# “Gypsy-Nomads”:

# The Ongoing Refugeeism of the Polish-Jewish Repatriates after World War II

### Introduction

Most Holocaust survivors from amongst Poland's Jewry, some 230,000 people[[1]](#footnote-1), 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 repatriation agreements signed between Poland and the Soviet authorities. Many, however, did not stay in Poland but rather continued westwards, pushing on to displaced persons (henceforth DP) camps erected primarily in American-occupied regions in Germany and Austria where they soon became the majority group amongst the camps' population of Jewish DPs.

Despite the large volume of Polish-Jewish refugees to survive the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, historians have paid them relatively scant attention.[[2]](#footnote-2) 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.[[3]](#footnote-3) Relatively few of these studies dealt with the history of the refugees after many of them left Poland and arrived at the DP camps.[[4]](#footnote-4) 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 DP camps. My principal objective is to answer the following question: How did the Polish-Jewish refugees' wartime experiences shape their experiences after the war ended?

The main argument that I will present is that refugeeism is one of the central defining factors of this group. Refugeeism 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 seek to demonstrate how this trait is a key to understanding some of the weighty decisions many of them made along the way, not only during the war years but also after it ended. Those unique and continues experiences can offer a new periodization of the war regarding the refugees. The uprootedness this group had endured for many years set it apart from other groups of DPs in the camps, principally consisting of survivors of Nazi labor and concentration camps, partisans and individuals who spent the war in hiding. These groups preceded the repatriates in the DP camps. In light of the fact that after their arrival to the DP camps the refugees from the Soviet Union constituted a majority amongst Jewish groups in the DP 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 refugeeism 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.[[5]](#footnote-5) The escape or deportation from the homeland left those people not only with no physical or legal protections of their country but also with lack or damaged basic needs[[6]](#footnote-6), such as personal security and proper living conditions or sources of income and satisfactory food supply. Moreover, the basic state of mind for the majority of this group was temporariness – waiting for the end of the war, to their return to Poland or to move to the next way station. Even though the refugees who spent the war years in the Soviet Union numbered hundreds of thousands of people, were dispersed across enormous geographic spaces, and were subjected to different circumstances to which they responded in different ways, I wish to propose refugeeism 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 very legal-formal universal definition of "who is a refugee" had only been adopted after the war, in 1951, and in its wake[[7]](#footnote-7) as The United Nations Convention on the Status of the Refugees.[[8]](#footnote-8) One of the central components in the legal definition of the refugee, is the exile from one's native land:

[...] Any person who 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 […][[9]](#footnote-9)

Admittedly, this legal definition has been adopted after the events described here took place, 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. [[10]](#footnote-10)

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 refugeeism 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 and onward, I will be using the term "repatriates" interchangeably with refugees). Even though part of the Polish Jews, including the repatriates, tried to reestablish the Jewish life in Poland, and few communities succeeded doing so, still many repatriates left Poland shortly afterwards, This point duly discussed in the historical literature on the subject, however I will venture a few observations, adding that the experience of living outside Poland during the war as refugees also contributed to the subsequent decision not to resettle there when it ended.

In order to substantiate the claim that the experience of refugeeism 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 DP camps. Along the whole article I will use also some testimonies and memories of the refugees themselves, however the repatriates' period in the camps will be studied primarily through the perspective of two Jewish aid agencies operating in the camps at the time: The AJDC (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) and the Zionist Jewish Agency. This choice is due to the external, but intimate, perspective these agencies' employees and administrators had on the DPs 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 DP camps.

### In the Soviet Union

The Polish-Jewish refugeeism in the Soviet Union began in tandem with the outbreak of World War II and the German invasion of Poland. From the beginning of the war until the German invasion of Polish annexed territories of the Soviet Union in 1941, a total of about 300,000 Jews fled from Poland to Soviet territories.[[11]](#footnote-11) 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. To this massive eastern-bound exodus was soon joined also Jews forcibly expelled by the Nazi invasion forces.[[12]](#footnote-12) During the first few months, prior to their removal 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 led 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.[[13]](#footnote-13) These can be illustrated by a testimony of a Jewish refugee who fled to 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 zone if only to fill their empty bellies.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In 1940–1941, tens of thousands of these refugees, Jews and non-Jews alike,[[15]](#footnote-15) were arrested and exiled to Siberia and Kazakhstan either for objecting to Soviet citizenship, signing up for return trips to Poland, or engaging in political movements such as Zionism or Bund, or illicit commercial activity[[16]](#footnote-16). 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. The situation of exiled refugees was horrific as they were denied appropriate quarter and sustenance; many of them found their deaths succumbing to frost and epidemics in the Northern provinces and in Kazakhstan. Natan Grinboim, then 13 years old refugee from Katowice, described the terrible condition in the north in his late memoirs:

The bread ration, which every worker received, was negligible. Its size was related […] to the work quota. In the frost and snow conditions, almost no one could reach even one full quota. Service workers and those who did not go to work received much less. Other supplies were also restricted. People had colds and pneumonia. Death from disease and starvation became an almost daily spectacle. It hit mostly the elderly and the children[[17]](#footnote-17).

