Jewish Refugees in Soviet Poland 1939-1941

by Ben-Cion Pinchuk

Hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees sought homes free from Nazi persecution during the period between 1933 and 1941 preceding the extermination of millions. Hitler's rise to power in Germany and the extension of Nazi rule over large parts of Europe were accompanied by sharp increases in the number of Jewish refugees to non-Nazi countries. Prior to the period of the Nazi-Soviet War in June 1941, German authorities allowed and even forced the Jews living within their borders to leave. The real tragedy was that most of the other countries either closed their doors or sharply limited the numbers which they were prepared to accept.

A general international apathy concerning the fate of the Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied territories prevailed among most of the member governments of the League of Nations and outside that body. The policy of the League amounted to a refusal to deal with the problem, despite the fact that a High Commissioner (James G. McDonald) was appointed to take care of refugees, Jewish and others, coming from Germany. However, the Commission did not receive its budget from the League, and its achievements were very limited. "The victims of Nazism met with resistance almost everywhere. Many countries stiffened their immigration requirements in order to prevent the entry of those doomed people into the Western hemisphere." A conference was convened in Evian, France in July 1938; representatives from thirty countries who responded to President Roosevelt's initiative participated, but affected no real changes in the policies adopted by the non-Nazi countries. In a way, the policy of appeasement applied to Germany during the 1930s was transferred to the Jewish refugee problem.

There are no exact figures concerning the number of Jewish refugees who were able to find temporary or permanent homes outside the Nazi territories. Jacques Vernant estimates that by May 1939 the number of Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia was 401,000, of whom 194,000 immigrated to countries overseas and 207,000 found refuge in Europe. Arieh Tartakower and Kurt R. Grossman maintain that during the years 1938 to 1942 the number of Jews who were able to leave for countries overseas was about 213,000. They could not, however, ascertain the total of refugees leaving before or after the outbreak of the war.

Taking into account the general background of the refugee problem as
well as previous Soviet policy on the subject, the presence of several hundred thousand Jewish refugees in Soviet-occupied Poland after September 1939 created something of a paradox and deserves more attention than it has hitherto been given. About 10 per cent of the largest Jewish community in Europe found refuge in Soviet territory by leaving those parts of Poland which were occupied by the Nazis. This group thus became the largest remnant of European Jewry during the Holocaust. Owing to its size and its special problems during the existence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, this group is a subject of particular importance for historical research.

Even though the Soviet constitution included a special article which offered asylum to foreign citizens who were persecuted for political reasons, the USSR was not among those countries which absorbed any meaningful number of refugees from Nazi territories. The Soviet government did not cooperate with the High Commission established by the League of Nations and, together with Germany, tried to curtail the Commission's activities. The Soviet government was afraid that the High Commission would support anti-Soviet refugees. In addition, internal developments such as collectivization, rapid industrialization and the purges of the mid-thirties did not create a favorable environment for the acceptance of or attraction for the victims of nazism. The Kremlin viewed the Evian Conference as a "plot to encourage the sabotage activities of the Trotskyist émigrés" and, therefore, refused to send its representatives or to participate in the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees which the Conference established. Only after the occupation of eastern Poland did the Soviet government directly encounter the Jewish refugee problem and on a massive scale as well.

Two major waves of Jewish refugees in flight from Nazi occupation reached eastern Poland: the first started before 17 September 1939, when the Red Army crossed Poland's eastern border, and lasted until the official incorporation of eastern Poland into the USSR; the second wave started after 30 October when the borders between the German and Soviet zones were officially closed, and almost lasted until the outbreak of hostilities between Germany and the Soviet Union.

The first group of refugees, who arrived in eastern Poland without encountering difficulties in crossing the border, did so both before and after the demarcation of the new Soviet-German border line. Among them were those who were part of the occupied population as well as those who were admitted by the Soviet authorities. This distinction is of importance when dealing with the problem of Soviet policy toward those Jews seeking refuge from nazism. Most of the refugees found in eastern Poland at the time that the Soviet troops entered, had come there as a direct result of the German-Polish War. The systematic attacks on purely civilian targets, particularly
large cities, were an integral part of the Blitzkrieg tactics, intended to destroy the morale of both the civilian population and the Polish army. The fact that the cities contained a relatively high proportion of Jews, made the Jewish community more vulnerable to Nazi intentions. That, however, was not the major reason for the massive flight of Jews to the East. German atrocities perpetrated against the Jewish population in the towns of Czestochowa, Krasnoshelets, Vishkov and others deeply affected the Jewish community, and tens of thousands of Jewish men left Warsaw and Lodz.\textsuperscript{10} The flight from Warsaw was accelerated after 7 September when an official decree was published ordering all men eligible for military service to move to the eastern provinces where a new army and line of defense would be established. The Polish government itself was retreating from the capital to Lublin and organizing special convoys for selected groups.\textsuperscript{11} It should be noted that a very high percentage of those fleeing East were men and women without families. “There were among the younger people those who intended to cross the Soviet border in case of a total German victory. Members of the Zionist organizations fled to towns close to the Rumanian border, hoping to reach Palestine via Rumania.”\textsuperscript{12}

