

### **Deported, Exiled, Saved. History and Memory of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union (1940–1959)**

**Veranstalter:** European University Viadrina, Frankfurt an der Oder; Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw; Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw

**Datum, Ort:** 10.10.2018–12.10.2018, Warsaw

**Bericht von:** Veronika Dyminska, Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt an der Oder

The experience of Polish Jews during and immediately after World War II, whether deportation, evacuation or exile, was a life-changing period that they were forced to go through not on their own will. Nevertheless, in the perspective of many Jews, the exile is perceived as the possibility to escape the ongoing destruction of Jewish life under occupation. As it turned out, for some Polish Jews deportation by the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) saved them from German persecution. About 250.000 Polish Jews survived World War II by deportation, evacuation, and/or flight to Siberia and Central Asia. After the war, the majority of them returned to Poland, before making their way to countries in Europe or overseas. However, the history of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union is complex and exceeds the frame of national history calling for a global perspective. An attempt to analyze it and find new approaches was done during the Global Education Outreach Program workshop. The main task of the meeting was to gather scholars from Poland, Germany, Israel, US, Canada, Australia, and Russia and provide them with the possibility of a professional discussion about recent research.

The workshop was opened with the welcoming addresses of the organizers. MARKUS NESSELRODT (Frankfurt an der Oder) stressed that the workshop continues the discussion on the Jewish experience in the Soviet Union during and after World War II, that began with a conference 30 years ago, organized by ANTONY POLONSKY (London / Warsaw) and Norman Davies.<sup>1</sup> KATHARINA FRIEDLA (Warsaw) introduced different archives and sources of the

Jewish history from 1933 to present. She gave an overview of the most valuable collections worldwide and pointed out the importance of national archives in the former Soviet republics.

The first panel focused on the Jewish experience in Soviet occupied Poland. In his presentation Markus Nesselrodt dealt with the topic of the flight of Jews to the Soviet territories from the German occupied zone. After the German invasion in September 1939, over two million Jews faced the choice between two evils, an estimated number of 300.000 of them decided to flee to the East. The main aspects that influenced the flight were family hierarchy, geography and proximity to the new demarcation line, time of the decision, knowledge of the Nazi German ideology and persecutions, and lack of choice after being expelled from Germany. Hence the decision to flee was often a combination of individual experience, knowledge, and chance. JANINA KARPENKINA (Moscow) gave insights into the processes of Sovietization of Jews in the Soviet occupied part of Belarus. Jews formed about 10 percent of the local population of the former Eastern Polish borderlands before the outbreak of the war. Thanks to the good level of education and high concentration in the cities but also due to Soviet tactics of stimulating ethnic conflict, Jews entered administration positions in the region. However, the situation changed dramatically in January 1940, when most locals were replaced by Belarussians coming from the Eastern regions of the country. MARTYNA RUSINIAK-KARWAT (Warsaw) described the story of the *Bundists* (Jewish socialists) who were deported to Siberia and Central Asia. Even though many activists of *Bund* and his youth division, *Tsukunft*, managed to flee from the German occupied zone of Poland to the East, they were soon arrested by NKVD as 'counter-revolutionary elements' and sent mainly to Altai Krai. After 1942, they started to create illegal organizations in Kuybyshev and collected information about other *Bundists* and their families. They aimed initially to leave

<sup>1</sup>The volume „Polish Jews in the USSR, 1949–1946“, edited by Norman Davies and Antony Polonsky, includes papers that had been presented at an international conference on the History and culture of Polish Jews in Jerusalem, 1988.

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the Soviet Union with the Anders's Army, although finally many decided to stay in Central Asia and returned to Poland only in 1946.

RENATA PIĄTKOWSKA and PRZEMYSŁAW KANIECKI (both Warsaw) presented various sources from the collection of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. They suggested a visual history perspective introducing several items and documents. These sources, they argued, tell the history of particular persons and families and capture the moment of the flight or remain – sometimes the only memory of those Jews, who didn't survive.

The second panel concerned the co-existence of Polish and Polish-Jewish deportees in the Soviet Union. ELIYANA R. ADLER (State College, PA) concentrated particularly on the experiences of Polish-Jewish children. She analyzed the testimonies of children evacuated to Iran and Palestine, focusing on their feelings and perception of uncertain future and sense of adventure being displaced. Yet, Adler also questioned the objectivity of the documents and discussed their specific value as children's testimonies. WOJCIECH MARCINIAK (Lodz) summarized the deportation of more than 320.000 Poles from Soviet occupied Poland. Resettlement was one of the forms of repression on Polish citizens along with arrests, internments, and compulsory service in the Red Army. MIRIAM SCHULZ (New York / Paris) tried to sketch the history of the conceptual framework dominating the representation of Soviet Jewry through the Cold War. In her presentation, she deconstructed how the image of Soviet Jews as „Marranos“ was shaped by Polish-Jewish intellectuals who had survived the Holocaust in Soviet exile and problematized how the gilgul of the Marrano paradigm in the Soviet context paved the way for a gradual dichotomization of Soviet Jewry into maranen (the Wieselian „Jews of Silence“ that needed to be saved) versus the meshumodim (i.e. Jewish self-destroyers, namely anyone Jewish who identified with the Soviet experiment) in (Jewish) scholarly and public discourses.