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; 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 different 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 (such as Komi province in Siberia) where Polish-Jewish refugees remained, having chosen not to emigrate southwards, were also riveted by food shortages, subhuman working conditions and endemic hygiene crises. Disease outbreaks took a heavy toll on human lives. The convergent circumstances of prolonged forced migration, sporadic incarceration and disease outbreaks dismembered many families, orphaning many children and dependents. Years after, Rivka Agron-Wolf described this horrible life existence:

The hunger stings, but there is nothing to eat. The authorities allotted rice in small portions. There is no soap. Well, at least there is water. People are dying. Everyday there are less and less friends and acquaintances around us. Father is very ill. Twice already he was hospitalized in Bukhara, but there as well there is no food nor medicine. Everything goes to the army. In the hospital, you lie on a planks bed without a mattress […] Father returned from there exhausted. He preferred to die on the floor in the privacy of his room and receive a Jewish burial, which would be impossible were he to die in the hospital at Bukhara.[[18]](#footnote-18)

According to Litvak, about 35 to 40 percent of all Polish-Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union had died of starvation, disease and hard labor.[[19]](#footnote-19)

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. Very few of the refugees secretly took part in political activities or became part of the pro-Soviet Polish organizations. This, too, distinguishes their situation as refugees: as opposed to prisoners, whose lives are severely curtailed and constantly susceptible to harsh external regimentation, the refugees had the possibility to rebuild their lives, despite their precariousness, the hardships they faced and the omnipresent lack of security in their lives.[[20]](#footnote-20) Despite the improvement in some aspects of life for part of the refugees many continued to live with strong feelings of transience and were waiting for war to end and to go back to their homeland.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The experiences of refugeeism 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 the 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 the political entity to which they once belonged, but also signified the aspiration to finally put an end to the tribulations of refugeeism 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 and not only 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 mass repatriation was started following a repatriation agreement signed in July 1945 between the Soviet government and representatives of the "Polish 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 had taken residence in the internal provinces of the Soviet Union in Central Asia and Siberia. During 1944–1946 a total of about 200,000 Polish Jews repatriated to Poland from the Soviet Union, the majority of whom took the journey from February to July, 1946.[[22]](#footnote-22) Rivka A gron–Wolf,whose memoirs on the harsh life experiences in Bukhara was given above, described her return to Poland:

רכבת בקר שדמתה להפליא לרכבת שהובילה אותי לסיביר, החזירה אותי מן השבי הרוסי אל החופש על אדמת פולניה. הזמן היה סתיו 1946. הגעתי את העיר ליגניצה בחבל שלונסק. ליגנציה הייתה ידועה לפנים ביופייה, וכעת דמתה לסדום ועמורה, כמו ערים רבות אחרות. קרונות הרכבת היו מאוכלוסים עד אפס מקום, ומתוכם נהרו החוצה צעירים וזקנים תשושים, שנשענים על מקלות או על זרועות בניהם שגדלו בסיביר. שני דורות שבעי סבל שהזדקנו טרם זמנם, אחזו ביד אחת את צאצאיהם החיוורים, וביד השניה את מיטלטליהם העלובים, צעירים בני עשרה, שהתחנכו בבתי יתומים פולניים או רוסיים, רצים וממהרים ללא סיבה נראית לעין. שיכנו את כולנו בבניין אחד הרוס, בניין רב קומתי. נותרו בו רק יחידות דיור אחדות, שהדלתות והחלונות נעקרו מהן כמו שיניים רקובות. זה הבית אשר המולדת הישנה-חדשה נתנה לאזרחיה ששבו אליה מן השבי בסיביר. כפני הבית נסוכי העצב, ההרס והאובדן, הייתה גם תחושתי.[[23]](#footnote-23)

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[[24]](#footnote-24). For example, in June 1946, the American Advisor for Jewish Affairs to the U.S. Army commander in Europe, 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".[[25]](#footnote-25) The long voyage back to Poland was undertaken primarily by overpopulated trains, where children, the elderly, and invalids crowded the few available and meager cars, and suffered from a shortage of water and food.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Still, Jewish lives and Jewish communities from across the country reestablished themselves and even flourished in the first years after the war. [[27]](#footnote-27) Of course, not all Jews continued 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 in Lower Silesia, such as in Wrocław/Breslau, Dzierżoniów/Reichenbach and Wałbrzych/Waldenburg flourished and prospered during these years: new schools, corporations, newspapers and other sorts of cultural life were established. The new communities in Lower Silesia were established immediately after the liberation, were increased due to the repatriation from the Soviet Union, reduced because of the big escape following Keilce Pogrom on July 4th 1946 and then came to stabilization for few years.[[28]](#footnote-28) Some Jews opted to remain in Poland after 1949 and even after 1968. Eventually, however, large percentage of Poland's Jewry that survived the Holocaust and was repatriated opted to leave Poland before long.[[29]](#footnote-29) From mid-1946 until March 1947, some 140,000 Jews left Poland. [[30]](#footnote-30)

Scholars offered several reasons for this mass emigration: antisemitism, the political split in Poland after the war, psychological duress following the murder of family members 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.[[31]](#footnote-31) The Zionist westward "flight" (*Habrichah)* 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.[[32]](#footnote-32) Such explanations, though important, fail to account for the weight of expatriates' wartime experiences on these subsequent decisions.[[33]](#footnote-33) 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 life 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:

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 they have been displaced well before having arrived at the DP 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.[[34]](#footnote-34)

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.[[35]](#footnote-35) 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 the "Regained 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.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The situation of the repatriates was bad because they did not returned to their former houses, as the Central Committee of the Jews in Poland declared.[[37]](#footnote-37) However, more than that, most repatriates found themselves required to rebuild their lives in an environment they never called home and which, 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 expelled and a Polish culture began taking form, whereby Polish-Jewish 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.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Moreover, Lower Silesia at that time was considered to be a The establishment of the new Polish-Jewish settlements in Lower Silesia was side by side with the end of the in May 1945 by a group of concentration and labor Nazi camps survivors and on 17 June 1945, a month after, the Jewish Lower Silesian Voivodship Committee was established. The local Jewish organizations together with the Central Committee of the Jews in Poland set up some productivity plans to accommodate Jews, including Jews who set in other places in Poland, in Lower Silesia.