The final borders between the USSR and Germany were drawn on 28 September; until that date no clear-cut delineation between the two had existed. The Soviet authorities, therefore, inherited the Jewish refugees remaining in eastern Poland as part of the local population. It hardly required a policy of generosity toward victims of nazism to let the refugees stay where they were found. More complicated is the matter of Soviet policy toward those Jews who crossed the border without hindrance, mainly in October 1939. Should this be considered as a policy designed to rescue Jews from Nazi persecution? The evidence available does not warrant such a conclusion. Soviet policy was determined by general considerations that had very little to do with the fate of the Jews in Nazi Poland. Moscow insisted on maintaining the fiction that the Soviet Union came to “rescue and liberate the oppressed Byelorussian and Ukrainian population.” In line with this policy, the Soviet authorities in Poland organized elections to constitutional assemblies which decided, unanimously, to join the USSR.\textsuperscript{13} During the period of preparing the elections, the Soviets had every reason to be liberal in order to prove that not only the local population but also the people from German Poland, preferred to live under Soviet rule.\textsuperscript{14}

During the month of October, the Soviet authorities did not object to the German practice of forcing entire Jewish communities to cross into Soviet Poland. Thus the Jews of Sokal, close to the new border on the Bug, witnessed the arrival of many Jews from Belz, Kristiampole, and Varzh. Among them was also the famous Rabbi of Belz.\textsuperscript{15} All the Jewish inhabitants
of Ostrolenka were forced to cross the border at the same time. When they reached the first Soviet outpost "the Russians received us cordially, offered us cigarettes and candies," related one of the refugees. Przemyśl, in Galicia, thus became a major center for entire Jewish communities who were forced to cross to the Soviet side during the month of October. The Soviets were still ready to accept thousands of Jewish refugees, either those who had been expelled or were fleeing on their own.

The second wave of Jewish refugees started reaching Soviet territory after the official incorporation of eastern Poland into the Byelorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics, at the beginning of November 1939. This wave lasted, albeit in drastically reduced numbers, almost until 21 June 1941. The refugees were now fleeing from territories where the massacre had already begun to a country that promised to be at least a refuge. The Soviet authorities required special permits from people trying to enter their territory, or those qualifying according to the population exchange agreements with the German government on 16 November 1939. The crossing of the border without mutual consent, involved great hardship and the risk of death. The local German authorities continued their practice of forcing entire Jewish communities to cross the Soviet border, but now the Soviet guards refused to admit the victims of persecution. Those caught were shipped back to the Nazi border. German guards in turn fired at anyone trying to reenter. Thus, quite frequently, thousands of refugees had to stay for days in the no-man's-land along the border.

A rather bizarre episode was the attempt by the Germans to use the agreement with the Soviet Union of 16 November 1939 to "legally" transfer Polish Jews across the Soviet border. According to that, the undersigned parties had agreed to the exchange of Ukrainians and White Russians living in German territory for Germans (the so-called Volks-Deutsche) living on Soviet territory. The German authorities tried to register Jews as "Ukrainians of the Mosaic faith." The Soviets refused to accept that arrangement. Moscow tried to stop the flood of expelled refugees by requesting the direct intervention of the German Foreign Ministry. Violators of the prohibition to cross the frontier were threatened with three years' imprisonment. On 15 November the Soviets officially protested Germany's action to force Jews to cross their borders. State Secretary Weizsacker reported the complaint of Colonel General Keitel, in a memorandum dated 5 December 1939, stating that the Jews expelled across the Russian border were being forced back by Soviet commanders. Keitel asked the Foreign Ministry to take up the matter with the governor general of Poland in order to prevent possible future friction. In response to Soviet objections as well as to changes in the policy toward the Jews in the Nazi territories, the practice of expelling thousands of Jews across the Soviet frontier ceased in the beginning of 1940.
Despite the dangers involved, the stream of Jewish refugees continued throughout the winter of 1939-1940. Thousands fled from towns and villages close to the border. Here, entire families, including children and the elderly, attempted to reach the Soviet side. Many were killed in the no-man's-land and some, who succeeded in crossing the border, were tried for espionage. Nevertheless, one has the impression that the Soviet border was not yet tightly sealed to those seeking refuge. The attitude of the Soviet guards differed from place to place. Occasionally hundreds and even thousands were allowed to cross the border.

