Exile and Survival: Lithuanian Jewish Deportees in the Soviet Union

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In the late 1950s, through the intervention of the Danish government, Israel and Rachel Rachlin and their three children received permission to end their Siberian exile of sixteen years. Deported from Lithuania in June of 1941, just two weeks before the Nazi invasion, they had raised their family in a series of Siberian villages, constantly and randomly moving from one to another at the behest of the Soviet security forces.[1] The Rachlins were not criminals, and had faced no trial. They were a Lithuanian Jewish family caught up in the upheavals of their time. On the very eve of the Nazi onslaught, the Soviets were in the midst of deporting a group of Baltic citizens they deemed dangerous to the regime. This paper will seek to describe the relatively unknown story of the Jews who were part of this group, as well as to discover what made their experience unique. It will open with some historical background, before turning to a summary of the parallel deportation of Polish Jews. The remainder of the paper will use the memoirs of the Rachlins, as well as of other deportees, to characterize the experience more broadly.

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1. Rachlin, *Sixteen Years.*

Lithuania, 1939-1941

Independent Lithuania, established after the First World War, did not include the historical capital city of Vilnius/Vilna and its surrounding region. Instead, and much to Lithuanian chagrin, this area was granted to the newly reconstituted Polish state. On September 1, 1939, the German army invaded Poland from the west. Seventeen days later, the Soviets, per previous agreement and seeing the weak defenses of the Poles, invaded from the east. As the occupying forces pacified the country, they gradually returned to the borders established by a secret protocol attached to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. By the end of September, Poland had been divided in half; the Bug and San Rivers served as borders, and the Soviets assumed control over the Baltic States.[2] On October 28, the Soviets ceded the Vilnius region to the Lithuanians, in return for concessions that included Soviet military bases.[3] Less than one year later, in June of 1940, the Soviets occupied and annexed all of Lithuania and the other Baltic states. Rapid sovietization took place until the following summer, when the Nazis launched a surprise attack on the Soviet Union.

Immediately after the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, thousands of Polish Jews began to move east. Some were dedicated communists seeking a better life under the Soviets. Most were simply terrified refugees trying to escape the worst ravages of the war and with no real long-term plans. Although precise numbers are difficult to come by, due to the spontaneous nature of the movement and initial fluidity of borders, it is estimated that as many as half a million Polish Jews crossed into the eastern Polish areas that were soon to be incorporated into the USSR.[4] Many would return to their homes in the Nazi-held areas once the fighting had stopped. A smaller, but nonetheless significant number preferred to enter Lithuania.

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2. Tych, "Polish Jews", p. 16.
3. Levin, *Baltic Jews*, p. 1. For more on the Jewish reaction to this state of affairs, see: Liekis, "The Transfer of Vilna District".
4. Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils*, p. 179.

This group was comprised of many Zionists and Orthodox Jews.[5] Lithuania was seen as possibly the last safe depot from Eastern Europe, and thus attracted Jews holding exit visas and those seeking them.[6] As many as 18,000 Polish Jewish refugees made their way to Lithuania in the fall of 1939.[7]

During the inter-war period, Lithuania had established a unique and relatively tolerant relationship with what had been a fairly small Jewish community of about 150,000 people.[8] Now, with 90,000 Jews in the Vilnius region, the percentage of Jews in the Lithuanian population rose from 6.4% (pre-war) to 8.4%, not including the refugees.[9] The large number of ethnic Poles in the Vilnius region created additional challenges for the regime. The new authorities wanted to enhance the area's Lithuanian character, but the long, complex history of inter-ethnic mixing made this difficult. Relatively few residents received Lithuanian citizenship, and none of the refugees did.[10]

The refugees created a difficult situation for the Lithuanian government. On January 7, 1940, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported that six Polish Jews who had crossed into the country illegally had been sent to Nazi occupied areas, while another group had been expelled to Soviet Poland.[11] These expulsions, however, backfired on the regime. Not