מכיוון שאזור זה רוקן כמעט לחלוטין מתושביו הגרמניים בשל בריחה או גירוש כפוי ומכיוון שבאופן יחסי הבתים והרכוש לא ניזוקו במלחמה, הניצולים יכלו לגור בבתים מסודרים, להשתמש ברכוש שהושאר מאחור ולהתפרנס ממנו. בנוסף לכך, כאשר השלטונות הפולניים ביקשו להקים מערכת שלטונית מקומית היו יהודים רבים ששולבו בפקידות ובמנגנון המקומי. ההתיישבות במקום נחשבה לסיפור הצלחה שהביאה לכך שהוועד היהודי המרכזי החליט שכדאי לעודד התיישבות יהודית במקום ואף הוסכם להעביר את הרפטריאנטים הצפויים לחזור מברית המועצות ישירות לאיזור זה כי זה יהיה הדבר הטוב ביותר עבורם. בתום 1945 היו בכל האזור כ-16000 יהודים. שום דבר לא הכין את הוועדים המקומיים למספר הרב של הרפטריאנטים ולכך שבפרק זמן קצר מאוד הגיעו לאיזור למעלה מ-100,000 יהודים במסגרת הרפטריאציה. הדיור, הרכוש והפרנסה שהייתה לפני כן יחסית בשפע לא הספיקו לכלכל את הרפטריאנטים הרבים שהגיעו לאזור, הוועד היהודי המרכזי, הוועדים המקומיים וגופי סיוע כמו הג'וינט נרתמו לסייע, אך לא הצליחו להביא את המצב לכדי איזון ולסייע לכל הרפטריאנטים כראוי. [[39]](#footnote-39)

Part of the repatriates who were sent to these areas soon left Lower Silesia and proceeded to migrate across Poland. It is hard to indicate exactly how many repatriates decided to leave Poland immediately after their return or in short time afterwards, and this demand a farther extensive research, however, at least large percentage, if not the majority of repatriates, continued their uprooted existence and did not settle.[[40]](#footnote-40) According to Engel, the "flight" movement gained success specifically among the repatriates. One of the reasons for that was the fact that the repatriates had less possibilities to manage in Poland in comparison to the Polish-Jews who settled in Poland immediately after the war and before the big mass of the repatriation. The Jewish Committees could not give them a proper aid, many were unemployed and in generally the program to settle them in Lower Silesia was failed.[[41]](#footnote-41)

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 refugeeism,[[42]](#footnote-42) 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.[[43]](#footnote-43) 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 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.[[44]](#footnote-44) For example, on 3 June 1946 a train transport of repatriates was attacked during a short stop in Katowice and many were killed and injured, women, children and elderly in particular.[[45]](#footnote-45) Alongside the many reasons given consideration in the literature for the mass exodus of Jews from Poland, one might equally point to additional push 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 were suspected to be pro-Soviet, Soviet spies or Soviet propagandist, as part of the *Zydokomuna* stereotype[[46]](#footnote-46) and their vulnerability as targets. All these are results of their war time experiences, 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 DP Camps

After the failed attempt to settle in Poland, many of the refugees continued wandering. They arrived at the DP camps mainly in Germany and Austria, and from there they hoped to continue to mandatory Palestine [*Eretz-Yisrael*][[47]](#footnote-47), to the USA, South America or to other countries, depending on the availability of destination countries and immigration laws. The assessment that they would remain for a limited period only was commonly held amongst the aid agencies charged with their resettlement. As we shall see, this optimistic initial assessment, too, was soon invalidated as the repatriates were forced to or, in light of the limited options they faced, chose to stay in the DP 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. The American decision to keep the eastern borders open despite the mass influx of Jews from Poland was taken after a massive lobby of the American Jewry together with the examination of different solutions in order to reduce the number of the newcomers. Still, only Jews who were present in the American controlled areas in February 1946 were granted official recognition as DPs, 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 "Displaced Persons", Jewish repatriates from the Soviet Union who came to the camps only in late period were classified as "Persecuted Persons". This different classification assured and officialized the uniquely aggravated precarity to which they were subjected. They were termed "infiltrators", 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 DPs.[[48]](#footnote-48)  The AJDC, one of the central aid agencies in the DP camps, referred to the repatriates as "refugees", using the term in several of its reports.[[49]](#footnote-49)

By definition, all those who resided in the DP camps were 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 DP camps' Jewish residents, who were liberated on German and Austrian land.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The enrollment of the Polish-Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union at the DP camps stood in opposition to the overarching repatriation policy of returning refugees and prisoners of war to their countries of origin, a process that begun as early as mid-1944 (as opposed to the later repatriation agreements between Poland and the Soviet Union mentioned before). [[51]](#footnote-51) By the time the refugees had arrived from Poland to the DP camps, most prisoners have already been released by the Allied forces and had returned to their homes.[[52]](#footnote-52) The infusion of new immigrants into the camps led to their being refilled when the number of DPs was already in decline,[[53]](#footnote-53) 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, Leon D. Fisher, the field director of the AJDC in Salzburg area in Austria, declared in one of his reports for the period from July 1st to September 15th, 1946 that

This two and a half months interval can be called the crisis in the history of the A.J.D.C. activities in Austria […] Because the influx was so completely unpredicted and sudden, there were not even minimum quantities of food and clothing to meet elementary needs on an emergency basis.[[54]](#footnote-54)

This impression was shared also by AJDC activists in Germany[[55]](#footnote-55) and Zionist emissaries in Germany and Austria alike [[56]](#footnote-56).