The number of Jewish refugees decreased in the spring of 1940 and ceased almost completely during that summer. The difficulties in crossing the Soviet frontier prevented many from even attempting the venture. At the time when increasing numbers of Polish Jews were drawn into ghettos in the summer of 1940, the Soviet border became even more difficult to cross. The reasons for the closure of the Soviet borders to Nazi victims, just as their accessibility in the preceding months, had little to do with Soviet policy concerning the fate of the Jews under German occupation. The summer of 1940 saw a general tightening of the Soviet policies in the newly annexed territories. The free movement of people across the borders created a genuine security risk, and it was too complicated to control every crossing. Beginning with the summer of 1940, the border between the "friendly" countries became a fortified line. Not only Nazi collaborators but also Nazi victims had to be prevented from crossing the frontier.

The exact number of Jews from Nazi occupied Poland who found refuge on Soviet territory is not known; nor do we have reliable data concerning the proportions among the various waves. One may doubt whether the absolute figures of refugees under Soviet jurisdiction could be found even in the Soviet archives. The chaos that reigned in the area for quite a while after the entrance of the Soviet troops and the transfer of many refugees across the borders and within the boundaries of eastern Poland complicated the problem of census taking. The speedy collapse of Soviet rule after the outbreak of the war in Germany probably destroyed much of the available material. Those studying the problem from outside the Soviet Union must rely on secondary sources, and, therefore, their statistics amount to rough estimates, at best. The range of differences in estimates might give us an idea of the problem's complexity. Thus, Avraham Pechenik estimated the number of refugees as 1,000,000, while the journal, Jewish Affairs, maintained that their number did not surpass 200,000. Bernard D. Weinryb, using a variety of sources and testimonies tends to accept 300,000 as the approximate number of Jews who found refuge in Soviet Poland. Other investigators of the period tend to accept Weinryb's estimates. Refugees constituted about 20 per cent of the Jewish population of Soviet
Poland; therefore, sheer numbers of refugees alone created an important problem for the Soviet authorities in eastern Poland.

The occupation and formal transformation of eastern Poland into the western provinces of the Soviet Byelorussian and Ukrainian Republics were only the first steps in the process of fully integrating the annexed territories into the USSR. The Soviet authorities changed the economic and social life of the area. The previous social and political structures and organizations were abolished while an attempt was made to eliminate the various former elites by imprisonment and deportation. The changes introduced in the various spheres of societal activity were designed to provide effective control over the annexed territories.

One of the most problematic groups in adaptation to the Soviet way of life were the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees. They were difficult to direct, and eastern Poland lacked the economic capacity to absorb them. For the Soviet authorities, the refugees also became a political, administrative, and economic problem. The authorities had very little regard for the refugees' unique situation, particularly in its human aspects. A contradiction existed between the goals and attitudes of the Soviet authorities and those of the Jewish refugees. Their mutual relations went through several phases reflecting changes in Soviet policy toward the local population and also the differing reactions of the refugees themselves.

During the first stage, which began after the Soviet army had entered eastern Poland, and which lasted until the formal incorporation of the area into the USSR, the local authorities exhibited a rather liberal attitude toward the refugees. At this stage, the victims of war and Nazi persecution were allowed to adapt and to find their way in the new system with little interference and with some help from the authorities.

The local Jewish communities, themselves experiencing the painful process of adaptation to the new regime, their autonomous organizations dismembered, tried their best to offer help to their brethren. One gets the impression that the smaller communities showed greater concern and devoted more energy to helping the refugees. Thus in Sokal, a special committee was established to take care of the refugees. The entire community contributed to the establishment of a public kitchen, while private homes, synagogues, and schools were used to provide housing.29 "Almost every Jewish family housed some refugees from Nazi Poland,"30 relates an inhabitant of Derechin, a town in Byelorussia. The Jewish community of Ianovo, near Pinsk, mobilized all its resources to provide first aid to the refugees: "After a short while all the refugees found housing with local families. All of us felt a moral obligation to offer help to our destitute brothers,"31 recalled a survivor from that little town. In Lutsk, "every Jewish home had at least
one refugee. The hospitality was spontaneous and natural. . . . It amounted to a huge effort to provide first aid to hundreds of homeless Jews."^^ This is just a sample illustrating the generous behavior of the shtetl toward Jewry in time of need. Refugees with special skills were able to find employment in both the smaller towns and the larger centers. Teachers, engineers, technicians, accountants and physicians were in great demand.^^

