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AFTER LIBERATION: THE JOURNEY HOME OF JEWISH
SURVIVORS IN POLAND AND SLOVAKIA, 1944-46

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Abstract

In this paper, I tell the stories of Jewish survivors who made their way to their hometowns in Poland and Slovakia between the fall of 1944 and summer 1948. I describe liberation by the Soviet Army and attitudes toward the liberators in Poland and Slovakia. I ask what the Jewish position was in the complex matrix of Polish-Russian relations in 1944 and 1945. Then I follow the survivors during the first hours, days, and weeks after liberation. I describe their pursuit of something to eat and wear and a place to sleep. Finally, I focus on the journey home of Jewish survivors leaving for their hometowns in the hope of finding living relatives and their homes intact. I look at all those experiences as a time of exchange and confrontation between liberators and the liberated and among travelers on the road. I argue that these encounters were not homogenously marked by violence, hatred, and mutual resentment, but also by curiosity, solidarity, and indifference.

Keywords

Jewish history, Polish-Jewish relations, Slovak-Jewish relations, modern East European history, ethnic studies, ethnic violence, post-1945 studies, Holocaust studies, social history.

The majority of work on Polish-Jewish relations after the Second World War focuses on the familiar story of violence and emigration and posits a “natural” link between the two. The master-narrative is that as Jewish survivors returned after liberation, the local population “greeted” them with antisemitism and violence.¹ As a result, rebuilding Jewish individual and communal life in Poland was impossible and emigration was inevitable.

In this paper, I want to add nuance and complexity to the prevailing narrative by placing Poland in the context of Slovakia and by uncovering the heterogeneity of postwar experiences. As an example, I tell the story of Jewish survivors who were not (only) victims or emigrants but liberated returnees, travelers, and co-passengers. More specifically, I describe the daily relationships, exchanges, and confrontations between liberators and the liberated and among travelers immediately after the war. I argue that these encounters were not merely marked by violence, hatred, and mutual resentment, but also by curiosity, solidarity, and indifference.

Soviet Liberation²

Although, *de jure*, the war ended only in May 1945, many residents of Poland and Slovakia began their journey home as early as summer and fall 1944. Depending on the place of residence, hiding, or confinement, the local populations experienced the end of the war at various times between January 1944 and May 1945. As the Red Army advanced from east to west across the country, residents of eastern Poland were free as early as the summer of 1944 while hundreds of thousands of others from territories further west had to wait almost a year, until April and May 1945. As a result, there is no single narrative of liberation but rather hundreds of thousands of stories, each one having its own dynamic and chronology. The stories presented in this paper cover the period between July 1944 and June 1946, which roughly coincides with the liberation of Poland (the districts of Kraków, Lublin, and Kielce, among others) and Slovakia (the regions of Bratislava, Banská Bystrica, Nitra, and Prešov), as well as the repatriation of Polish Jews from the Soviet Union.

On 3 January 1944, the Red Army crossed the eastern frontier of prewar Poland (near Sarny). Henryk Grynberg has eloquently described their entry,

¹ Marc Hillel, *Le Massacre des Survivants: en Pologne Après l'Holocauste, 1945-1947* (Paris: Plon, 1985); Yisrael Gutman, "Żydzi w Polsce po II Wojnie Światowej: Akcja Kalumni i Zabójstw," *Przegląd Prasy Zagranicznej* 2, no. 3-4 (1986). Other works on antisemitism in postwar Poland include Paul Lendvai, *Antisemitism without Jews* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971); Krystyna Kersten, "Kielce – 4 Lipca 1946," *Tygodnik Solidarność* 36, (December, 1981); Bożena Szaynok, *Pogrom Żydów w Kielcach 4 Lipca 1946* (Warszawa: Bellona, 1992); Marian Mushkat, *Philosemitic and Anti-Jewish Attitudes in Post-Holocaust Poland* (Levistone, 1992); Stanisław Meducki and Zenon Wrona, ed., *Antyżydowskie Wydarzenia Kieleckie 4 Lipca 1946: Dokumenty i Materiały* (Kielce: Urząd Miasta Kielce, 1992); Tadeusz Wiącek, *Zabić Żyda: Kulisy i Tajemnice Pogromu Kieleckiego 1946* (Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza Temax, 1992); *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, "Anatomia Pogromu: Rzeszów 1919, Kielce 1946," no. 4 (1996); Jan Tomasz Gross, *Upiorna Dekada: Trzy Eseje o Stereotypach na Temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców i Komunistów, 1939-1948* (Kraków: Universitas, 1998); Anna Cichopek, *Pogrom Żydów w Krakowie 11 Sierpnia 1945 Roku* (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2000); Jerzy Daniel, *Żyd w Zielonym Kapeluszu: Rzecz o Kieleckim Pogromie 4 Lipca 1946* (Kielce: Scriptorium, 1996); Joshua D. Zimmerman, ed. *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Jan Tomasz Gross, *Fear: Anti-semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: an Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Random House, 2006).