When repatriates arrived at the DP camps, they encountered other displaced Jews who had 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.[[57]](#footnote-57) Thus, for instance, Koppel S. Pinson, the educational director of the AJDC in the DP camps in Germany and Austria from October 1945 until September 1946, described the DP camps' population as consisting of three distinct groups: The first and most veteran group was the 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 18–48. The second group was the Partisans who had joined the first group beginning in autumn 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. The third group contained the "Infiltrees" or "Persecutees": persons who never resided in Germany beforehand. They fled the Nazi invasion into the Soviet Union and returned to Poland but were unable to settle there and pushed on westward.

The repatriates, whose condition conformed to Pinson's the third group, were considered to be the mentally healthiest of all groups then residing in Germany due to the fact that it included a substantial portion of children and the elderly, and the fact 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 of working age.[[58]](#footnote-58) 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 DP camps and resettle them in permanent settlements.[[59]](#footnote-59)

When these two 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 emissaries 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 DP camps, Haim Avni, one of the Zionist emissaries 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.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Later, Avni explicitly refers to the refugeeism 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.[[61]](#footnote-61)

The repatriates’ arrival from Poland to the American occupation zones in Germany and Austria greatly increased the Jewish population in the DP 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 DPs 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.[[62]](#footnote-62) 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.[[63]](#footnote-63) This massive influx changed much about life in the camps. I will shortly focus on the material scarcity this tremendous shift created in the camps.[[64]](#footnote-64)

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, and after a short stay in Poland, 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 DP camps, the deprivation and exhaustion of these new DPs were readily apparent. A letter sent to the secretary of the AJDC 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 […].[[65]](#footnote-65)

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 DPs, such as, Bad Reichenhall, Ulm, Pocking Pine City (Waldstadt b. Bamberg), Bensheim and Hessisch Lichtenau complex. Since the existing camps were unable to accommodate all the incoming DPs, some camps were converted from makeshift shelters intended to house DPs 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.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Haim Yahil (then named Haim Hoffman) was the director of the “Relief Units” (in Hebrew, *Plugot HaSa`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 and Germany, 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.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Not only had the relief organizations noticed the severe conditions in the camps, so did the veteran DPs 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.[[68]](#footnote-68) Another article 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 DP camps in August 1946.[[69]](#footnote-69)

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 physical condition of the concentration camps survivors. As a result, by the time the repatriates arrived in the DP 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 DPs – those who had been living in the DP 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 DP.[[70]](#footnote-70) 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 DP camps.[[71]](#footnote-71) The bad living conditions, poverty and malnutrition for years of wandering had were still reflected on the children health even after a year of rehabilitation attempts in the DP Camps. It is important to notice that even though the physical condition of the repatriates was severe, their mental condition was considered to be good, as I showed. This tension is a corollary to their wartime experiences as refugees – the ability to continue some aspects of their former life, such as familial structure, on the one hand, and wandering and temporariness on the other hand.

The repatriates were ostensibly supposed to spend a short period of time in the DP camps before being permanently resettled: Palestine, USA or other destinations. Immigration to Palestine or to the USA, however, was illegal at the time. The British mandate provided only a few immigration certificates for Palestine, and the USA limited the ability of DPs 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.[[72]](#footnote-72) ההגבלות על ההגירה וחוסר האונים שבישיבה הממושכת במחנות העקורים העקורים היו משותפים אומנם גם לרפטריאנטים וגם לרוב תושבי מחנות העקורים היהודים שקדמו להם במחנות. עם זאת, חלק מההבדל שבין הקבוצות בהקשר זה, הוא התזמון שבו הגיעו הרפטריאנטים למחנות. שנת 1946 הייתה שנה שהתחילה באופטימיות במחנות, בין היתר בשל המלצות הועדה האנגלו-אמריקאית להתיר את עלייתם של 100000 יהודים לארץ ישראל. כאשר הגיעו הרפטריאנטים למחנות העקורים בקיץ 1946 תקווה זו נכזבה והעמיקה ההבנה כי הישיבה במחנות תארך זמן רב יותר מחשבו קודם לכן.

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.[[73]](#footnote-73) 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.[[74]](#footnote-74)

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 refugeeism were primal factors of life even after the war ended.

