# "Gypsy-Nomads": The Ongoing Refugeeism of the Jewish-Polish Repatriates

### Introduction

Most Holocaust survivors from amongst Poland's Jewry, some 230,000 people, survived the war as refugees in the Soviet Union. They either fled Nazi occupation, suffered forcible removal, or were trapped there with the arrival of the Soviet occupation. After the war, most returned to Poland as part of a repatriation agreement signed between Poland and the Soviet authorities. Many, however, did not stay in Poland but rather continued westwards, pushing on to displaced persons camps erected primarily in American-occupied regions in Germany and Austria where, they soon became the majority group amongst the camps' population of Jewish displaced persons.

Despite the large volume of Polish-Jewish refugees to survive the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, historians have paid them relatively scant attention.[[1]](#endnote-1) Scholarly attention, however, has recently picked up, with a number of notable studies substantially deepening our knowledge of the circumstances of their flight to the Soviet Union, the fabric of their lives there, and the circumstances of their eventual return to Poland following the repatriation agreements.[[2]](#endnote-2) Relatively few of these studies dealt with the history of the refugees after many of them left Poland and arrived at the displaced persons camps.[[3]](#endnote-3) In this article I seek to shed a broad light on the history of the refugees, from the start of the war until the first years after its end, with a particular focus on the period spent in the displaced persons camps. My principal objective is to answer the following question: How did the Jewish-Polish immigrants' wartime experiences shape their experiences after the war ended?

The main argument that I will present is that refugeehood is a one of the central defining factors of this group. Refugeehood has been foundational to their lives, its imprint borne not only during the war itself but also during subsequent years, until at least 1947. I will seek to demonstrate how this trait is key to understanding some of the weighty decisions many of them made along the way. The uprootedness this group had endured with for many years set it apart from the majority of displaced persons in the camps, principally consisting of survivors of Nazi labour and concentration camps, partisans and individuals who spent the war in hiding. In light of the fact that the immigrants from the Soviet Union constituted a majority amongst Jewish groups in the displacement persons camps, an examination of this group's unique attributes would make inroads into understanding the reality of Jewish existence in Europe post-1945.

The argument regarding the centrality of refugeehood as a central attribute of Polish Jews who spent the war in Soviet territories pertains not only to their formal legal status but to their material, societal, emotional and cognitive states as well.[[4]](#endnote-4) In fact, the very legal-formal definition of refugeehood had only been adopted after the war and in its wake. One of the central components in the legal definition of refugee, adopted in 1951, is the exile from one's native land:

... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country…[[5]](#endnote-5)

Admittedly, this legal definition has been adopted after the events described here took place,[[6]](#endnote-6) but it was formulated in direct reference to preceding events and may therefore be used as a point of departure for the debate to follow.

Repatriates from the Soviet Union numbered in the millions of people, were dispersed across enormous geographic spaces, and were subjected to different circumstances to which they responded in different ways. Attempting to generalize about such a heterogeneous collective seems foolhardy. Still, I wish to propose refugeehood as a central prism through which to we can more acutely perceive and make sense of the conduct of many individuals belonging to this large group.

The article will be structured chronologically: the first part will briefly survey the history of the refugees in the Soviet Union with the aim of ascertaining how and under which circumstances they became refugees, and how refugeehood became a central collective experience affecting their consciousness and shaping their conduct. In the second part I turn to the return of the refugees to Poland following the repatriation accords (in this part, I will be using the term "repatriates" interchangeably with refugees). Most repatriates left Poland shortly afterwards, a point duly discussed in the historical literature on the subject; I will venture a few observations, adding that the experience of living outside Poland during the war also contributed to the subsequent decision not to resettle there when it ended.

In order to substantiate the claim that the experience of refugeehood during the war bore an imprint on the conduct and decisions made afterwards, the third and primary part of the article will focus on the displacement persons' camps. The repatriates' period in the camps will studied primarily through the perspective of two Jewish aid agencies operating in the camps at the time: The Joint and the Jewish Agency. This choice is due to the external, but intimate, perspective these agencies' employees and administrators had on the displaced persons they encountered. In other words, the fact that they themselves did not belong to the group but were enlisted to provide it with care and support allowed them a vantage point from which to observe and remark upon the divisions and differences amongst the different sub-groupings.

### In the Soviet Union

The Jewish-Polish refugeehood in the Soviet Union began in tandem with the outbreak of the second world war and the German invasion of Poland. From the beginning of the war and until the invasion of German to the Polish annexed territories of the Soviet Union in 1941, a total of some 300,000 Jews fled from Poland to Soviet territories.[[7]](#endnote-7) The eastward flight began spontaneously and was prompted by the desire to escape the war's frontlines or in an attempt to re-organize Polish defenses. Jews forcibly expelled by the Nazi invasion forces soon converged into a massive eastern-bound exodus.[[8]](#endnote-8) During the first few months, prior to their being removed by the Soviet authorities, most Jewish refugees continued to reside in the territories of eastern Poland as delineated by the old borders, prior to the Russian invasion and the partition of Poland. This trend created to congestion and overcrowding in the cities, and a prevalent view of the presence of refugees as an aggravation.