On the other hand, the situation was particularly acute in the larger cities. The Jewish population of Lwow(Lvov) and Bialystok was almost doubled, adding tens of thousands of newcomers.^4 Within a very short time all houses and rooms were rented. New arrivals were forced to use schools, synagogues, theaters, railway stations and parks. Those who were lucky enough to find a vacancy needed a special permit from the local authorities.35 The Soviet administration was reluctant to provide housing for the refugees, since it needed the limited housing facilities for its personnel arriving from the USSR. One finds numerous, identical descriptions of misery and the problems of housing and employment which afflicted thousands of refugees in eastern Poland. The local authorities opened some public kitchens in the major cities to provide food for the refugees, but the food was poor and the number of kitchens insufficient.36 During the first months of Soviet authority, existing Jewish relief institutions were not abolished, but could not handle the situation. Later, the Soviets simply let them run out of funds. In Bialystok and Kovel, the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) was able to offer some aid.37 In Lwow(Lvov), "food relief was organized as long as the financial resources lasted. When the money ran out the Soviet authorities made it clear that they were against philanthropy," reported one of the Jewish community leaders.38 When the JDC sent 150,000 zloty for relief work in Lwow(Lvov), the Soviet authorities refused to permit the opening of public kitchens.39 After 1 January 1940, the Polish zloty was no longer legal currency in eastern Poland. This regulation affected those refugees who had not exchanged their savings in time and who, therefore, became penniless overnight.40

Finding a job was one of the major concerns of the refugees. The local Jewish community could not take care of a problem of such magnitude even in normal times. As mentioned earlier, some refugees found employment in the professions, in local institutions, factories, cooperatives, and in the expanding educational system. A small, but important group, which attracted the attention of the Soviet authorities, was that of Jewish intellectuals—poets, novelists, journalists, and artists—who found refuge in Lwow(Lvov) and Bialystok.

The Soviet authorities paid special attention to the "reeducation" and indoctrination of the new citizens of the Soviet state. The relatively large
group of Jewish intellectuals assembled in Bialystok could potentially serve that purpose well, provided, of course, that due elimination had been made of those with an ideologically suspicious past. The rest had to adapt themselves to the official thought and style. During the first few weeks after the occupation, the authorities provided a special home for refugee journalists and writers. Those who had or were suspected of having had some past connection with either the Bund or the Zionist movement stood no chance of being accepted, and looked instead for safer occupations. Others, who could not force themselves to follow the official line, and to remain silent in face of the tragedy of their brothers in the Nazi territories, stopped writing. Dozens of poets and novelists, who were ready to serve the regime, "produced" poetry according to the prevailing Stalinist style. The pages of the Bialystoker Shtern, the Minsker Oktiaber, Kiiever Shtern, and other Yiddish papers were filled with their literary "products."

With the passage of time, special branches of the Soviet Union of Writers were established in Bialystok and Lwow (Lvov). Thus, in January 1941, the Ofboi, a monthly published in Latvia, could print an article entitled "Broad Jewish Cultural Activity in Western Byelorussia." The paper reported that "in Bialystok there are many Jewish writers who previously lived in Warsaw. In Bialystok, as in the entire area formerly under the rule of the Polish Pans, where any cultural activity could barely exist, intensive creative cultural activity is now going on... The cultural production of the Jewish writers has increased tremendously." The same paper reported that David Bergelson, the famous Soviet Yiddish writer, had met with the editorial board of the papers Shtern and Oktiaber. During that meeting, Zelik Akselrod, a member of the Shtern board, talked about the publication of a series of books by the refugee writers. The Yiddish writers from the Soviet Union played an important role in "reeducating" the refugee writers. Their frequent visits to the new territories were designed to influence the Jewish masses and to enforce the official line on the newcomers. Yitzhak Feffer from Kiev was particularly active in the western Ukraine, while western Byelorussia was visited by two special "Writers' Brigades" with Peretz Markish and David Bergelson heading the one and Leib Kvitko and Yehezkel Dobrushin the other. The more complex question about the interaction between the Yiddish writers from the Soviet Union and the Jewish Polish writers deserves a more detailed analysis that would be beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say, that the influence was by no means one-sided.

The Soviet authorities employed some refugee writers and actors in the Jewish state theaters that they formed in the annexed territories. The Jewish Drama State Theater was established in Lwow (Lvov). Its literary manager was Alter Katsizne, and its most important actress was Ida Kaminska.
Bialystok was even more active. A Jewish Drama State Theater, whose members were mostly actors from Warsaw, performed mainly in Bialystok and the major cities of western Byelorussia. A "Wandering Theater" was organized to cover the smaller towns and to "provide culture to the large Jewish masses in the provinces of Western Byelorussia." Yet the most "illustrious" contribution was the Jewish Miniatures State Theater under the literary direction of Moshe Broderzon, with Shimon Dzhigan and Shumacher serving as art directors. It was formed in November 1939 and took extended trips throughout the Soviet state. Its repertoire consisted mainly of short satirical sketches.

