**Polish-Jewish Refugees in the Soviet Union During War World II and Their Contacts with Jewish Communities Outside the Soviet Union**

 **Naama Seri-Levi**

My research examines Jewish refugees from Poland who spent the years during World War II in the Soviet Union. This refugee population was an important one, with 230,000 of them surviving the war, representing about 70% of all Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust. Building on the subject of my MA thesis, which dealt with the refugees’ lives in the DP camps, the aim of this research is to elucidate the experiences of the Polish refugees who spent the World War II years in the Soviet Union from the beginning of the war until after its end.

World War II’s Polish-Jewish refugees are often examined solely in the context of the Nazis’ mass extermination of Polish Jewry. In contrast, this study seeks to examine the position of the refugees and the development of the attitudes towards them from the perspective of their contemporaries during the war and not in light of the later recognition that these refugees’ escape and/or expulsion ultimately saved them from extermination. This research poses two key questions. First, how did the refugees personally understand and define their situation throughout the war years, especially with respect to the situation of their loved ones who remained in Poland? Second, what did private persons and public institutions among Polish Jewry and Jewish communities know about the refugees’ situation and how did these parties relate to the refugees?

This research focuses on the connections and networks between the refugees and three different Jewish communities: Polish Jews who remained under the Nazi occupation; the *Yishuv* (Jewish settlement) in Mandatory Palestine; and the Jewish community in the United States. During the war years, many of the refugees and deportees residing in the Soviet Union maintained ongoing connections with family, friends and political institutions outside the Soviet Union. The structure for communication included the exchange of correspondence, delivery of packages, requests for information and provision of assistance, immigration activities, international political activities, and more. From this extensive network of communication, we can learn what the refugees knew about the course of the war, how they understood the war, the circumstances of their situation under Soviet rule, and the persecution of Jews and their destruction in occupied Polish territory. These networks also reveal vital information about the efforts of Polish Jews, whose country was divided during the initial period between the Nazis and the Soviets, to maintain the lines of communication among themselves and not be torn apart. In addition, these communications offer evidence of how Jewish communities in the “free world” understood the development of the extermination and means of survival in Eastern Europe.

 The American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), as a leading philanthropic organization, played a major role in various networks between the refugees and the three centers of Poland, the *Yishuv* and the United States. The JDC's different offices maintained contacts with the refugees throughout the war years: during their escape to the Soviet borders at the beginning of the war; while they lived and tried to survive in the vast expanses of the Soviet Union during the war years; and after their return to Poland immediately following the war. The JDC helped by offering social welfare, financial support, package deliveries and maintaining connections between the refugees and their relatives abroad. These activities raise a wide range of issues, such as what methods were employed for administration and the nature of the bureaucratic efforts regarding the refugees. Moreover, these activities enrich our understanding of the various ways in which Jewish communities around the world cooperated in order to assist the refugees. From these efforts, we can also learn about the connections of the JDC with other organizations and associations. Moreover, we can better understand the degree and comprehensiveness of the efforts to help the refugees.

For this research, I have found materials in several JDC Archives collections. First, the New York office’s 1933–1944 collection is the largest and most diverse collection of material regarding the refugees. It holds correspondence with Polish organizations and international organizations, bulletins, lists of names, and reports about the refugees from the very beginning of the war until the liberation of Poland. Second, the Jerusalem office’s 1944–1952 collection contains documents from both the Jerusalem office and the office in Tehran, including correspondence primarily about package deliveries. Third, the Warsaw office’s 1939–1941 collection includes some correspondence with local communities in Poland during the war, and even after 1941, which describes the waves and escape roots of the refugees. Fourth, the Warsaw office’s 1945–1950 collection holds a wealth of documents, including official reports and correspondence on the initial relief and rehabilitation activities with the refugees immediately after their return to Poland following the war. Finally, the Istanbul office’s 1937–1949 collection contains several documents regarding package deliveries.

Due to the immense amount of relevant materials held in these archives, I will need to spend a considerable amount of time at their premises. While some of the collections have been digitized and are searchable online, the main collection, in the New York office’s 1933–1944 collection, can be accessed only at the archives’ computers in Jerusalem or in New York. Living in Jerusalem, I will not incur any flight or accommodation expenses for the Jerusalem research. However, in order to undertake the research, particularly at the archival office in Jerusalem, I will need to take unpaid leave from my full-time place of employment. Consequently, I plan to use the fellowship funds to replace the income lost when I am absent from my other employment.

Over the last few years, I have dedicated most of my time to archival research, and I have uncovered an abundance of valuable and provocative material. I plan to enrich these sources and complete this research phase of the work with the search at the JDC archives. Currently, I am working on the first chapter of my dissertation dealing with the search for missing relatives during the war years, with the goal of completing the dissertation by the end of next year.

Selected bibliography on the topic:

Eliayana R. Adler and Natalia Aleksin, “Seeking Relative Safety: The Flight of Polish Jews to the East in the Autumn of 1939,” in *Yad Vashem Studies* 46 (2018), no. 1, 41–71.

Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Atina Grossmann (eds.), *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union,* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017.

Atina Grosmann, “’Joint Fund Teheran’”: JDC and the Jewish Lifeline to Central Asia, in Avinoam Patt, Atina Grossmann, Linda G. Levi, and Maud S. Mandel (eds.), *The JDC at 100: A Century of Humanitarianism*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019, pp. 205–244.

Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union During World War II*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002.

Josef Litvak, *Polish-Jewish Refugees in the USSR, 1939-1946,* Jerusalem, 1988 [Hebrew].