The third panel was dedicated to the everyday encounters of the Jewish and non-Jewish population in the Soviet Union. NATALIE BELSKY (Duluth) illustrated the relationships

between Soviet and Polish Jews using testimonies and memoirs. Since both collectives developed completely different experiences during the interwar period, tensions, misunderstanding, and stereotypes became significant for the young generation. Nevertheless, the common Jewish identity caused some cases of cooperation, assistance, and friendly relations. Katharina Friedla presented the religious and social life of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union. During World War II, Polish Jews faced oppressions and drastic restrictions of the religious life and were forced to go underground. Nevertheless, religious traditions were still cultivated by Jews privately and illegally, in constant fear of being blamed of creating ‚counterrevolutionary sabotage‘. Religion became a part of survival strategy, giving people a sense of identity and belonging to the group that had endured exile and deportation in the hostile Soviet atmosphere.

Subject of the fourth panel were the contacts of Polish Jews with the state. NAAMA SERI-LEVI (Jerusalem) examined the relationships between the Polish Jews in the Soviet exile and the Jewish Yishuv in Mandatory Palestine. The presentation especially focused on the role of the Information Bureau for Jews in the Soviet Union in connecting Jewish refugees in Russia with their relatives in Israel. ALBERT KAGANOVITCH (Winnipeg) contributed to the topic of the complicated relationships between Poles and Polish Jews in the Soviet Union, arguing that Jews experienced more tensions and hardships. Although both groups were national minorities in exile, Poles were preferred to get support from the Soviet state and locals. ALICJA ŚMIGIELSKA (Cracow) gave an overview of the activities of the Center for Documentation of Deportations, Expulsions, and Resettlements of the Pedagogical University of Cracow and presented the research project on the ‚Teheran children‘. The testimonies have been documented in 20 video interviews with deported witnesses about their individual experiences.

The most important aspects of the conference were presented in the keynote lecture of ATINA GROSSMANN (New York) on the survival of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union. Around 250.000 Polish Jews were

saved thanks to deportations and evacuations. Their 'Asiatic' experience of living in exile in Soviet Central Asia was formed by encounters with the local population, evacuated Soviet citizens, and deported Poles. While the harsh living conditions affected both Jewish and non-Jewish deportees, only Jews perceived the deportation as a possibility to escape Nazi persecution and to survive – contrary to the Polish perspective. However, the postwar return of the Jews to the West proved that although the shock of the war was described in similar terms, the experiences differed completely and caused misunderstandings between the two communities.

The discussion continued in the fifth panel about the aftermath of the Holocaust. KAMIL KIJEK (Wrocław) presented his research on the Jewish community in Dzierżoniów. After the end of the war the Polish government chose Lower Silesia to become a territory for huge Jewish settlements in the context of legitimization of Soviet authorities in the former German areas and the anti-Jewish violence in other regions of Poland. At its peak half of Dzierżoniów's 40.000 inhabitants were Jewish. MAGDALENA RUTA (Cracow) explored the literary reflections of Polish Yiddish writers who survived in the Soviet exile. The wartime period was divided for them into two periods: while they identified the time between 1939 and 1941 as rather positive, their perception of the years from 1941 to 1945 was significantly influenced by hardships of resettlement, solidarity with the whole Jewish nation, remembrance of the Holocaust victims, and encounters with the Orient. About 100 artists managed to return to Poland after the war, although the majority of them soon left for Israel, Argentina or the United States. GENNADY ESTRAIKH (New York) focused on the second wave of repatriation of Polish Jews from the USSR in the late 1950s. Other than the Polish refugees, who automatically became citizens of the Polish People's Republic, Jewish repatriates were allowed to choose between Polish and Soviet citizenship. An estimated 80.000 Jewish repatriates returned to Poland, however the exact numbers remain unclear. Some Polish Jews rejected repatriation and decided to stay in the Soviet Union.