Only a small fraction of the refugees could find suitable employment in eastern Poland. For the vast majority, the authorities found another solution: they were offered jobs in the USSR, itself. Special employment offices, "labor departments" in western Byelorussia and "labor bourses" in western Ukraine tried to persuade those seeking employment to accept jobs in the interior of Russia. The registration for work in Russia had already begun during the months of September and October after the final demarcation of the borders. There are reports of pressure being put upon the refugees to accept the jobs offered in the interior of Russia as early as October 1939. Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Urals, and the Donbas were among the places offered to the refugees who were looking for jobs. Those who agreed to go were immediately given free transportation, advance payment, and tempting conditions. While the majority refused, there were thousands who stood in line for registration. "Many wanted to leave Bialystok, where they find it increasingly difficult to get housing, food, fuel. . . . They register to go to the Caucasus, the Urals, to sunny Tashkent," recalled Moishe Grossman, who lived in Bialystok at that time. The exact number of refugees actually leaving is unknown. D. Grodner maintains that: "In Bialystok alone 20,000 registered in one week; in Brest-Litovsk, 10,000." The Soviet press in Yiddish carried frequent reports on thousands of refugees being sent to various parts of the Soviet Union for work. Representatives from different Soviet enterprises visited the major refugee concentrations in an effort to attract them for work.

Those who registered for work left with great fanfare—flags, orchestras and patriotic speeches accompanied the outgoing trains. The receptions were equally enthusiastic and were confirmed by letters from the registrants, some of which were published in the local press. Yet, the honeymoon was a rather short one. Most of the refugees were unskilled and therefore employed as simple laborers. The work was hard, housing conditions inadequate, and the pay very low, compared to the accustomed standards of the refugees. Many tried to go back to eastern Poland, and quite a number reap-
peared in Bialystok and other towns after a few months. Through placards on the walls and newspaper advertisements, those who returned were invited to register for free food and work. The returnees who came to register were immediately arrested.

The Soviet attempt to provide employment and to "productivize" the people (a term used by the Soviet Yiddish press to describe the registrants) was a complete failure. Only a small proportion of the refugees did register, and quite a few among them came back. What might have been considered by the Soviet authorities to be a generous offer of conditions equal to their own citizens was believed by the refugees to be hard labor that they were not accustomed to performing. The Soviet failure to transfer a sizable part of the refugees who were concentrated in the larger cities posed the question of the refugees' status in eastern Poland even more acutely. The presence of many thousands of jobless persons reluctant to adapt to the new regime was a problem that the Soviet authorities could not tolerate. They would try to resolve it together with the problem of the refugees' legal status.

On 29 November 1939, the Soviet Citizenship Law was extended to eastern Poland. According to that law, all Polish citizens who were living in the territory when it was incorporated into the USSR (on 1 and 2 November 1939) automatically became Soviet citizens. The same status was given to persons who came to the Soviet Union in accordance with the population exchange agreement with Germany of 16 November. Automatic Soviet citizenship was also granted to people who left Vilna, which was transferred to Lithuania on 10 October 1939. People living in eastern Poland not included in the abovementioned categories could become Soviet citizens because of the existing naturalization law of 1938.

There is no doubt that the Soviet government intended to convert the Jewish refugees into Soviet citizens. It should be added that certain limitations were included, as will be shown later, in the citizens' status offered to the refugees. It would be wrong to attribute this policy merely to humanitarian considerations. General imperatives of control and sovietization of eastern Poland were the more dominant motivations. Whatever the rationale behind the Soviet policy was, it received a negative response from the vast majority of the Jewish refugees. Most of them considered their stay under Soviet rule as temporary. They thought that the war would be short and hoped to return to their former homes. There were those who tried to immigrate to the United States, Palestine, or other overseas countries. Some simply refused to become citizens of a regime they hated. Many refugees refused to accept Soviet citizenship considering it to be an act formally and finally severing their connections with their families living in Nazi Poland:
"Most of the refugees left their wives, children, closest family on the other side; how could they accept Soviet citizenship, an acceptance that would mean remaining in the Soviet Union forever!! To say farewell to home, to the dearest forever?!!" That was the cruel dilemma that faced the majority of the unfortunate, as it was eloquently posed by one of them.  

The fact that the refugees received Soviet passports containing the so-called "paragraph 11," contributed its share to their reluctance to become Soviet citizens. "Paragraph 11" imposed certain restrictions on residence and freedom of movement: only small towns and villages located no less than 100 kilometers from the border were open to people carrying such passports. They needed special permits to leave their place of residence. For most refugees it meant leaving the larger cities, where they at least had some chance of finding employment.

Sometime during the spring of 1940, the Soviet authorities decided to take drastic steps to either force the refugees to accept Soviet citizenship or to resolve the problem by other means. While we have no direct evidence concerning such a decision, the events that followed make it abundantly clear that such a decision had been taken as part of the general hardening of Soviet attitudes toward the local population. Special commissions of the NKVD were established in April-May 1940 to register the refugees. The registrants were faced with two alternatives—either to become Soviet citizens or to declare that they were ready to return to their former homes, now under Nazi occupation. Most available sources deny that any pressure was put on the refugees to register one way or another. The vast majority decided to register their intent to return. Among them were people holding jobs and those who were aware that Jews were being driven into ghettos in Nazi Poland. The registration, considered a test of loyalty by the Soviet authorities, had dire consequences for the refugees.