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5. *Ibid*., p. 210; Litvak, *Plitim Yehudiyim*, p. 68. Shlomo Kless estimates that group included 2,000 Zionist pioneers, 2,000 yeshiva students, 500 members of Betar, and 400 members of the Bund (Kless, *Pe'ilut Tsionit*, p. xi).
6. One memoirist, an active Zionist, describing the growing desperation to get out of Europe, says that even anti-Zionists were signing up for the coveted certificates for Palestine. At one point she even met a Polish woman trying to get one. "Even she, the Christian woman, dreamed of the certificate." (Zerubavel, *Hayiti Plitah*, p. 98).
7. Liekis, "The Transfer", p. 216. Dina Porat's numbers were somewhat lower, but also more approximate (Porat, *Rikuz Ha-plitim*, p. 15). Liekis was able to base his research on documents only recently available.
8. Levin, "Arrests and Deportations", p. 68.
9. Liekis, *1939*, p. 214.
10. Wierzbicki, "Polish-Jewish Relations", p. 502; Liekis, *1939*, pp. 215-219.
11. "Lithuania Deports", *JTA*, Jan. 7, 1940.

only did they not appreciably lower the numbers of refugees, but they created bad international press for the state.[12] Pressure from neighboring countries only made matters worse. At the same time, the Soviet Union was demanding that Lithuania expel refugees deemed anti-Soviet, while Latvia, Estonia and Sweden were imposing travel restrictions on Jewish refugees.[13] The refugees, especially those who held valid entrance visas to other countries, were desperate to get out, but Lithuania risked antagonizing powerful interests with both action and inaction.

Fortunately, the local and international Jewish communities were very effective at providing welfare to the refugees. Rabbi Ḥayim Ozer Grodzinsky in Vilna dispersed the newly arrived yeshiva students into towns that could support them.[14] Local committees organized to find housing and jobs for the stream of refugees. The Jewish Agency, the Joint Distribution Committee, Vaad Hatzalah, and other philanthropic, political, and religious organizations abroad were actively involved in lobbying for visas and sending funds and goods to the refugees.[15]

The Soviet take-over in June 1940 changed the calculus for the aid agencies, as well as for the refugees themselves. In the initial aftermath of the occupation, many visa holders held back from presenting them, concerned that requesting to leave might result in a sentence to Siberia. Yet unexpectedly, and for what would prove to be a limited time, the Soviets did grant safe passage to those with appropriate documentation.[16] At the same time, they also embarked upon a series of highly organized tactical arrests of political and communal leaders among the Lithuanians, Poles and Jews. Due to Lithuania's previous independent status, there was a particularly high concentration of Jewish leaders there, including leaders

12. Liekis, *1939*, pp. 207-212.

13. "Russia Asks", *JTA*, Dec. 15, 1939; "Refugees Stranded", *JTA,* Feb. 5, 1940.

14. Liekis, *1939*, p. 281. Many memoirs refer to Rabbi Grodzinsky's guidance and help during this period. For one example, see: Shafran, *Fire, Ice, Air,* pp. 42-43.

15. Kranzler, *Thy Brother's Blood*, p. 130; Liekis, *1939*, pp. 282-283.

16. "Russia Allows", *JTA*, April 10, 1940. Dina Porat sought to explain this unexpected turn of affair in her article "Nesibot Ve-sibot".

of all the Zionist movements and youth activists. The Bund had also sent some of its prominent members out of both Nazi and Soviet areas. Small scale arrests targeting specific individuals continued throughout the period of Soviet rule in Lithuania.[17]

After dealing with political and religious activists during the first months, the Soviets turned to 'cleansing' economic elements. The largest deportation took place a mere two weeks before the Nazi invasion. Just when the Soviets should have been paying attention to the troops amassing on their borders, they were organizing large scale arrests and deportations of Baltic citizens considered economically dangerous. On June 14, 1941, the Soviet security forces (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*, hereafter NKVD) arrested about 30,000 Lithuanians, including 7,000 Jews, as 'enemies of the people'.[18] The action was well-planned. Two to three agents arrived at each home simultaneously, leaving no time for friends, neighbors, or relatives to contact and warn one another. Each family was given twenty minutes to pack their luggage and loaded into waiting trucks that brought them to the train station. They were then crammed into cattle cars, unable to say goodbyes, and with no knowledge of what awaited them.