As time went on the situation of the refugees steadily deteriorated. Polish currency was devalued, shops emptied, and the black market flourished, particularly amongst the refugees. Jewish refugees were homeless, taking shelter on the streets and depended on soup kitchens or went hungry. Between the refugees there were those who opted to return to German occupied territories due to the impossibly harsh conditions they faced.[[9]](#endnote-9) These might be illustrated by a testimony of a Jewish refugee who fled Lvov:

The situation in the Soviet occupied territories is bleak. In the first months finding any food or sustenance proved to be impossible. Work, too, beyond reach and those lucky few who managed to find employment through "protection" are unable to sustain themselves by the wages they are given for more than a few days. Desperation has taken hold of the residents, and a sizable majority now seeks to return to the German occupation zones if only to fill their empty bellies.[[10]](#endnote-10)

In 1940–1941, tens of thousands of these refugees were arrested and exiled to Siberia and Kazakhstan either for objecting Soviet citizenship, signing up for return trips to Poland, or engaging in Zionist, Bundist, or illicit commercial activity. Similarly, due to a shortage of jobs in the annexed Polish territories, some refugees left on their own accord to work in the Soviet heartland as part of the rapid industrialization project that the Soviet regime had initiated. Harsh conditions in the Soviet labor camps and in the special settlements to which the refugees were exiled caused high rates of morbidity and mortality.[[11]](#endnote-11) The situation of exiled refugees was horrific as they were denied appropriate quarter and sustenance, many of whom found their deaths succumbing to frost and plague in the Northern provinces and in Kazakhstan.

When the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, cooperation between the Soviet authorities and the Polish government-in-exile began. With the establishment of diplomatic relations, former Polish citizens were granted amnesty, and as a result refugees were released from internment, and many opted to migrate southwards, seeking shelter in the southern republics of the Soviet Union, particularly Uzbekistan. The journey was arduous. The refugees, most of whom were physically weak to begin with, were dogged by a lack of supplies and poor weather conditions. Many of those who escaped the Nazi occupation or were evacuated by the Soviets joined the mass movement southward. Some of the refugees enlisted to the Anders Army or to other units in the Red Army.

In order to be eligible for food rations, refugees were required to settle, register their new residences and find employment. As this was seldom possible, migration carried on. Provinces of the Soviet Union from where Jewish-Polish refugees generally did not emigrate southwards, such as Komi province in Siberia, were also riveted by food shortages, subhuman working conditions and endemic hygiene crises. Disease outbreaks took a heavy toll in human lives. The convergent circumstances of prolonged forced migration, sporadic incarceration and disease outbreaks dismembered many families, orphaning many children and dependents. According to an official report of the Polish Embassy in the Soviet Union about Jewish Polish nationals who have registered in one of its stationed outlets, by April 1943 no less than 30% of Jewish-Polish refugees in the Soviet Union had died of starvation, disease and hard labor.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Despite grim living conditions and acute mortality, many young couples got married, brought children into the world, and successfully preserved their families. Some Jews succeeded in being absorbed into the local Soviet socio-economic fabric and some Polish-Jewish refugees married local Jewish women. Impermanency notwithstanding, local religious and cultural initiatives began to form. This, too, distinguishes their situation as refugees: as opposed to prisoners, whose lives are severely curtailed and constantly susceptible to harsh external regimentation and control, they had the possibility to rebuild their lives, despite their precariousness, the hardships they faced and the omnipresent lack of security in their lives.

The experiences of refugeehood for Polish Jews who either fled or were expelled from their homes to the Soviet Union were severe, emotionally and physically. Incertitude and uprootedness were an all-pervasive reality for the entirety of six year-long war. Even when the death and destruction of the war eventually wound down, however, things did not go back to normal.

### The Return to Poland

The refugees' experiences in the Soviet Union are crucial to understanding their lives and the decisions they made following their return to Poland. The return to Poland was not only a formal re-enfranchisement by political entity to which they once belonged, but also signified the aspiration to finally put an end to the tribulations of refugeehood they endured throughout the war. The frustration of this aspiration was understood as contingent upon, and in continuation to, their lives in the Soviet Union rather than as a result of their discovery of the annihilation of Poland's Jewry, and of the loss of their families, relatives and property.