A strange and rather tragic episode occurred about the same time. Jewish refugees tried to register to return to Nazi Poland with German commissions that operated in the Soviet territory. A certain misunderstanding of that episode exists in the scholarly literature on the subject. Thus, Weinryb maintains that, in conjunction with the general registration, "those who registered with the NKVD had to register again with a German commission operating in Soviet-occupied Poland in April-May 1940, in accordance with the Russian-German agreement of April 1940 on exchanges of population. But only a few Jews were admitted by the German commission." Solomon M. Schwarz contends that Weinryb and Grodner are wrong: he finds no documentary evidence that any population exchange agreement was signed between the Soviet Union and Germany in April 1940. "However, some kind of a new agreement was signed. . . . This is confirmed by many testimonies.
of the operation, on the basis of a Soviet-German agreement, of commissions to register refugees to return to their former homes.” Schwarz concludes: “Probably the agreement dealt not with population exchange but only with the repatriation of refugees.” Yosef Litvak tends to dismiss the entire matter as “an episode around which rumors and gossip . . . abound,” a fabrication without foundation.

On the basis of the available evidence, several conclusions can be drawn concerning the issue. Throughout the period covered by this article, there were Jewish refugees who tried, and some who even succeeded, to return to their former homes in Nazi Poland. Economic conditions in Soviet Poland, fears of imprisonment and deportation, family connections, ignorance of the real situation and dangers facing the Jews in the Nazi territory, all contributed to the fact that refugees tried to return. There are no doubts about the operation of German commissions on Soviet territory at the time, April-May 1941. These commissions were invariably designated as the “commissions of population exchange,” and registered those who wanted to be repatriated.

An interesting confirmation about the entire episode is found in Nikita Khrushchev’s memoirs. Recalling some of the events of the time, Khrushchev, then in charge of the Ukraine, writes that there “was an exchange agreement whereby people on German-occupied territory who wanted to return to their homes in the former Polish territory now occupied by Soviet troops were allowed to do so; and likewise, anyone in the Ukrainian population on Soviet territory who wanted to return to German-occupied Poland could do that.”

The commissions operated in several cities such as Bialystok, Lwow (Lvov), and Brisk. The last location served also as the place of departure for those returning to German territory. There is little evidence to justify Weinryb’s assertion that those who registered with the NKVD, “had to register again with the German commission.” Most of the evidence seems to indicate that the two commissions operated separately and that quite a few Jews wanted to register with the German commissions without any Soviet order to do so. In Bialystok, many Jewish refugees waited for hours to register with the German commission. The refugees did not know the exact nature of the agreement between the states, but they had learned very quickly that the Germans refused to register Jewish refugees. Some tried to bribe the German representatives for a chance to be reunited with their families. Lwow (Lvov) was one of the major centers for registration, and many refugees had to wait for days to reach the commission. Khrushchev also relates “that most of the people standing in line for registration were Jews.”

The Soviet authorities interpreted the efforts to register with the German commission as an overt act of disloyalty. The attempts of many
Jewish Refugees in Soviet Poland

Jews to cross the border and their willingness to live under a regime that publicly announced its hatred toward Jews was considered, rightfully, as dangerous to the prestige of the Soviet government. Thousands of Jews who assembled in Brisk, hoping to sneak aboard the trains moving West, were arrested by special NKVD units.\(^{81}\)

The following authentic story demonstrates, better than any analytical exposition, the tragedy of Polish Jewry living on both sides of the border. At Biala, Podlaska, the first station on the German side of the border, the train carrying refugees East encountered the train moving West. "When the Jews coming from Brisk saw Jews going there, they shouted: 'You are insane, where are you going?' Those coming from Warsaw answered with equal astonishment: 'You are insane, where are you going!!!'"\(^{82}\)

The Jewish refugees in eastern Poland presented a problem for the Soviet authorities which they were neither able nor willing to solve in a way satisfactory to both sides. The Soviets considered the refugees to be a security risk since they showed a particular interest in developments in the German area, had family connections across the border, had made repeated attempts to sneak through the frontier to visit relatives, and had often expressed the desire to emigrate overseas. This increased Soviet distrust and the refugees were considered as likely candidates for espionage. The refusal of most to accept Soviet citizenship coupled with their overt declaration to return to German-occupied Poland, drove the Soviet authorities to a radical resolution of the problem—massive deportation of the refugees. During the spring of 1940, there were signs that the Soviet authorities were prepared to institute this plan as the answer to the refugee problem. It was part of a general shift toward a policy of removing entire social groups from eastern Poland. It replaced the more selective and individual character which the imprisonment deportations had had before.\(^{83}\)

The first to be deported were refugees without families who had registered to return, refusing to become Soviet citizens. "The first arrests did not create any panic among the refugees. At worst, thought some, they will be sent to the interior regions of the USSR, where they could get employment and wait until the war would end,"\(^{84}\) recalled a witness from Pinsk. It soon became obvious that those were mere illusions; the deportations extended to the entire refugee population in eastern Poland, and the destination of the trains moving East were to the labor camps of northern Russia and Siberia.