Lithuanians and Lithuanian Jews were hardly the first groups to experience deportation under Soviet occupation. Under Stalin, the USSR had built up a rather large and impressive system for mass, forced relocation. Entirely overseen by the NKVD, it covered the gamut and routed people to prison camps, forced labor, and internal exile. By 1941, close to a million former Polish citizens, with a disproportionate number of them Jews, had already been trapped in this system. The non-Jews in this group were mainly from eastern Poland, and had been arrested for political and economic reasons. The Jews, on the other hand, were mainly from western Poland, and found themselves incarcerated as stateless refugees.[19]

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17. Levin, *Baltic Jews*, pp. 119-121.
18. *Ibid*., p. 5.
19. For a brief overview of the experiences of Polish Jewish deportees, see my article, ”Hisardut Be-shule Ha-Milḥamah”. The most complete treatment to date is Yosef Litvak’s *Plitim Yehudiyim*.

The experiences of Polish and Lithuanian Jewish deportees in the USSR were similar in many ways, yet there were also important differences. Neither group has received a great deal of scholarly attention, but the Polish Jewish deportation, comprising hundreds of thousands of individuals, is certainly better known. To date, Dov Levin has undoubtedly done the most to raise the profile of the Lithuanian Jewish deportees.[20] The purpose of this paper is to highlight the particular aspects of the Lithuanian Jewish deportation, in contrast to the larger and more widely known Polish case. This echoes, to a degree, Dina Porat's seminal article, ”The Holocaust in Lithuania: Some Unique Aspects” (1994). Just as the Holocaust unfolded in particular ways in Lithuania, so too did deportation to the east.

The Deportation of Polish Jews

Polish Jews were deported in three waves. First, in the fall of 1939, almost immediately after occupying the eastern provinces of Poland, the Soviets began arresting political and religious leaders among Polish citizens, both Catholics and Jews. The Soviets worked from carefully organized lists. Next, in the spring of 1940, having dispensed with the most 'dangerous' categories of people, they turned to wealthy business- and land-owners and an assortment of other professions that were seen as a threat. Lastly, in the summer of 1940, the NKVD tried to sweep up all of the refugees who had not signed up for Soviet citizenship or been deported previously.[21] Whereas the first two waves of deportations were comprised mainly of Catholic Poles, the third wave had a larger percentage of Jews. Numbers remain contested; the Polish government-in-exile believed that the Soviets had incarcerated approximately 1.5 million Poles, of whom 20-30% were Jewish.[22] In the absence of Soviet documents, most scholars and laypeople have relied on these figures. Recently, a number of academics have

20. See for example Levin, ”Arrests and Deportations”.

21. Weinryb, ”Polish Jews”, p. 347.

22. Kot, *Conversations*, pp. xii, 62.

suggested significantly lower numbers, but similar percentages.[23] These numbers, which may never be determined with any accuracy, include Polish citizens deported from Lithuania, who, having either resided in or fled from Polish areas, retained their previous civil status.

Deportees from all three waves were taken to work installations in the Arctic, Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Donbas region. Many were told they would spend the rest of their lives in captivity. Indeed, that first year seemed like eternity. They faced extreme temperatures, hunger, disease, and terrible labor conditions. And then, with the Nazi invasion of the USSR in the summer of 1941 and the subsequent agreement negotiated by the Polish government-in-exile, they suddenly found themselves amnestied. Yet given the rapid Nazi invasion, going back to Poland, or even the newly incorporated former Polish territories, was out of the question. Most Polish Jewish refugees moved south, into Central Asia, where they hoped to find better climate conditions, more food, and perhaps a means to escape the USSR. Only a minority of exiled Polish citizens were able to leave with either the Soviet or Polish armies. The majority stayed throughout the war and was repatriated in 1946.

In Lithuania, perforce, events unfolded somewhat differently for Jewish refugees from Poland. First, the Soviet annexation took place almost a year later. Thus, although the new rulers began sovietization immediately and with great energy, it simply could not proceed at the same pace. By the time of the Nazi invasion, political and religious leaders had been taken away in targeted raids and the deportation of economic enemies was in full swing, but there was no time for the third wave, focusing on refugees. Of course, given the particular make-up of the refugee population in Lithuania, with its high percentage of political and religious activists, many were deported with the earlier groups.

A familiar example is Menachem Begin, future prime minister of Israel, and his young wife Aliza, who escaped the Nazi invasion of Warsaw for independent Lithuania. Begin was already the leader of the Zionist youth group Betar in Poland. He continued his work in Vilna, although they had

23. Kaganovitch, "Jewish Refugees", pp. 99-100.

to settle in a small town outside the city. They simultaneously endeavored to obtain the coveted immigration certificates to Palestine. Once the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania, Begin knew it was only a matter of time before he would be arrested. He saw leaders of other Zionist groups taken away one by one. In September of 1940, he was indeed taken into NKVD custody. He spent months being interrogated in prisons before being sent to a series of prison labor camps. His wife was actually able to get out of the country and into Palestine.