The return of the refugees from the Soviet Union began as early as June 1944, in anticipation of the advancement of the Polish army – which fought alongside the Red Army – into territories formerly belonging to the Polish State, and intensified when treaties were signed with the governments of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. The floodgates were opened following a repatriation agreement signed in July 1945 between the Soviet government and representatives of the "Provisional Government of National Unity," newly installed in Warsaw. The agreement stipulated the repatriation of all Poles who have fled or were expelled to Soviet territories during the war, including Jews, together with their families and any other dependents in their household. This agreement enabled the return of Polish Jews who took residence in the internal provinces of the Soviet Union in Central Asia and Siberia. During 1944-1946 a total of 200,000 Polish Jews repatriated to Poland from the Soviet Union, the majority of whom took the journey in the spring season following the signing, from February to July, 1946.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Upon returning to Poland, the dire situation of the repatriates did not abate. Many wandered the streets in rags, were entirely bereft of material means and were emotionally and physically spent.[[14]](#endnote-14) The long voyage back to Poland was undertaken primarily by overpopulated trains, where the elderly, enfants and invalids crowded the few available and meager cars, and suffered from a shortage of water and food.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Still, Jewish live and Jewish communities from across the country reestablished themselves and even flourished in the first years after the war. [[16]](#endnote-16) Eventually, however, the majority of Poland's Jewry which survived the Holocaust and was repatriated opted to leave Poland before long. From mid-1946 until March 1947, some 140,000 Jews left Poland. [[17]](#endnote-17)

Scholars offered several reasons for this mass emigration: antisemitism, the political split in Poland after the war, psychological duress following the murder of family and relatives, the fact that Poland was soaked with Jewish blood, the dispute over the ownership of Jewish property, an ideological break with Poland following the Holocaust, and the prospering of the Zionist movement.[[18]](#endnote-18) The Zionist westward "flight" is normally described as one caused primarily by a convergence of fear of antisemitism and successful Zionist canvassing efforts amongst survivors who repatriated to Poland or were liberated there by the Red Army. [[19]](#endnote-19) Such explanations, though important, fail to account for the weight of expatriates' wartime experiences on these subsequent decisions.[[20]](#endnote-20) I propose that their long experience of rootlessness in years prior and their lives as refugees during the war itself were also factors in their decision not to resettle in Poland.

The possibility that refugee live was a central contributive factor in the decision to leave Poland was already raised by Luba Levita, the Jewish Yishuv in Mandatory Palestine National Committee’s emissary to Poland and the DP camps in 1946:

Comrades! We must not decipher this too superficially. They flee not only the scepter of physical annihilation. […] they flee because they no longer have traction, because have been displaced well before having arrived at the displaced persons camps […] even 200,000 Polish Jews who returned to Poland with the repatriation from the Soviet Union, even these 200,000 have not returned to their homes. In the real, straightforward sense of the word, not in its literal sense; subjectively, personally, they have not returned home […]

And these scores of thousands of Polish Jews, upon returning to Poland – came back to a faraway, distant, strange land, which, even had it been awash with the love of Israel and had they been universally welcomed by all – they would have felt as if they returned to a land not their own, to a place to which they have no connection whatsoever, not only in the future or the present, but also past connection.

In Levita’s view, the manifestations of anti-Semitism were not the only reason that the repatriates had left Poland. He believes that, formally, although many of the repatriates did return to the political figure "Poland," it could not be said that they returned to their homeland. They did not find anything resembling what they had previously known: not only because their communities, for the most part, had been destroyed, leaving them with no one and nothing to return to, but also due to another fact -- geography.

The large Jewish public from the Soviet Union arrived in more than 200 train transports during the months of February-July, 1946. Over 70% of the trains were sent to what the Polish government designated as "recovered territories", namely lower Silesia and to Szczecin, both of which were regions annexed to Poland following Germany's capitulation at the end of the war. [[21]](#endnote-21) Most repatriates thus found themselves required to rebuild their lives in an environment they never called home and, indeed, was not even a part of Poland before the war. In the few months spanning between the liberation of these territories and the end of the war and until the arrival of the repatriates, the Germans who inhabited the region were uprooted and a Polish culture began taking form, whereby Jewish-Polish communities also began being established. In this regard, the designation of "repatriates" was inappropriate, as they were not repatriated back to their homeland, but rather were transplanted to a region foreign to them. Part of the repatriates sent to these areas soon left lower Silesia and proceeded to migrate across Poland. In fact, a majority of repatriates continued their uprooted existence and did not settle.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Apart from being sent to new territories formerly unknown to them, many repatriates were forced to grapple with new and exceptional hardships. Even though other Jews also endured a state commensurate to refugeehood, [[23]](#endnote-23) the repatriates were refugees in the stricter sense of the word: they fled their country during the war and had endured an uprooted existence in exile for the duration of the hostilities. Repatriates also faced difficulties stemming from their earlier sojourn in the Soviet Union, the timing of their return to Poland and from the fact that aid agencies and Jewish communities were unprepared to resettle so many people in such a short period of time. [[24]](#endnote-24) In Poland, at that time, a political struggle raged on about, inter alia, the relationship between the new regime and the Soviet Union, and Jewish repatriates were often scapegoated as suspected agents of the Soviet regime. Rumors held that the transportation of the Jews from the Soviet Union came at the expense of non-Jewish repatriates led to assaults against trains ferrying Jews. Repatriates, many of whom were elderly and children who were yet to acclimatize in their new environments in the first several months, were also a common and easy target for attacks.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Alongside the many reasons given consideration in the literature for the mass exodus of Jews from Poland, one might equally point to additional pull factors unique to repatriates: their poor physical condition after the long years of exile; the fact that they did not return to regions from which they were originally expelled but to new territories to which they were unaccustomed; hostile reactions on behalf of the local population, part of which stemming to the fact that they came from the Soviet Union, and their vulnerability as targets. All these are results of their refugeehood, and, contrary to their expectation, their long years of up rootedness did not come to an end with the end of the war.

