foreign-born Jewish man gingerly handed me his father's