In June of 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Begin was in one of the Pechora camps near the Arctic Circle in the Komi Republic. Despite their isolation, the prisoners managed to learn about the start of the war, and later even about the agreement between the Polish government-in-exile and the Soviet Union, which freed all Polish citizens in captivity. Nonetheless, it would be several months before the Polish prisoners in his camp, both Jews and non-Jews, were actually granted amnesty. From there, Begin eventually arrived in Central Asia and, unlike most other Jews, joined the Polish army that was forming there. This allowed him to leave the Soviet Union and reach Palestine in 1942.[24]

Begin was one of many Polish Jewish refugees deported from Lithuania, but treated by the Soviets as a Pole and not a Lithuanian. His experience thus did not differ from that of Polish Jewish refugees deported from eastern Poland, except that it happened later. He was, of course, a fairly high-profile target, and thus sentenced to time in prison and labor camp with Soviet prisoners. This was not the fate of most deportees. A more typical example might be that of Menachem Mendl Grossman, a yeshiva student who fled Poland on Yom Kippur of 1939, after the Germans had arrived. He and other students from his yeshiva, along with one of their younger rabbis, were settled by Rabbi Grodzinsky in the town of Rossein in the Kaunas region of Lithuania. There they received support from the Joint Distribution Committee and local Jews that enabled them to return to their studies.

Indeed, they were so pleased to be allowed to continue their education,

24. Begin, *White Nights*.

that they did not look into leaving Europe until the Soviets came, by which time it was too late. In June of 1941, they were deported to a remote outpost in Siberia, but freed several months later due to the amnesty for Polish citizens. Grossman managed to be evacuated with the Polish Army, and recorded his testimony in Palestine in 1943.[25]

Also worth noting are the Polish Jews who resided in areas taken over by the Lithuanians and then the Soviets. The family of Esther Hautzig, for example, did not flee and become refugees. They stayed in their family home in Vilna, even as it became part of Lithuania and then the Soviet Union. As her father owned a business, they were deported as a family in June of 1941. After a couple months of hard labor, they were amnestied along with other Polish citizens and allowed to move to a nearby village. They spent the war there and returned to Poland, which no longer contained Vilna, in 1946.[26]

Begin, Grossman, and the Hautzig family, although captured in Lithuania, had either voluntarily fled Poland or lived in territory incorporated from Poland. They had Polish citizenship and shared the fate of other Polish deportees. What about those Jews deported as Lithuanians? We return to the Rachlin family, mentioned above.

Lithuanian Jewish Case Study: The Rachlin Family

Israel Rachlin was a native of Kybartai, Lithuania. He met his wife Rachel while traveling in Denmark for his family's import-export business. They married in 1935 and moved into his family home. Despite having many connections abroad, they made no efforts to emigrate in the years leading up to the war. In the months following the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, the Rachlins lost first their house and then their business. Although they

25. Menachem Mendl Grossman testimony, protocol 45584, Flinker collection, Ganzach Kiddush Hashem.

26. Hautzig, *The Endless Steppe*.

followed the news as closely as they could under the circumstances, in June of 1941 they were not particularly worried about the Nazis or the Soviets.

The arrival of the NKVD at their door on June 14 thus came as a surprise. They were given no information and scant time to pack for their family, which included Israel's mother, a 5-year-old and a baby. When the truck carrying them and their belongings stopped at Israel's cousin Izy's farm to pick up their son Schneur, who had been staying there, Izy did not come out to see them off. Like the neighbors watching from behind their curtains, Izy was also clearly afraid of being taken away with them.

Their entire family was deposited at the nearest train station. Their train spent the next few days waiting on tracks and picking up other deportees along the route. They were locked in guarded cattle cars for hours, and sometimes days, in the summer heat. The increasingly frequent sound of aircrafts alerted them to the start of war and their own journey into the unknown.