### In the Displaced Persons Camps

After the failed attempt to settle in Poland, the refugees continued wandering. They arrived at the displaced persons camps in Germany, Austria and Italy, and from there they hoped to continue to mandatory Palestine or to other countries, depending on the availability of destination countries and immigration laws. The assessment that "[…] they were remaining for a limited period only" was commonly held amongst the aid agencies charged with their resettlement. [[26]](#endnote-26) As we shall see, this optimistic initial assessment, too, was soon invalidated as the repatriates were forced to, or chose to in light of the limited options they faced, stay in the displaced persons camps for a longer duration than expected.

The large majority of the repatriates made their way to American-controlled areas, where, unlike in the British-controlled areas, they were admitted due to an American policy of ensuring the free movement of refugees. Still, only Jews who were present in the American controlled areas in February 1946 were granted official recognition as displaced persons, a status enabling them access to free shelter, clothing and food. Unlike Jews captured in territories formerly controlled by the Nazi regime who were classified as "refugees", Jewish repatriates from the Soviet Union were classified "persecuted persons". This different classification assured and officialized the uniquely aggravated precarity to which they were subjected. They were termed "illegal aliens", persons secretly and deceitfully stealing the border. Still, in practice, the Americans tolerated repatriates entering territories under their control and provided them with similar rights and aid as extended to displaced persons. [[27]](#endnote-27) The Joint, one of the central aid agencies in the displaced persons camps, referred to the repatriates as "refugees", using the term in several of its reports. [[28]](#endnote-28)

By definition, all those who resided in the displaced persons camps homeless and uprooted. Nevertheless, the repatriates were deemed to have chosen to flee after having been duly reinstated in their homeland, in what became one of the characteristics that distinguished them from many of the displaced persons camps' Jewish residents,who were liberated on German and Austrian land.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The enrollment of the Polish-Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union at the displaced persons camps stood in opposition to the overarching repatriation policy of returning refugees and prisoners of war to their countries of origin, a process begun as early as mid-1944 (as opposed to the later repatriation agreements between Poland and the Soviet Union mentioned before). [[30]](#endnote-30) By the time the refugees had arrived from Poland to the displaced persons camps, most prisoners have already been released by the Allied forces and had returned to their homes. [[31]](#endnote-31) The infusion of new immigrants into the camps led to their being refilled when the number of Displaced persons was already in decline,[[32]](#endnote-32) and strained UNRRA's resources. Thus, apart from the necessity of providing elementary support to thousands of refugees who were originally slated to be repatriated to Poland and be dealt with there, the difficulties of absorbing them caused an administrative and financial ripple effect which proved detrimental to all the repatriation efforts of UNRRA across the continent. Polish Jews were ostensibly a group provided for by being repatriated to Polish-controlled territories, and were therefore not scheduled for treatment by UNRRA; their massive exodus from Poland and continued displacement caught international aid agencies poorly prepared.

When repatriates arrived at the displacement persons camps they encountered other displaced Jews who have been residing in the camps since the end of the war. The camps' administrators clearly distinguished between the newly arriving repatriates and the older camp residents. Thus, for instance, Koppel S. Pinson, the educational director of the Joint in the displaced persons camps in Germany and Austria from October 1945 until September 1946, described the displaced persons camps' population as consisting of three distinct groups:

1. Survivors of concentration and labor camps liberated by Allied forces. In his assessment, this group consisted of some 60,000 Jews, men and women aged

2. Partisans who have joined the first group since fall 1945. He mentioned them to be young men and women and considered them to be in better psychological condition than those held in the camps. Few children also belonged to this group.

3. "aliens" or "illegals": persons who never resided in Germany before hand. They fled the Nazi invasion into the Soviet Union, returned to Poland but were unable to settle there and pushed on westward. (the scope of this group will be discussed later).

The repatriates, whose condition conformed to Pinson's the third group, were considered to be the healthiest of all groups then residing in Germany due to the fact that it included a substantial portion of children and the elderly, and that throughout the war they maintained cultural and social activities – this, unlike the survivors from the concentration and labor camps, who consisted primarily of men and women in working ages.[[33]](#endnote-33) The Zionist agents from Palestine, too, considered this group to be healthier and more vivacious and communicated their intention to extract them quickly from the displaced persons camp and resettle them in permanent settlements.[[34]](#endnote-34)

When these to central groups are juxtaposed – the prisoners of the Nazi regime vis-à-vis the refugees from the Soviet Union – one might begin to understand why the latter were considered by the agents to be "better". The fact that they were refugees, and not prisoners, allowed them to maintain familial life and nurture cultural and social cohesion. Alongside the "positive" traits, it is evident that the repatriates had endured many hardships due to their prolonged exile and uprootedness which had laid their mark. The agents of the aid agencies were impressed by the physical and psychological condition which distinguished them from other groups that coinhabited the camps. By the end of 1946, a few months after the arrival of the large wave of repatriates to the displaced persons camps, Haim Avni, an agent operating in the camps commented:

It has been three or four months since the first repatriates arrived here, on German soil. Seven years of uprootedness and meanderings under their belts. Exodus from Poland to the depths of Russia and back – and still no end in sight. These are the offspring of the remainders, discovered only after the borders were redrawn. Clasping their bundles in their hands, their backs bent from the weight of the burden, deep furrows rivet their faces. A trope of vagabonds. With them young and old children, whose speech is Russian or Ukranian, and place of birth far away, in distant Asia… behind them years of separation form the land, of a live of misery and cruel fight for survival in the Asian steppes and the Russian deserts, an ocean of indentured labor. The lives of flocks and transit camps.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Later, Avni explicitly refers to the refugeehood as a defining factor of the repatriates, acknowledging the duality of their situation:

The concept of "refugee" we envisage as something transitory, unstable and passing. Every Jew was once a refugee, if not himself, then his father, and if not literally then allegorically. This essence of the refugee is close and understandable to us all, but never as a phenomenon of multiple years. And here are Jews in the camps who have been meandering here and there for six or seven years. First from Poland to Russia, then receding into Asia and back to American Germany – a permanent migration. And these Jews have confidence enough even in such circumstances to erect families, raise children.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The repatriates’ arrival from Poland to the American occupation zones in Germany and Austria greatly increased the Jewish population in the displaced persons camps. By the end of 1946, those repatriates accounted for two-thirds of the overall Jewish population in the DP camps. In the American occupation zone in Germany, the number of Jewish displaced persons increased almost four times in less than a year, from 40,000 at the beginning of 1946 to about 145,000 in the end of the same year.[[37]](#endnote-37) In the American zone in Austria, their numbers increased five times between the end of 1945 and the end of 1946 up to about 28,000.[[38]](#endnote-38) This massive influx changed much about life in the camps. I will shortly focus on the material scarcity this tremendous created in the camps.[[39]](#endnote-39)

The sharp, rapid rise in the population of Jewish DPs caused serious hardship for the aid organizations. The Polish-Jewish repatriates arrived at the DP camps after weeks of travelling from the Soviet Union to Germany and Austria, and after years of wandering, hunger, and illness. They were exhausted, starving, and in some cases also ill, and they had few, if any, possessions.

Immediately upon their arrival in the displaced persons camps, the deprivation and exhaustion of these new displaced persons were readily apparent. A letter sent to the secretary of the Joint in New York described their arrival to the camps:

This morning about 1200 men women and children arrived in the new camp of Mikelsdorf. What they found is a tent city build on an air field. Each person was issued two blankets and nothing else. There is no running water and a rowe [!] of latrines was built in the middle of the camp. Field kitchens are used to feed the people. The group which came today is just a part of the 5000 expected in this installation which is to be run by the army [… ]

We found hundreds of people walking around the field tired and with no spirit. They had been brought here on box cars from Puch, Austria. Many of them had been travelling for weeks, coming from Russia and Poland. All of them were poorly dressed and had few belongings; many were too exhausted, and asleep on the cots.

There are a little more than 200 children in this group and the army had no special food for them. We saw long lines of people standing in the rain for their food. There were not enough mess kits and the people got their food in tin cans.… Young and old, sick and healthy, they had all been herded in the box cars…[[40]](#endnote-40)

Some of the Polish Jews who arrived in the summer of 1946 to the American occupation zone in Germany were housed in functioning camps that were already populated by displaced persons, such as, Bad Reichenhall, Ulm, Pocking Pine City, Bensheim and Hessisch Lichtenau complex. Since the existing camps were unable to accommodate all the incoming displaced persons , some camps were converted from makeshift shelters intended to house displaced persons in transit for a few nights into permanent camps, such as the camps Hof and Ainring. The expansion of the existing camps, however, could not match the pace of the population increase, and this led to the quick establishment of new camps in August 1946, such as Ziegenhaim, Hofgeismar and Hasenecke. However, these camps had also proven insufficient to provide for all the new arrivals. As new camps could not be immediately opened, the US army set up two tent camps.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Haim Yahil (then named Haim Hoffman) was the director of the “Relief Units” (in Hebrew, *plugot ha-sa`ad*), the official delegation of the Jewish Agency and the Jewish *Yishuv* in Mandatory Palestine operating under the auspices of UNRRA. In October, after visiting camps in Austria, he wrote a letter to his wife Leni, later one of the most influential Israeli Holocaust historians. He wrote:

The new camps in Austria are in a horrible state. I saw one camp that consisted of dilapidated shacks housing 700 people…with 3-5 families living in a single room. Later, I saw a military base in Salzburg with large rooms and bunk-beds, with 40-60 people in each room – men, women, and children. In the infirmary, a man suffering from a throat infection, a baby, and an elderly woman were lying beside one another.

[…] I later observed a similar situation in two new camps near Frankfurt [...] It is truly appalling. If we do not rectify the situation quickly the winter can be expected to bring many illnesses, and I am concerned about the possible death of babies and toddlers.