During the second half of June 1940, most Jewish refugees were removed from eastern Poland. The operation itself lasted only several days. The secret police were assisted by the entire Soviet governmental apparatus and the members of the Communist party in the area. The deportees were told, at least during the first stage of the operation, that their refusal to
become Soviet citizens and registration to return to German territory was the reason for their deportation. The refugees were “picked up” by the NKVD, which used its lists of those who had expressed their wish to return. When the refugees started to hide and to change their places of residence, “they were simply kidnapped while walking in the street, dragged from their homes, separated from their families,” recalled a witness from Pinsk. In Lwow (Lvov), the entire operation lasted only four days and nights. It involved the total mobilization of the secret police, party members, and higher administrative personnel.

It was evident that every detail was planned in advance: trucks were waiting in the intersections; from certain concentration points, the deportees were transferred to long trains moving East; the disinformation section of the NKVD was very active in preparing and executing the deportation. The victims had to be unprepared, taken by surprise, and led to believe that nothing bad would happen to them. False announcements, deceptive rumors and misleading information were among the methods used. In Lwow (Lvov), the police shifted its focus of attention from individuals to families. When the latter began to hide, those without families thought that the danger had passed and started returning to their homes. They were immediately picked up. The result was that each group in its turn was caught unaware.

The Soviet deportation machine was well prepared for its job. Years of experience in uprooting and hunting down thousands of helpless victims during the periods of collectivization, the great purges, and even before, bore fruit. Acting in accordance with General Serov’s detailed instructions, most of the refugees were deported in June 1940. Among the deportees were also people employed in Soviet institutions and even some who had accepted Soviet citizenship. The deportations continued after June 1940, although on a much smaller scale. The last large convoys of refugees left Pinsk on 20 June 1940, a day before the outbreak of war with Germany. Trains with deportees crossed Lida on 21 June 1941.
Jewish Refugees in Soviet Poland

While it is impossible to ascertain the exact number of the deported refugees, there is no doubt that the vast majority of them were exiled. An inherent incompatibility between the Jewish refugees and the Soviet authorities in eastern Poland existed. The refugees could not sever their ties with the past, their families, and their hopes. They did not adapt to the Soviet way of life. A complex human problem became an administrative question for the Soviet government. They resolved it by using a method with which they were familiar—mass deportation. The deportees were victims of Hitlerism, as they were victims of Stalinism. The majority of the refugees saved their lives after eastern Poland was conquered by Germany when they were deported into the Soviet Union. It was the ultimate irony of history.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 38.
10. Moshe Prager, Yeven Metsulah he-hadash [The New Disaster] (Tel Aviv, 1941), pp. 28-29.
12. Shoat Yehudei Polin [The Holocaust of Poland’s Jewry] (Tel Aviv, 1940), p. 47. (Henceforth to be called Shoat Polin).

21. The protest note was handed to Count von Schulemburg, the German ambassador to Moscow. See Gerald Reitlinger, *The Final Solution* (London, 1953), p. 49.
23. See *Yad Vashem, testimonial*, (henceforth to be called *Y.V.*), K-116-1324; A. Pinsker, *Ud Mutsal* [A Remnant] (Tel Aviv, 1957), pp. 18-20; and Prager, *Yeven Metsulah*, p. 32.
28. See Schwarz, *Evrei*, p. 33. Litvak, “Ha-Shilton,” p. 56 estimates the number of refugees to have been between 300,000 and 400,000.
29. *Sefer Sokal*, p. 278.
32. Y. I., SH-191-2131.
33. In Lubach, according to a census taken in September 1940, there were thirty-five Jewish refugees in the different professions; see *Geven a mol a yidish shtetl Lubakh* [There was a Jewish Shtetl Named Lubach] (Tel Aviv, 1971) pp. 33-35. Similar data come from such places as Kletsk; see E. S. Stein, ed., *Pinkas Kletsk* [The Book of Kletsk] (Tel Aviv, 1959), pp. 63 and passim; Lomze; see Ivri, *Ostrolenka*, pp. 358-59; and Dubno; see Yaakov Adini, ed., *Dubno: Sefer Zikaron* [Dubno: Memorial Book] (Tel Aviv, 1969), pp. 648-52 and Prager, *Yeven Metsulah*, pp. 33-35.
34. The *Minsker Oktiaber* of 4 January 1940 reported that the population of Bialystok had increased from 105,000 to 200,000 since its annexation. Lwow (Lvov), too, had almost doubled its Jewish population. See *Shoat Polin*, p. 43.
35. On the acute housing problem see Tania Fuks, *Vanderung Iber Okupirte Gebitin* [Wandering in Occupied Lands] (Buenos Aires, 1947), pp. 49 and passim; Fride Zerubavel, *Na Vanad* [Wanderer] (Buenos Aires, 1947), pp. 65 and passim; and Lederman, *Yener Zait*, pp. 74-99. The three represent a small sample of memoirs published by Jewish journalists, authors and artists, who fled to the Soviet part of Poland. They similarly describe in detail the fate of the Jewish refugees between 1939 and 1941, and served, with others, as an important source for this article.