Their train traveled east, farther and farther from home. At a certain point along the way, NKVD officers entered each car and called out a list of men to be taken away. It was not clear to the Rachlins or their fellow travelers what these men had done to deserve harsher treatment, but Israel was not among them. The train finally stopped at a *sovkhoz* (a communal work settlement) in Biysk, a city in the Altay region on the western edge of Siberia.

This was to be the first of many stops over the coming years. After surviving a punishing winter, finding useful employment, making some friends on the *sovkhoz*, and even planting potatoes to be harvested later, in June of 1942, they were suddenly told to pack their belongings and leave. Their NKVD overseers would tell them neither why they had to move nor reveal their next destination. And thus it continued. In each new location, the Rachlins had to organize housing and food for themselves, as well as find appropriate work and schooling for their children. Sometimes they were taken to locales with relatively large deportee populations, where they benefited from help and guidance. Once they were sent to a scientific outpost where the only other permanent residents were members of the Yakut ethnic group. Over

time, their stays in each location grew longer, but they were nevertheless often suddenly and inexplicably dismissed from their jobs and forced to find new work immediately, in order to keep food on the table.

The spring of 1945 found the family living at a research station outside Pokrovsk, a city on the Lena River in eastern Siberia. Although they had originally believed that their forced relocation to that area the previous year had been the result of Israel's efforts to press their case with a high level official, the fact that other deportee families were also forced to move left them unsure and dispirited, as Israel relates:

> Although I gradually came to realize that it was useless to search for a rationale for the actions and decisions of the Soviet authorities, I could not reconcile myself to being uprooted once more and moved elsewhere. For nearly an entire school year I had been teaching German to about 120 students and had achieved good results. I had excellent relations with both my students and my colleagues, and it was obvious that the school would have difficulty finding a teacher with the same qualifications. Now I was forced to leave to work in some sort of brickworks where they needed a clerk for various tasks that did not require any special qualifications or skills.[27]

They celebrated the end of the war along with their neighbors, but without any hope of their own liberation.

> As far as we were concerned, the peace did not cause any major change in our lives. We remained deportees, and the conclusion of the war did not bring about any changes in the conditions under which we had to live. We had to get used to the idea of remaining there indefinitely.[28]

Nonetheless, the end of the war did make communication possible again. Israel's efforts to contact family in Lithuania yielded no results. In July of 1946, Rachel wrote to the Danish Embassy in Moscow to inquire about her

27. Rachlin, *Sixteen Years*, p. 113.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

relatives. Several months later she received word that they had survived. Eventually, she was able to establish contact with her sister, and the Rachlins began receiving periodic packages of food and other goods.

In 1955, the Rachlin family was living in Yakutsk, the capital city of the Yekutia region in eastern Siberia. By that time, their eldest son, Shneur, had graduated from high school and was attending a technical institute. They had been fortunate to be able to purchase a small house. Between their packages from abroad and rent from boarders, they were living in less dire straits than before. Quite suddenly, Israel received news that his status as a deportee had been revoked and he would soon receive a passport. When he inquired about the rest of his family, he was told that they had never officially been deported, and thus could not have their status revoked nor receive passports that would allow them to move within the USSR. As they waited for Israel's passport to arrive, they sought help and guidance for ameliorating the status of the rest of the family. Now more than ever, they felt the impact of their long stay.

> After fourteen years in Siberia, our strength seemed to have run out, and we both experienced increasing difficulty coping with the cold weather. When the temperature dropped lower than forty degrees Fahrenheit below zero, we both had great difficulty being outside and had problems with breathing and with our hearts. The winter of 1955-56 was exceptionally severe, and our longing for the summer and the warm weather seemed stronger than ever.[29]

Not long afterward, they received word that the Danish Embassy was negotiating their freedom. It would take nearly two years for all the paperwork for their departure to come through. In the interim, they moved to Irkutsk, a larger and more cosmopolitan city in southern Siberia. In May of 1957, the Rachlins received permission to leave the Soviet Union. Two months later, they arrived in Copenhagen, sixteen years after being deported.

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29. Rachlin, *Sixteen Years*, p. 197.

This is only one of many similar stories, and of course it glosses over all of the details of their stay; the death and burial of Israel's mother, the birth of their third child, and the daily difficulties they faced. Every individual deportee and every family experienced their own highs and lows along the way. That said, there were certain commonalities in the experiences of deported Lithuanian Jews.