During the seventh panel the participants

concentrated on the memory of survival in the Soviet exile. LIDIA ZESSIN-JUREK (Frankfurt an der Oder) analyzed the role of Jews in the Polish memory of Siberia. She illustrated the remembrance politics with examples of the community of Poles deported to Siberia in the town of Stubice on the German-Polish border and of an exhibition in Białystok with a striking religious character. The absence of Jewish experience in the Polish memory is influenced by the antisemitic stereotype of *żydokomuna*, a strong Catholicism of Poles, and the physical absence of Jews in Poland. JOHN GOLDLUST (Melbourne) investigated the memory of Polish Jews in Australia using video testimonies and memoirs. He explored whether Jews perceived themselves as victims of the powerful Soviet authorities or whether they established a degree of 'agency' over the narrative. MALGORZATA QUINKENSTEIN (Poznan) closed the panel with a presentation of her recent research on the biography of the Jewish artist Dora Szenfeld. The time spent in Bukhara during the war strongly affected her life and creative work. Her written memoirs consisting of over 700 pages with text, photographs, and drawings are a unique example of an autobiographical self-reflection and a precious historical source.

In the closing roundtable discussion Antony Polonsky, Eliyana Adler, KRZYSZTOF PERSAK (Warsaw), and Katharina Friedla identified new questions for future research. One of them concerns numbers and statistics of Polish Jews in the USSR. All agreed that further research is necessary in the area of everyday life in Soviet exile, including a comparative analysis of experiences of Jews and non-Jews.

#### Conference Overview:

Dariusz Stola (Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw) / Andrzej Żbikowski (University of Warsaw) / Katharina Friedla (Polish Center for Holocaust Research, Warsaw) / Markus Nesselrodt (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt an der Oder): Welcome address

*Panel 1: Jews in Soviet Occupied Poland (1940-1941)*

Chair: Andrzej Żbikowski (Jewish Historical

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Institute Warsaw)

Markus Nesselrodt (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt an der Oder): Early Flight from the Wehrmacht to Soviet Territory

Janina Karpenkina (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow): The Sovietization of Jews in the former Eastern Polish Borderlands

Martyna Rusiniak-Karwat (Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw): The Activists of *Bund* in the Soviet Exile

Renata Piątkowska / Przemysław Kaniecki (both Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw): Introduction to POLIN Archival Sources

*Panel 2: Polish and Polish-Jewish Deportees under Soviet rule (1940-1946)*

Chair: Krzysztof Persak (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw)

Eliyana Adler (Pennsylvania State University, State College): Experiences of Polish-Jewish Children in the USSR

Wojciech Franciszek Marciniak (University of Lodz): Polish Deportees in the Soviet Union

Miriam Schulz (Columbia University, New York): „A maran... Hofshiteyn iz a maran...“: Polish Jewish Refugee Intellectuals and the Birth of Soviet Marranos

*Panel 3: Life among the Soviet population (1940-1959)*

Chair: Oleg Budnitskiy (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow)

Natalie Belsky (University of Minnesota, Duluth): „An invisible line of frankness‘: Friendship and Tensions between Soviet and Polish Jews in the Soviet Interior

Katharina Friedla (Polish Center for Holocaust Research, Warsaw): ‚When the Shabbat became Sunday‘: Religious and Social Life of Polish Jews in the USSR

*Panel 4: Polish Jews and the State*

Chair: Markus Nesselrodt (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt an der Oder)

Naama Seri-Levi (Hebrew University of

Jerusalem): Yishuv and Polish Jews in the USSR

Albert Kaganovitch (University of Manitoba, Winnipeg): Together and Apart: Poles and Polish Jews in War-torn USSR

Alicja Śmigielska (Pedagogical University of Cracow): The ‚Teheran Children‘ in the Research of Center for Documentation of Deportations, Expulsions and Resettlements

*Keynote lecture*

Atina Grossmann (Cooper Union, New York): Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Polish-Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union

*Panel 5: The Aftermath of the Holocaust (1944-1959)*

Chair: Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw)

Kamil Kijek (University of Wrocław): Jewish Repatriates in Post-war Dzierżoniów

Magdalena Ruta (Jagiellonian University, Cracow): Fate of the Polish Jews in the Soviet Union (1939-1945) as Presented in Literature of Polish-Yiddish Writers Saved in the East

Gennady Estraiikh (New York University): The Second Repatriation of Polish Jews from the Soviet Union in the 1950s

*Panel 6: Memory of Survival in Soviet exile since the 1940s*

Chair: Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin)

Lidia Zessin-Jurek (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder): Deported Jews in the Polish Memory of Siberia

John Goldlust (Monash University, Melbourne): ‚Victims‘ or ‚Agents‘: Polish Jews in Australia Remember their Wartime Experiences in the Soviet Union

Malgorzata Quinkenstein (University of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznan): Dora Szenfeld: Artist-Woman-Jew and her Everyday Life in Uzbekistan (1941-1945)

*Roundtable Discussion*

Chair: Antony Polonsky (Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw)

Participants: Eliyana R. Adler (Pennsylvania State University, State College) / Krzysztof

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Persak (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw)  
/ Katharina Friedla (Polish Center for Holocaust Research, Warsaw)

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