37. Ibid.
38. *Shoat Polin*, p. 43.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., p. 63.
42. Grossman, *ibid.*, p. 27.
43. Ibid., pp. 35-36. The author recalls the refusal of the Bialystoker Shtern to publish anything about the fate of the Jews in Nazi Poland. See also Broderzon, Laidns veg, p. 31.

44. Thirty-four of the 170 members of the Writers' Union were Jews. See Bialystoker Shtern, 6 February 1940.

45. Ofboi, issue 3 (January 1941) 98.

46. Ibid.


48. Bialystoker Shtern, 2 February 1940.


50. Vilner Emes, 12 November 1940.

51. Ibid.

52. Vilner Emes, 8 December 1940, carried Moshe Broderzon’s article, “On Our Trip Through the Soviet Union.” After describing the “enthusiastic” receptions, the author admits that “the press drew to our attention that we have to adopt a Soviet repertoire.” The author promises to do so. Yet, several months later, the Kiiever Shtern, on 15 February 1941, reported that the theater collective had promised to prepare two performances which would “reflect its absorption in their country, and adapt it to Soviet reality.”


54. Weinryb, “Polish Jews,” p. 344 maintains that “in the last month of 1939 registration for work in Russia commenced.” Yet, a report from a Mr. Helman, the Hehaluts representative in eastern Galicia, describes registration for work occurring as early as the end of September. See Shoat Polin, pp. 24-25.

55. Ibid., p. 63.

56. A witness from Radzyn recalls his departure from Brisk in Zigelman, Radzyn, p. 219.


59. The Minsker Oktiaber of 20 January 1940 reported that seven trains with over 11,000 people left Bialystok recently for work in Soviet enterprises. The Bialystoker Shtern of 2 February 1940 in a polemical article with the Forverts, maintained that 30,000 refugees left for the interior in the last month.

60. The Bialystoker Shtern carried an article on 13 February 1940 which reports the arrival of a representative from Magnitogorsk to register 1,500 refugees for work in its building industry.


63. Y. V., SH-71-262; Lederman, ibid., pp. 126-27.

64. Grossman, Dzhugoshvili, p. 84.


66. Ibid., p. 541. Article 3 of the Soviet Citizenship and Naturalization Laws of 19 August 1938 stated that: “Aliens of any nationality or race could become Soviet citizens by their own request and the decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. or the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic where they reside.”

67. Y. V., A-74-1203; G-13-705; and SH-71-762.

68. Grossman, Dzhugoshvili, p. 84.

69. Lederman, Yener Zait, pp. 126-30; Grossman, ibid., pp. 94-96; Adini, Dubno, p. 654; and Mordchai V. Bershtein, ed., Yizkor Bukh fun Pulav [Memorial Book of Pulav] (New York, 1969), p. 345. This is just a small selection of testimonials coming from different parts of eastern Poland. Basically, they all repeat the same story.

70. At Pinsk, attempts were made to persuade the refugees to register to return. See


73. Litvak, "Ha-Shilton," pp. 64-65.

74. Lederman, *Yener Zait*, pp. 121-26; *Shoat Polin*, p. 38, contains a report of Jews from eastern Galicia crossing the border to the Nazi area.


81. Grossman, *Dzhugoshvili*, p. 94. Fuks, who personally witnessed the registration in Lwow (Lvov), relates in *Vanderung* on p. 80 that the Soviet officials questioned, "is our regime that distasteful to the Jews that they want to return to Hitler? If that is the case then certainly they should be regarded as an hostile element, and we better get rid of them."

82. Grossman, *Dzhugoshvili*, p. 94. The author heard the story from the actor Schumacher's wife, who was among the refugees coming from the Nazi side.

83. Schwarz, *Evrei*, p. 35.


89. Fuks, *Vanderung*, p. 81.