The Deportation of Lithuanian Jews

The most obvious, and important feature of the Lithuanian Jewish deportation was its duration. Whereas Polish Jews spent a maximum of seven years in the Soviet Union, less than two of which were in forced labor installations, the typical Lithuanian Jewish experience included fifteen or sixteen years in administrative exile, followed by several more years awaiting permission to leave the USSR. The lack of effective international advocacy on their behalf is undoubtedly a major factor in explaining the enormously long time that elapsed between the capture and release of the Lithuanian Jewish deportees. Polish deportees had the weight of the Polish government-in-exile behind them; in 1941, when they were released from prison camps, this government bore significant clout. At that point, the Soviets needed all the help they could get with the war and were willing to compromise in order to please an ally of Great Britain and the United States. By 1946, when Polish citizens were allowed to leave the USSR, the Soviets had won the war and were no longer in the mood for compromise. However, they believed that allowing the now-sovietized Poles back into the country would help them in building a new communist Poland.[30]

On the other hand, Jewish and non-Jewish Lithuanians had no such advocate. Their own leaders had been destroyed or co-opted. Not only did the Soviets see no gain in sending them back to Lithuania, but they

30. For more on the complicated negotiations of this period see: Kaganovitch, "Stalin's Great Power Politics".

even began a renewed and larger deportation of Lithuanians in the late 1940s.[31] This is not to say that the entire world forgot about these exiles. On the contrary, in the fall of 1941, the few Baltic leaders who had managed to escape both the Soviets and the Nazis made their way to London to request help for their citizens. They knew perfectly well that the Polish government-in-exile had succeeded in freeing its citizens, and hoped for the same. However, due to the timing of the Nazi invasion, it took them some time to locate information about their nationals. By the time they were able to approach the Foreign Office, the war was in full swing and Great Britain needed the cooperation of the Soviet Union far more than it needed the good will of a few former Baltic statesmen. In one internal memo responding to a request from the former Latvian ambassador, a Foreign Office official bluntly stated:

> The objection to our making any approach to the Soviet authorities on behalf of Latvians or other Baltic deportees is that the Russians regard them as citizens of the USSR. If, as no doubt is the case, they are hardly treated; other Soviet citizens are just as hardly treated; and we should not consider ourselves entitled to make a diplomatic approach on behalf of Russians who have been sent to Siberian labor camps.[32]

The British, in other words, were unwilling to antagonize their new allies with what appeared to be trivial concerns in the midst of a punishing war. It is worth noting that the files of the Foreign Office also contain secret memoranda from Polish government-in-exile sources regarding the Lithuanian and other deportees. The Poles had first-hand information from their own newly released citizens about the status of prisoners left behind, which they shared with the British. Although it was in their interest to discredit the Soviets and show their unjust treatment of foreign nationals, the Baltic prisoners were not a top priority. These communiqués

31. For a non-academic treatment of this topic see: Kuodyte & Tracevskis, *Siberia*.

32. Yad Vashem Archives, M.27, 33,00030 (originally from Public Records Office, London).

were thus delivered privately, so that they could more effectively publicly press the Soviets regarding Polish citizens.[33]

The reality of the World War not only made the concerns of a small number of Baltic deportees secondary, but also greatly disrupted communication. Only after the war ended, could many of the deportees attempt to resume contact with their relations. By that point, of course, Lithuania was firmly in the grasp of the Soviets and thus unable to make entreaties for deported citizens, but other governments began to inquire on behalf of the deportees. Family members in the State of Israel, the United States, and other Western nations wrote letters to their respective governments asking for help in freeing their relatives.

In some cases, such letters actually proved effective. Leo Adler and his pregnant wife Bella were separated in late 1940, when he, a German Jew, managed to get to Japan with the Mir Yeshiva, while she, a Lithuanian Jew, stayed behind to await news from him. When she tried to join him in early 1941, she was arrested as the spouse of a foreign national and sent to Siberia. Only in May of 1946, did Leo find out that his wife and young son were alive and residing in Karaganda, Kazakhstan. Leo, his uncle, and Bella's aunt began a letter writing campaign to the US government to free Bella. Through their efforts, Bella was released and the family was reunited in January of 1948.[34]

The Adler case is unusual, but even when such letters did not cause immediate action, they seem to have made an impression over time. In November of 1956, the Jewish Labor Committee formally asked the United States government to raise the issue of Jewish deportees in Siberia at the United Nations.[35] Significantly, it was not until the death of Stalin and subsequent beginnings of the Thaw under Khrushchev that most of the deportees were released.