The opening of the gates of the American zone to the Jews of Poland is a great thing and has enabled almost 100,000 Jews to leave Poland. It was paid for, however, with much suffering. Many children are [wearing] out [clothes] and are barefoot.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Not only had the relief organizations noticed the severe conditions in the camps, so did the veteran displaced persons and the Central Committee – the chief organization of “Sherith HaPleta” (the surviving remnant) in the American zone. In the “Unzer Weg” newspaper of September 6 1946, the Central Committee published an announcement saying that “helping the refugees is the present need” because of the harsh conditions in the new camps and the transit camps for the new refugees coming from Poland.[[43]](#endnote-43) Another article from August 1946 described the severe conditions in one of the new camps for children, stating ironically that the conditions of the orphanage in Russia during the difficult days of the war in Leningrad were 'much better' when compared to the conditions in which children presently endured in the displaced persons camps .[[44]](#endnote-44)

During the year between the liberation of the camps and the arrival of the repatriates, a cooperative effort between the organizations working in the camps and the American military authorities managed to improve the condition of the concentration camps survivors. As a result, by the time the repatriates arrived in the displaced persons camps, they were in comparatively worse condition than that of the former prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps. The authorities addressed the very poor condition of the repatriates, for instance, by spending more per day on their food, clothing, supplies, shelter, and medicine than they did for veteran displaced persons – those who had been living in the displaced persons camps for some time: In Austria, the War Department spent some 43 cents a day in care per repatriate, while spending only 32 cents a day per veteran displaced person.[[45]](#endnote-45) According to one noteworthy report, even a year after the arrival of the repatriates to the camps, children who were born in Russia and were repatriated with their parents suffered, on aggregate, from worse health than children born in the displaced persons camps.[[46]](#endnote-46)

The repatriates were ostensibly supposed to spend a short period of time in the displaced persons camps before being permanently resettled: Palestine, the United States or other destinations. Immigration to Palestine or to the United States, however, was illegal at the time. The British mandate provided only a few immigration certificates for Palestine, and the United States limited the ability of displaced persons in general and repatriates in particular to immigrate there. This state of affairs changed only in the second half of 1948 with the concurrent establishment of the State of Israel and legal amendments regarding immigration being passed in the US Congress. [[47]](#endnote-47)

In the meanwhile, repatriates had the option to leave the camps and search individually for more comfortable interim housing arrangements. Still, despite the poor conditions, many repatriates chose to remain in the DP camps and to cease their efforts to find a better place to live. There were a number of reasons for this decision: The fact that the transit camps provided maximum protection and comprehensive care and the fact that the DP camps served not only as a place of refuge but also as a meeting place for friends and acquaintances from the old days, with whom they did not want to lose contact again.

Moreover, an essential reason was the fact that, as we have seen, the repatriates had been moving around as refugees with their children almost without a break for seven or eight consecutive years: from Poland to the Soviet Union, then within the vast expanse of that country, from the Soviet Union to Poland, and from Poland to Germany or Austria. Their refusal to move into more comfortable camps also stemmed from their desire to finally settle down in one place, and from the difficulty of continuing to move around with their families and children as they did for many years.[[48]](#endnote-48) In addition, the camps were, by definition, an intermediate station on the way to other destinations. As a result, many saw no point in moving to another interim facility in order to temporarily improve their living conditions. Instead, they preferred to wait what they expected to be a short period of time in dreadful conditions before moving on to their permanent destination.[[49]](#endnote-49)

This decision to stay despite of the poor conditions in the camps may be taken as further evidence of the significance of their experiences during the war. Temporality and refugeehood were primal factors of life even after the war ended.

As time passed, the conditions improved in the displaced persons camps to which the repatriates came. There was an effort to try and find work and professional training for the displaced persons, and the children began attending school. Nonetheless, the long waiting period was hard for all the camp residents, and the difficult toll taken by ongoing migration was particularly evident in the case of the repatriates: not only due to their present situation, which had actually improved as time passed, but because of their years of wandering before arriving at the camps. This is seen from the testimony of Yitzhak Kaminski, one of the emissaries sent by the Relief Units, written in Bavaria on August 21, 1947:

I spoke with a number of camp residents. Practically all of them are Jews who fled to Russia at the beginning of the war, returned to Poland at the end of the war, and erupted into the flight to Germany. Like many others living in the camps, these people are unique in character in comparison to the groups of Jews currently living in Germany. […]

The unique aspect that strikes you most when you meet Jews who have returned from Russia is the fact that they are Gypsy-nomads.

Individuals and families wandered thousands of kilometers. For years on end, they could not find a roof to put over their heads. [....]

In the eyes of the child who was born on the road, the young man and woman who have prematurely grown old, and the middle aged uncle whose wrinkles have prematurely deepened and multiplied – our suffering, our tragedy stares back at us.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Coming about two years after the war’s end, Kaminski still saw the Polish refugees from the Soviet Union as having a “very unique character.” He looks into their faces and sees their many years of wandering, as “Gypsy-nomads.”