As time passed, the conditions improved in the DP camps to which the repatriates came. There was an effort to try and find work and professional training for the DPs, and the children began attending school.[[75]](#footnote-75) 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.[[76]](#footnote-76)

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

### Conclusion

One of the most salient characteristics of Polish Jews who spent the war years in the Soviet Union was that of being refugees. They had left their homes early, at the beginning 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 DP 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 of the steps they took, such as leaving Poland after repatriation and their choice to remain within the DP camps system. Thus, it can complement the already existing research, which thoroughly discusses the impact of various other push and pull factors in the migration of Polish-Jewish repatriates. In addition, this important feature of the repatriates helps us understand the changes that took place in the DP camps following their arrival. In the DP camps Jews lived under difficult personal and physical conditions that improved from the end of the war until the arrival of the great wave of repatriates. However, the arrival of the repatriates required a special treatment, mainly because they were physically and materially poor due to the many years of wandering. 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 camps Jewish population in Germany and Austria.

Although the repatriates' arrival in the DP camps is known and mentioned in the research, usually an insufficient attention is given to their uniqueness. Many times, researchers tend to view the Jewish population of DP camps as one homogenous group, under the overall identity of "Holocaust survivors", and thus missing an important part of the delicate fabric of Jewish life in Europe after the Holocaust.

As I have shown in this article, the existence of this distinct group was conspicuous for the residents of the DP camps themselves, as well as for the aid organizations operating in the camps. It seems that this group has been forgotten over the years and has not earned a worthy place in research and memory. Researchers who have discussed this issue in recent years have noted several reasons for their forgetfulness: the Cold War and the disputed place of the Soviet Union in the memory of World War II, the Holocaust and the years that followed; The absence of documentation and the collection of testimonies about the refugees' experience in the Soviet Union immediately after the end of the Holocaust and in the many years that followed; The silence of the repatriates themselves in light of the recognition of the experiences of those who survived the Nazi occupation.[[77]](#footnote-77) Recently, Nesselrodt showed that, contrary to what is customary to think, there was also the writing of repatriates immediately after the Holocaust, even in the DP camps. They tried to deal in different ways with the separate experiences they had during the war, by bringing their experiences into the framework of the general suffering of the Jews of that time.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Throughout the war, the repatriates were outside the central and well-known story of the Holocaust, but at the end of the war they returned to a common experience of displacement in the DP camps together with the Jews who lived under Nazi occupation during the war years. It is possible that at this time, when the two groups began to mingle - at least ostensibly - lies the reason that until today the study has little to do with the lives of the repatriates after their arrival at the DP camps. The recognition of their profound experience of displacement, which continued to characterize them even during this period, may therefore contribute to the re-revealing of those people into the historical memory.

1. \* I would to like to thank Prof. Yfaat Weiss for here advices, to Dr. Boaz Cohen, Dr. Michał Szulc and Racheli Frish for reading different early versions of the article and for the opportunity to share ideas and to Yael Levy and Binyamin Hunyadi for their help with Yiddish translations.