Another difference between the Polish and Lithuanian exiles was location. As Dov Levin has shown, the majority of Lithuanian deportation

33. See for example, Yad Vashem Archives, M.27, 33, 0008 (originally from Public Records Office, London).

34. Adler, *Against the Stream*.

35. "J.l.c." [sic], *JTA*, Nov. 14, 1956.

trains went to Siberia and the Arctic. Only about 22% ended up in Ukraine, Belarus, or Kazakhstan.[36] For Polish deportees, the numbers in Ukraine and Kazakhstan were far more significant. At this point, I can only offer conjectures as to why, and with what consequences. The Lithuanian deportees may have been sent farther away simply because the closer areas were already saturated with deportees. The coal mines in the Donbas required only a certain number of workers, and there were potential dangers in concentrating too many foreigners in one area. The timing of the German invasion may have also led the Soviet authorities to move deportees farther from the borders. Other Soviet political factors, including population manipulation in Soviet Lithuania, may have also figured into the decision.

The result was that the Lithuanian deportees were more isolated. It is possible that this isolation may have contributed to the length of their stay. Polish refugees in Kazakhstan were much closer to centers of population and the seats of power, especially when the government had to relocate to Kuibyshev. Perhaps it was just easier to forget about the fewer and more remotely located Lithuanians.

Even more speculatively, an additional outcome of this isolation may have been more opportunity for religious and cultural self-expression among the Lithuanian Jewish deportees in the north than the Polish Jewish refugees in the south. Based on memoirs and testimonies from both groups, it seems that attempts at religious practice were quickly stamped out in Central Asia, whereas they were largely ignored in the far north. This is not to say that Polish Jews did not go to great efforts to commemorate their holy days, nor that Lithuanian Jews had an easy time of it. On the contrary, both groups faced major obstacles in maintaining any Jewish observance. That said, Lithuanian Jews seem to have been able to sustain a higher level of regularity in their Jewish practice.[37]

The Rachlins, who were not strictly observant and lived for much of the

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36. Levin, ”Arrests”, p. 78.

37. Dov Levin, in his work on the Lithuanian deportees, was also struck by their ability to maintain Jewish languages and practices. See: Levin, ”Arrests”, pp. 89-91.

time apart from other deportees, nonetheless managed to mark all major Jewish holidays, and Israel buried his mother in a Jewish cemetery in Yakutsk. Rachel describes their post-war life in that area:

> Gradually, all of the deportees from Lithuania gathered in Yakutsk. We were quite a Jewish community now and often gathered to celebrate the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays together.[38]

In particular, Lithuanian Jews fortunate enough to be housed with others could develop this opportunity to its fullest. In his memoir, David Shadkhanovich describes a full Jewish life in Bykov-Mys, a small settlement in the Arctic Circle on the banks of the Laptev Sea. They not only observed the holidays, but also provided some supplementary Jewish education for the children. Shadkhanovich reproduces his wife's ketubah, which his father-in-law wrote out from memory for their wedding, in his book.[39]

At this point, it is impossible to determine whether this seeming opportunity was the result of chance, poor oversight, or other factors. One reasonable supposition is that it stemmed from the fact that the Lithuanian Jews were less likely to influence anyone else. Polish Jews, on the other hand, resided in proximity to Soviet Jews, either evacuees or deportees, and might have been suspected of reintroducing religious practice among them. Lithuanian Jews, whose neighbors included Lithuanian Catholics, Yakuts and Finish exiles, were less likely to destabilize Soviet norms.

This brief sketch of the Soviet deportation of Lithuanian Jews demonstrates that it did not follow the patterns set by the larger and more well-known Soviet deportation of Polish Jews. Indeed, particularly with regard to duration, their deportation was so different as to fall into a different category altogether. Deported Polish Jews tend to understand

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38. Rachlin, *Sixteen Years*, p. 200.

39. Shadkhanovich, *Zikhronot*, p. 92. For more on Jewish life in Bykov-Mys see also: Rachmilevitch, *Ve-'od Raiti*, pp. 70-72 and passim.

their time in the Soviet Union as their war experience. Some even refer to themselves as Holocaust survivors. After all, their time in the USSR not only coincided with the Second World War, but was clearly caused by it, and it was a terribly difficult time.