### Conclusion

One of the most salient characteristic of Polish Jews who spent the war years in the Soviet Union was that of being refugees who had left their homes early, at the start of the war and escaped to the Soviet Union and had wandered within that country, then from there back to Poland and from Poland to the displaced persons camps, which served as only a way station. The experience of many years living as refugees left its indelible mark on them and therefore, even when they arrived at the camps after the war. This trait was apparent, and it distinguished them from the rest of the survivors living in the camps. Understanding this important characteristic can contribute to better understanding the steps they took, such as leaving Poland after repatriation and their choice to remain within the displaced persons camp system. It can complement the already existing research, which thoroughly discusses the impact of various other push and pull factors in the migration of Jewish-Polish repatriates.

The importance of research on this group becomes evident when realizing that from the end of 1946, this group comprised the majority of the DP camp Jewish population in Germany and Austria and thus, understanding the unique experiential profile of this group has great importance for understanding Jewish life in Europe immediately following World War II.

1. משהו קלאסי שבכל זאת קדם לגל הנוכחי [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. לציין כמה מאמרים, את הקובץ של גרוסמן ואת הכנס באוקטובר 2018 בוורשה שהוא הראשון שעוסק בנושא הזה באופן בלעדי. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. יוקוש ולוינסקי, נסלרודט, אני. לוינסקי על פולנים במחנות ללא התמקדות בקבוצה זו. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. פראודפוט 21, מארוס 3-4, 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The basis for the 1951 definition is in explicit reference to events prior to January 1951, but in the ratification of this treaty in 1967 these references were dropped, and it is this later version which is routinely evoked in international law today. In recent years additional definitions were added by the UN such as "internally displaced persons", denoting those who endured similar persecution but had not crossed an international border in flight. For the history of the concept of the refugee see מארוס 5-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. By the end of the war the concepts "refugee" and "displaced person" were legally ratified together with different definitions by UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) and later by the IRO (International Refugee Organization). Holian 43-48, Proudfoot 402-406, Displaced Persons and Refugees in Germany 445-468. "Refugees" was primarily used to denote German citizens, whereas other people who found themselves in Germany and Austria and brought there by the Nazi regime were defined as "displaced persons". The Jews released by the Allied forces were indeed defined "displaced persons", though their status was more akin to what we refer to today as "refugee". להפנות לכמה ספרים [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The number of the refugees from Poland who fled to the Soviet Union has been discussed extensively and this figure is generally agreed upon. See: [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The latest article dealing with gender, family, class and geographical questions regarding that issue is: Eliayana R. Adler and Natalia Aleksin, "Seeking Relative Safety: The Flight of Polish Jews to the East in the Autumn of 1939", *Yad Vashem Studies, 46 (1)* 2018, 41-71 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. הפניה לאליענה ואולי לליטבק? [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. " Greetings from the two occupied territories in Poland", HaBoker, of May 17, 1940, p. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. להפנות לערך ביד ושם [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Since not all refugees enlisted in government offices it is impossible to ascertain the full extent of the loss of life across the Soviet Union during that time. The death rates amongst the enlistees, however, is very high. Report on the relief accorded to Polish citizens by the Polish Embassy in the U.S.S.R., with special reference to Polish citizens of Jewish Nationality, September, 1941-April, 1943, Poland. Ambasada (Russia) ; 1943 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In June 1946, the American Advisor for Jewish Affairs, the Rabbi Phillip Bernstein, reported to the Jewish American committee that he had received reports that those who repatriated from Russia to Poland were "returning destitute and find living conditions practically hopeless". [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Hanna Shlomi, "The Reception and Settelment of Jewish Repatriants from the Soviet Union in Lower Silesia, 1946", *Gal-Ed,* XVII (2000), 85-104. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. הפניות למחקרים חשובים [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Lucjan Dobroszycki, *Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland: A Portrait Based on Jewish Community Records 1944-1947,* New-York 1994. 27.

    Of course, not all Jews who were repatriated to Poland sought to continue westwards. Some rebuilt their lives there due to ideological or political reasons such as the Bundists, others similarly tried to rebuild their lives and took advantage of aid extended to Jews in their new quarters. Part of the new Jewish communities, such as in Worclaw/Berlsaw, and Dzierżoniów/Reichenbach, flourished and prospered during these years. Some Jews opted to remain in Poland after 1949 and even after 1968. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. קוז'מינסקה-פרילק makes the connection between disparate wartime experiences and the absorption of survivors in Poland after the war, and discusses the repatriates from the Soviet Union at length. Amongst the subjects she discusses are the shock of the discovery of the scope of the destruction and murder, the difficulty of reclaiming property and anti-Semitic harassment.