 Yosef Litvak, Polish-Jewish Refugees Repatriated from the Soviet Union at the End of the Second World War and Afterwards, in: Norman Davies/Antony Polonsky (eds.), Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939–46, New York 1991, 227–239, here 235; Mark Adele/Wanda Warlik, Saved by Stalin? Trajectories and Numbers of Polish Jews in the Soviet Second World War, in: Mark Edele/Sheila Fitzpatrick/Atina Grossmann (eds.), Shelter from the Holocaust. Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union, Detroit, Michigan 2017, 95–131, here 215. See also below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Davies/Polonsky (eds.), Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR; Shlomo Kless, Borders, Underground and Flight. Zionist-Chalutzian Activity in U.S.S.R. and the Connection of the "Yishuv" in Eretz-Israel with them (1941–1945), Tel Aviv 1989 (Heb.); Yosef Litvak, Polish-Jewish Refugees in the USSR, 1939–1946, Tel Aviv 1988 (Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eliyana R. Adler, Hrubieszów at the Crossroads: Polish Jews Navigate the German and Soviet Occupations, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 28 (2014), no. 1, 1–30; Edele/Fitzpatrick/Grossmann (eds.), Shelter from the Holocaust; Albert Kaganovitch, Jewish refugees and Soviet authorities during World War II, in: Yad Vashem Sudies 38 (2010), no. 2, 12–85. In October 2018 the POLIN museum in Warsaw hold the workshop "Deported, Exiled, Saved. History and Memory of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union (1940–1959)" which was organized by Katharina Friedla and Markus Nesselrodt. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Laura Jockusch/Tamar Lewinsky, Paradise Lost? Postwar Memory of Polish Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union, in: Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 24 (2010), no. 3, 373–399; Markus Nesselrodt, "I bled like you, brother, although I was a thousand miles away". Postwar Yiddish sources on the experiences of Polish Jews in Soviet exile during World War II, in: East European Jewish Affairs 46 (2016), no. 1, 47–67; Naama Seri-Levi, "These People are Unique". The Repatriates in the Displaced Persons Camps 1946–1947, in: Moreshet 14 (2017), 49–100. On the Polish-Jewish population in the DP camps see: Tamar Lewinsky, Polish-Jewish Displaced Persons in Occupied Germany, in: Feliks Tych/Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), Jewish Presence in Absence. The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland 1944–2010, Jerusalem 2014, 95–124. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michael R. Marrus, The Unwanted. European Refugees in the Twentieth Century, New York 1985, 3 f, 10f; Malcolm J. Proudfoot, European Refugees: 1939–52. A Study in Forced Population Movement, Evanston, Illi, 1956, 22 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Andrew E. Shacknove, Who is a Refugee? In: Ethics 95 (1985), no. 2, 274–284. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The reality of refugees was well known before WWII, and immediately following WWI international projects regarding the refugees were established. For example, the Nansen International Office for Refugees under the League of Nations was established during the early 1920s. However, they differed from the late organizations which operated following WWII. There were also some earlier definitions related to specific groups, such as Russians who could not enjoy the protection of the government of the Soviet Union any more. Tony Kushner/Katharine Knox, Refugees in an Age of Genocide: Global, National, and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century, London 1999, 11. For extensive discussion on refugees during the 20th century see: idib; Marrus, The Unwanted. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kushner/Knox, Refugees in an Age of Genocide, 10 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 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: Marrus, The Unwanted, 5–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 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). Anna Holian, Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism. Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany, Ann Arbor, Mich. 2011, 43–48; Proudfoot, European Refugees, 402–406. Full version of the definitions of the displaced persons and refugees in Germany, see on Appendix B 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". For extensive discussion on the refugees following WWII see also: Gerard Daniel Cohen, In War's Wake. Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order, New York, NY, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The number of the refugees from Poland who fled to the Soviet Union has been discussed extensively and this figure is between the lowest and highest estimation. See: Mark Adele/Wanda Warlik, Saved by Stalin? Trajectories and Numbers of Polish Jews in the Soviet Second World War, in: Edele/Fitzpatrick/Grossmann (eds.), Shelter from the Holocaust, 95–131. For a discussion on the survival rate see also: Albert Stankowski, How Many Polish Jews Survived the Holocaust, in: Tych/Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), Jewish Presence in Absence, 205–216. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The latest article dealing with gender, family, class and geographical questions regarding that issue is: Eliayana R. Adler/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 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Litvak, Polish-Jewish Refugees in the USSR, 64–67. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Drishot Shalom Mishnei Shithei Hakibush BePolin [Greetings from the two occupied territories in Poland], in: HaBoker [The Morning], 17 May 1940, 6 (Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For more information on the deportations of the non-Jews see, among others: Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, War Through Children's Eyes. The Soviet Occupation of Poland and the Deportations, 1939-1941, Stanford, Ca. 1981; Katherine R. Jolluck, Exile and Identity. Polish Women in The Soviet Union During World War II, Pittsburgh, Pa. 2012; Halik Kochanski, The Eagle Unbowed. Poland and the Poles in the Second World War II, London 2012, 136-162. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Soviets ideology regarding Zionisem or Bundisem is out of this article limits. For more about the Soviet persecution of the refugees and the Polish-Jewish citizens of Eastern Poland under the Soviet occupation see: Jan Tomasz Gross, The Sovietisation of Western Ukraine and Western Byelorussia, in: Davies/Polonsky (eds.), Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 60–76. Litvak, Polish-Jewish Refugees in the USSR, 127–169. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Nathan Greenboim, Badrachim Ubetzidei Hadrachim: Pirkei Haim Vezikaron [Along the roads and asides the roads: memories], Tel Yitzhak 1993, 165 (Heb.) . [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rivka Agron-Wolf, Kol Metai [All my dead people], Jerusalem 2009, 74 (Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. An official report of the Polish Embassy in the Soviet Union mentioned that by late 1941 no less than 30% of Polish-Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union had died. Litvak, Polish-Jewish Refugees in the USSR, 359. However, this estimation is quite problematic and it is hard to estimate how many refugees had perished in the Soviet Union, see: Adele/ Warlik, Saved by Stalin?, 122 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The continuity of life of the refugees, their cultural life, and especially the birthrate and marriage among the refugees, arouse curiosity when those refugees were repatriated to Poland and later when they continued to the DP camp, especially when they were compared to the other groups at the camps (see below). It is also attracts attention nowadays because it shows how rich the refugees' life were. However, in this article I chose to focus on one motif of their life. For different aspects of the refugees' experiences see: Davies/Polonsky (eds.), Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR; Edele/Fitzpatrick/Grossmann (eds.), Shelter from the Holocaust; Litvak, Polish-Jewish Refugees in the USSR [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In some of the refugees' memoirs the expectation of returning to Poland was often referred to be a "dream", for an example " The dreams of homecoming were becoming more and more realistic", Yitzhak Geler, Sipur Hayav Shel Yitzhak Geler [Yitzhak Gelers' Memoirs]: Cieszanów-Siberia-Eretz Yisrael, Bnei Brak 2004, 72 (Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Yosef Litvak, Polish-Jewish Refugees Repatriated from the Soviet Union; Stankowski, How Many Polish Jews Survived the Holocaust, 209–216. Lower numbers are mentioned in Adele/ Warlik, Saved by Stalin?, 117–122. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Agron-Wolf, Kol Metai, 88 (Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak, The Adaptation of Survivors to the Post-War Reality from 1944 to 1949, in: Tych/Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), Jewish Presence in Absence, 125–164, here 157 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives (henceforth AJDC) NY AR194554 /4/32/6/319, Letter from Philip S. Bernstein to Mr. W. L. Kenen, June 29, 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hanna Shlomi, The Reception and Settlement of Jewish Repatriates from the Soviet Union in Lower Silesia, 1946, in: Gal-Ed,XVII (2000), 85–104. On the other side. Kaganovitch shows how the Soviet authorities helped the repatriates and gave them some supply before their journey back to Poland. Kaganovitch, Jewish refugees and Soviet authorities [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. David Engel, Between Liberation and Flight. Holocaust Survivors in Poland and the Struggle for Leadership 1944–1946, Tel Aviv 1996 (Heb.); Eli Zur, Nipped in the Bud. Hashomer Hatzair in Poland, 1944–1950, Jerusalem 2017 (Heb.) and few articles in: Tych/Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), Jewish Presence in Absence. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The flourish of the Jewish life in Lower Silesia is not part of the main concern of this article. For further information about the repatriates who chose to stay in Poland see the current researches of Katharina Friedla and Kamil Kijek. For the Polish Jewish life in Lower Silesia until 1950 see: Kamil Kijek, Aliens in the Lands of the Piasts: The Polanization of Lower Silesia and Its Jewish Community in the Years 1945–1950, in: Tobias Grill (ed.), Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe, Shared and Comparative Histories, Berlin and Boston, Mass., 2018, 234–255; Andrzej Nowak, The Jewish Settlement in Chojnów 1945–1950, in: Marcin Wodziński and Janusz Spyra (eds.), Jews in Silesia, Cracow 2001, 229–238; BoŻena Szaynok, Jews in Lower Silesia 1945–1950, in: ibid, 213–228; Ewa Waszkiewicz, The Religious life of Lower-Silesian Jews 1945–1968, in: ibid, 239–245. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Tamar Lewinsky, Polish-Jewish Displaced Persons in Occupied Germany, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Lucjan Dobroszycki, Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland: A Portrait Based on Jewish Community Records 1944–1947,New York 1994, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. There are many researches on this subject. For example, see: Engel, Between Liberation and Flight; Edyta Gawron, Post-War Emigration of Jews from Poland. The case of Kraków, in: Tych/Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), Jewish Presence in Absence, 473–500; Andrzej Żbikowski, The Post-War Wave of Pogroms and Killings, in: ibid, 67–94. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Yehuda Bauer, Flight and Rescue: Brichah, New York 1970; Engel, Between Liberation and Flight; Yisrael Gutman, The Jews in Poland After World War II, Jerusalem 1985, 42–59. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Koźmińska-Frejlak 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. Ewa Koźmińska-Frejlak, The Adaptation of Survivors to the Post-War Reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Yad Tabenkin Archives 2–2/1/6, Luba Levita, The 24th Council at Kibbutz Gvat, February–March 1947, (Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Agron-Wolf (see above) did use the term "homeland" however calls it "old-new homeland". The use of "new" also confirms my claim here. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Dobroszycki, Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland, 22; Shlomi, The Reception and Settlement of Jewish Repatriants. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Tetikeyts Berikht fun Tsentral Kamitet fun di Yidn in Poyln, fun 1 yanuar 1946 biz dem 30 yuni 1946 [Activity report of the Central Jewish Committee of the Jews in Poland January 1st 1946 until June 30 1946], Warsaw 1946, 13 (Yidd.). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. There are some testimonies from that period and on which shows that the understanding that those areas where formerly part of Germany, the land of the Nazis, was also a hard fact to cope with. An extensive research should be dedicated to this issue. On the complicated situation of the German Jews in Wrocław immediately after the war see: Katharina Friedla, Experiences of Stigmatization, Discrimination and Exclusion: German-Jewish Survivors in Wrocław, 1945–1947, in: Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook 62 (2017), 95–113. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Engel, Between Liberation and Flight, 112-115, 120-124; Kijek, Aliens in the Lands of the Piasts, 234-244; Shlomi, The Reception and Settelment of Jewish Repatriants. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Note number 28. 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: 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, Jerusalem 2001, 162–186 (Heb.), here 164–176. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Engel, Between Liberation and Flight, 122, 150, 244 note 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. 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. Ibid, esp. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Engel, Between Liberation and Flight, 119–125; Shlomi, The Reception and Settelment of Jewish Repatriants. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Engel, Between Liberation and Flight, 128–130, 150; idem, Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1944–1946, in: Yad Vashem Studies XXVI (1998), 43–85; Litvak, Polish-Jewish Refugees Repatriated from the Soviet Union, 237–238. For some other difficulties with the repatriates' return to Poland see: Alina Skibińska, The Return of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and the Reaction of the Polish Population, in: Tych/Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), Jewish Presence in Absence, 25–65, here 31–42. For more about the Anti-Semitism in Poland after the war see Jan T. Gross, Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz, An Essay in Historical Interpretation, New York 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Engel, Between Liberation and Flight, 129 and also idem, Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Jan T. Gross, Fear, 192–243; Litvak, ibid, 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. The perception that most of the newcomers from Poland wanted to continue to Mandatory Palestine was very common not only for the Zionist emissaries, but also to non-Zionist activists. For example, Loe Schwartz, the AJDC U.S. zone director wrote in his "Report on influx of Jews into U.S. Zone of occupation in Germany in August, 1946" addressed to the UNRRA U.S. Zone director that "The greatest number of these refugees desire to find a haven and peace and freedom in Palestine". AJDC, NY AR194554/4/32/6/318, 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, 1 September 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Arieh J. Kochavi, Post-Holocaust Politics. Britain, The United States, and Jewish Refugees 1945–1948, Chapel Hill, N. Car, 2001, 43–51, 138–146; Angelika Königseder/Juliane Wetzel, Waiting for Hope. Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-World War II Germany, Evanston, Illi, 2001, 49.