Additionally, Polish Jews who escaped the Germans by fleeing to the Soviet Union actually experienced the first weeks or months of the Nazi occupation. It is not uncommon for their memoirs to contain both experiences. Titles like *Run East: Flight from the Holocaust*; *Through Blood and Tears: Surviving Hitler and Stalin*; and *From the Gestapo to the Gulags*, reflect that sense of connection to the war and, more specifically, the Holocaust.

In contrast, Lithuanian Jewish deportees who left Siberia only in the late 1950s, and even then found it challenging to get out of the Soviet Union, tend to term their deportations as life experience or to see themselves as Prisoners of Zion. Many of them, unlike the Rachlins, had no Western nation to intervene on their behalf and faced additional decades of difficulty leaving the Soviet Union. Shimon Shapira, for example, left Siberia only in 1957. He, his wife, and their three children were not allowed to return to Lithuania. Instead they received permission to settle near a remaining relative in Latvia. Shapira eventually made contact with his surviving brother in Israel. After years of lobbying on both sides, the family was allowed to leave in 1966.[40] Shapira's memoir, *Be-derekh La-arets Ahavati* (En Route to my Beloved Land) along with many others such as *Arukha Ha-derekh Ha-baitah* (Long is the Way Home) and *Kol Ha-neharot Zormot Le-Yarden* (All of the Rivers Flow to the Jordan) include references to the passage of time or to a lengthy journey.

It was Soviet policy that kept thousands of people interned in the far north for so many years. At the same time, however, it was the outbreak of war that brought them into the Soviet sphere of influence in the first place. Without the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, the Soviets would not have been in a position to take over the Baltic States. Additionally, a different outcome to the war would have certainly affected them.

40. Shapira, *Be-derekh*.

Conclusion

In closing, it is appropriate to relate this topic to that of the volume as a whole: the Holocaust in Lithuania. As has been demonstrated, the Nazi onslaught in Lithuania was fast and furious. The death rate of Jews in the Baltics was a stunning 95%.[41] Had they not been deported, against their will and in many cases with just days to spare, these Lithuanian Jews would also have fallen victim to the Nazi atrocities. Yet due to factors beyond their control, including their professions or class status, these particular Jews survived.

As we have seen, their lives were not easy in exile. They faced the inhuman conditions imposed on all Soviet prisoners. Many died of disease, malnutrition, work accidents, and other aspects of the Soviet system. That said, their survival rate was far better than if they had stayed in Lithuania with their families and communities. Despite sixteen years of hardship, Rachel Rachlin was keenly aware of the trade-off, albeit compulsory:

> Only much later did we realize that our deportation actually was our salvation. If we had remained in Lithuania with Israel's relatives and all the other Jews, we would hardly have been able to avoid sharing their fate. The wilds of Siberia and all the ordeals we were to go through in the course of the following years were to save us from certain death. It is true that the object of our deportation was not to prevent us from falling into the hands of the Germans, but the course of history nevertheless caused this to become its paradoxical consequence.[42]

It is precisely this paradoxical consequence that has placed the deportees beyond the pale of Holocaust studies. Had the Soviet Union not exiled them, they would have been victims of the Nazis and included in mainstream scholarship on the war. Instead, and despite the terrible hardships they faced, their story has largely escaped both scholarly and

41. Levin, *Baltic Jews*, p. ix.

42. Rachlin, *Sixteen Years*, p. 27.

popular attention. This research aims to bring their story to light.
Deborah Dwork has recently argued that the study of refugees from the Holocaust should not be contained in separate chapters or entirely different books. Rather it should be part of the study of the Holocaust. ″All were slated for death,″ Dwork points out. ″Fleeing does not write refugees out of the story; it simply takes the story elsewhere. Indeed, it takes it everywhere.″[43] This insight seems particularly apropos to this deportee population, whose fate was changed immediately before the war, against their will. Contextualizing the story of the Lithuanian Jewish deportees within the historical narratives of the war as a whole, the Holocaust in Lithuania, Soviet war policies, and other Soviet deportations has the potential to help us better understand these interrelated experiences. Both the exile and the survival of this group of deportees are part of the chronicles of Lithuanian Jewish life during and after the Holocaust.

43. Dwork, ″Refugee Jews″, p. 282.

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