    הפניה למאמר הנוסף שגם בו יש התמקדות בקשיים. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Lucjan Dobroszycki, *Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland: A Portrait Based on Jewish Community Records 1944-1947,* New-York 1994. 22; Hanna Shlomi, "The Reception and Settelment of Jewish Repatriants from the Soviet Union in Lower Silesia, 1946", *Gal-Ed,* XVII (2000), [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The migrations within Poland was not a fate exclusive to repatriates but also to other Jewish Poles. Many of them left the villages, which were emptied during the war from most of their Jewish populations, and resettled in the cities. Many had also toured the country in search for their relatives. See [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Blatman described the situation of all Polish Jews after the war as that of refugees, although they did not meet the criteria of living outside of the country's international border. Daniel Blatman, "Outlanders in Their Home – Polish Jews from Lublin (1944) to Kielce (1946), in: *The Holocaust – History and Memory. Essays Presented in Honor of Israel Gutman,* Yad Vashem and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 2001, 162-186. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Arieh J. Kochavi, *Post-Holocaust Politics: Britain, The United States, and Jewish Refugees, 1945-1948, Chapel Hill 2001, 43-51, 138-143.*; קוניגסאדר ווצל, מחכים לתקווה, עמ' 49.

    A shift in this policy occurred in April 1947 when it was determined that although the borders will not be closed, any person crossing into the American-occupied territory of their own volition will not be admitted to the displaced persons camps and will not be offered aid. This shift primarily affected the Jews of Romania and Hungary more than those of Poland, since most have already been admitted to the camps by that time. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Letter from Mr. Leo W. Schwartz to Mr. J. H. Withing, "Re: Report on Influx of Jews Into U.S. Zone of Occupation in Germany in August 1946"., September 1, 1946. JDC NY AR194554/4/32/6/318; "Report No. 386, "Report of Salsburg Area Feb. 1946 – Dec. 1946", December 10, 1946, NY AR194554/4/17/8/112; UNRRA used a different legal definition for refugees,

    Anna Holian, Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism: Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2011, 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. There was a small group of ex-camp prisoners who returned to Poland after the war and later emigrated to the displaced persons camps. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. There were, admittedly, groups of Eastern Europeans who were unwilling to return to their homes, particularly due to their fears from the new regimes in their countries, which now also included the Jewish repatriates from Poland. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. George Woodbridge, *UNRRA: The History of The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, Colombia University Press, New York, 1950, 422-423.* [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Koppel S. Pinson, "Jewish Life in Liberated Germany: A Study of the Jewish DP's", *Jewish Social Studies*, 9/2 (1947), 101-126, here: 103-105. The numbers of children were increased after the repatriates arrived at the DP camps, because many of them came in family structure. At the end of 1946, 4.5% of the Jewish displaced persons population was babies under the age of one, 4% were between the ages of one and five, and almost 12% were between the ages of six and seventeen. Not only did the population of children grow; so did the middle-aged and older adult population, which had almost no presence in the DP camps prior to the arrival of the repatriates and after their arrival it was increased at least four-fold. Mankowitz, Life Between Memory and Hope, p. 19. Keynan, Holocaust Survivors and the Emissaries, p. 80 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Naama Seri-Levi, "These People are Unique": The Repatriates in the Displaced Persons Camps 1946-1947**,** *Moreshet* 14 (2017), 49-100 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Avni, *With Jews in the D.P. Camps, 36* [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Hayim Avni, *With Jews in the D.P. Camps,* Sde-Nachum, Ghetto Fighters' House, 1981 [Hebrew], 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Avinoam Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Detroit, 2009), p. 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ada Schein, *Health in Temporary Conditions: Health Care Services for Holocaust Survivors in Austria, 1945-1953, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2010* [Hebrew]*, 23f., 136.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. הפניה לעצמי ועוד. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Letter from American Joint Distribution Committee to Mr. Levitt, August 23, 1946, NY AR194554/4/32/6/318. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Letter from Mr. Leo W. Schwartz to Mr. J. H. Withing, "Re: Report on Influx of Jews Into U.S. Zone of Occupation in Germany in August 1946"., September 1, 1946. JDC NY AR194554/4/32/6/318. For more information on each one of the cmps see: Angelika Königseder and Juliane Wetzel, Waiting for Hope: Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-World War II Germany, Illinois 2001 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Letter from Haim Yahil to Leni Yahil, October 23, 1946, CZA A382/49, pp. 226-227 (Hebrew). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. " קאמוניקאט פון צ.ק", אונדזער וועג וואכנשריפט, 6 סעפטעמבער 1946, מספר 48, עמ' 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. "אין די נייע יידישע לאגערן", שם, עמ' 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Report No. 389 , February 2, 1947, JDC NY AR194554/4/17/8/112. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. ש. בן יהודה לסוכנות היהודית, wasseralfingen, August 22, 1947, CZA S86/284. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. The Displaced Persons Act from 1948 provided for the legal framework for immigratory options only of those who were registered in the displaced persons camps prior to December 22, 1945, thus effectively leaving the repatriates beyond the pale of the law. This changed in 1950, when the US Congress lifted the geographical and chronological limitations which curtailed repatriates' immigration there. See: [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. להוסיף הפניה מתוך מה שמופיע בתזה ובמאמר הראשון. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Yitzhak Kaminsky, On a Yishuv Mission to the Displaced Persons Camps in Germany, 1946-1947 (Haifa, 1984/85), p. 68 (Hebrew). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)