The American military authorities, the War Department, the State Department and the president hold different opinions regarding the question whether to keep the boarders open or not. This was connected to different question such as the cooperation with British and Soviet military authorities and the ability to help the newcomers. 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 DP 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. AJDC, NY AR194554/4/32/6/318, 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, 1 September 1946; AJDC, NY AR194554/4/17/8/112, Report No. 386. Report of Salzburg Area Feb. 1946 – Dec. 1946, 10 December 1946. UNRRA used a different legal definition for refugees, see: Holian, Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. There was a small group of ex-camp prisoners who returned to Poland after the war and later emigrated to the DP camps. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Proudfoot, European Refugees, 189–229. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. There were, admittedly, groups of Eastern Europeans who were unwilling to return to their homes, particularly due to their fears of the new regimes in their countries, which now also included the Jewish repatriates from Poland. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. George Woodbridge, UNRRA. The History of The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, New York, NY, 1950, 422 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. AJDC, NY AR194554/1in Germany and Austria alike.nd Zionist emmisaries meet elementary needs on an emergency basis.ny were killed and injured, wome/17/8/112, Report No. 386. Report of Salzburg Area Feb. 1946 – Dec. 1946, 10 December 1946 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. AJDC, NY AR194554/4/32/6/318, Letter from American Joint Distribution Committee to Mr. Levitt, 23 August 1946 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Central Zionist Archives (henceforth CZA), A382/49, Letter from Haim Yahil to Leni Yahil, 23 October 1946 (Heb.), 226 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. The differences between the groups were mostly at the fields of demography, health, culture, education and employment. Their late arrival at the DP camps caused a decline of the material conditions at the camps. For a full description of these differences see the article which was dedicated to the issue: Seri-Levi, These People are Unique. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Koppel S. Pinson, Jewish Life in Liberated Germany: A Study of the Jewish DP's, in: Jewish Social Studies, 9 (1947), no. 2, 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 DPs 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. Zeev W. Mankowitz, Life Between Memory and Hope. The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany, Cambridge 2002, 19; Irit Keynan, Holocaust Survivors and the Emissaries from Eretz-Israel. Germany 1945–1948, Tel Aviv 1996, 80 (Heb.);. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. The main target was to settle those people in Mandate Palestine or pre-state Israel. However, as time passed and there was no change in their conditions some Zionist emissaries thought that maybe this target needs to be deserted in favor to other immediate permanent settlements. Seri-Levi, These People are Unique ,81-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Avni, Hayim Avni, With Jews in the D.P. Camps, Sde-Nachum 1981, 36 (Heb.) [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. ibid 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Avinoam Patt, Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust, Detroit, Michigan 2009, 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ada Schein, Health in Temporary Conditions. Health Care Services for Holocaust Survivors in Austria 1945–1953, Jerusalem 2010, 23 f. and 136 (Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. For further discussion regarding those changes see: Keynan, Holocaust Survivors and the Emissaries from Eretz-Israel, 60–64; Pinson, Jewish Life in Liberated Germany, 104f, 108, 111f; Seri-Levi, These People are Unique. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. AJDC, NY AR194554/4/32/6/318, Letter from American Joint Distribution Committee to Mr. Levitt, 23 August 1946, [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. AJDC, NY AR194554/4/32/6/318, Report on Influx of Jews into U.S. Zone of Occupation in Germany in August 1946. 1 September 1946. For more information on each one of the camps see: Königseder/Wetzel, Waiting for Hope 215–250. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. CZA, A382/49Letter from Haim Yahil to Leni Yahil, 23 October 1946 (Heb.), 226 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Kamunikat fun ZK [Message from the Central Committee (of the Liberated Jews in the American Zone of Germany)], in: Undzer Veg [Our Way], 6 September 1946, 1 (Yidd.). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. In di neye yiddishe lagern [In the new Jewish (displace persons) Camp], ibid, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. AJDC, NY AR194554/4/17/8/112, Report No. 389, 2 February 1947. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. CZA, S86/284, S. Ben-Yehuda to the Jewish Agency, Wasseralfingen, 22 August 1947 (Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. The Displaced Persons Act from 1948 provided for the legal framework for immigratory options only of those who were registered in the DP 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: United States Immigration and Refugee Law, 1921–1980, Holocaust Encyclopedia, United State Holocaust Memorial Museum, <[https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/united-states-immigration-and-refugee-law-1921-1980>](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/united-states-immigration-and-refugee-law-1921-1980%3E%20%2823)  (23 January 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Keynan, Holocaust Survivors and the Emissaries from Eretz-Israel, 62–64. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. AJDC, NY AR194554/4/32/6/317, American Joint Distribution Committee, 21 April 1947; Mankowitz, Life Between Memory and Hope, 270–276. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Among many other researches on the DPs see: Atina Grossmann, Jews, Germans and Allies, Close Encounters in Occupied Germany, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2007, 131–235; Tamar Lewinsky, An Autonomous Society, in: Michael Brenner (ed.), A History of Jews in Germany Since 1945, Bloomington, Ind, Indiana University Press, 2018, 85–111; Ada Schein, Educational Systems in the Jewish DP Camps of Germany and Austria, doctoral dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2000 (Heb.) [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Yitzhak Kaminsky, On a Yishuv Mission to the Displaced Persons Camps in Germany, 1946–1947, Haifa 1985, 68 (Heb.). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. John Goldlust, A Different Silence: The Survival of More than 200,000 Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during World War II as a Case Study in Cultural Amnesia, in: Edele/Fitzpatrick/Grossmann (eds.), Shelter from the Holocaust, 29–94; Jockusch/Lewinsky, Paradise Lost?; Nesselrodt, “I bled like you, brother”. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)