² During the last half century, Polish historiography (first in exile and then at home) has widely contested the notion of post-WWII “liberation.” At the core of the dispute was the link between the presence of the Soviet military in Poland in the role of “liberators” and subsequent Soviet political domination. The argument went that while liberation implied freedom from oppression, the Red Army’s advance was (and was widely perceived as) nothing more than the replacement of one oppressor by another. In 2005, during the preparations for the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war and liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, heated political debates best exemplified the ongoing uneasiness around the term “liberation.” Fully aware of this debate, I will nevertheless use the term “liberation” without quotation marks henceforth throughout the thesis. The sources available to me indicate that virtually all Jews and Nazi camp inmates, regardless of their political views, significant segments of the rural population of central and western Poland and all of Slovakia, and the Slovaks opposing the Tiso regime, eagerly awaited the approaching Red Army to rescue them from Nazism. It is true that the Soviet liberation bore severe consequences for the political profile of the two countries in the decades to come. In this narrative, however, it is not the later political influence of the Soviet liberation that is critical but its effect on postwar ethnic dynamics.

The Russians came down the pitted clay highroad that went through village after village of which only the chimneys remained. They came through villages of jutting chimneys, sounding the road with long poles. They came on horsedrawn wagons, gun carriages, and slow, heavy tanks. Their heads were shaved clean, their dirty forage caps shoved back rakishly. The wooden spoons they'd made themselves stuck out from the soft creased tops of their boots. When they halted, they pulled out those spoons and ate their soup and kasha with them, then wiped them on their pants and stuck them back in their boot tops again. They advanced all day and all night, and all the next day again until nightfall.³

On July 20-21, 1944, the Soviets crossed the river Bug (the present eastern border of Poland) and advanced to the west towards what constitutes present-day Poland. In July and August 1944, the Red Army liberated, among others, Lublin, Przemyśl, and Rzeszów – the major cities in southeastern Poland. After reaching the suburbs of Warszawa in the midst of the uprising in August 1944, the Army stopped to enable the Germans their final crackdown on the Polish military underground.⁴ In January 1945, the Soviets resumed their advance westward liberating Kielce (January 15), Warszawa (January 17), and Kraków (January 19). Throughout February and March, the Soviets entered most of the cities, towns, and villages in central and northern Poland. On 6 May 1945, the city of Wrocław capitulated – the final German bridgehead in Lower Silesia.⁵ The Nazi occupation of Poland was officially over.

In Slovakia, the Red Army broke into the country in November 1944 during the final days of the Slovak national uprising. By December 1944, Romanian and Soviet troops had driven German troops out of southern Slovakia. On 19 January 1945, the Red Army, accompanied by the First Czechoslovak Army Corps, liberated eastern Slovakia including the main cities of Prešov and Košice. Three months later, in March 1945, both armies took over the northwest and central regions including the city of Banská Bystrica. On 1 April 1945, the Soviet and Czechoslovak military entered Topoľčany and, three days later, Bratislava – today's capital of Slovakia. The last days of April 1945, when the Soviets conquered the remaining western parts of Slovakia, marked the final demise of the Tiso regime. On 7 May 1945 (effective May 8), Nazi Germany capitulated and signed an unconditional surrender in Reims, France. On 8 May 1945, the Slovak government-in-exile capitulated to the US Army in Kremsmünster, Austria. The war was officially over.

It is a commonly held belief that during and after the war the overwhelming majority in Polish society considered the Russians as bad as, if not worse than, the Germans.⁶ Sociologists investigating the formation of national stereotypes and prejudices in today's Poland suggest that the collective memory of Polish-Russian history can explain anti-Russian and anti-Soviet sentiment among contemporary Poles.⁷ The major historical events that have shaped the vision of Russia as the enemy of Poles are the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland in 1939, the Katyń massacre in 1940, the postwar communist takeover, and decades of Soviet political domination. All these events were experienced or

³ Henryk Grynberg, *The Victory*, trans. Richard Lourie (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 1.

⁴ Andrzej Kunert, ed. *Kronika Powstania Warszawskiego* (Warszawa: Zysk i S-ka, 2004); Włodzimierz Borodziej, *The Warsaw Uprising of 1944* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

⁵ The Wrocław Fortress (German: Festung Breslau).

⁶ Assessment of the quality and intensity of anti-Russian sentiment in postwar Polish and Slovak society remains a matter of speculation. There were no surveys conducted on attitudes toward Russians and other minorities in the late 1940s. Among available sources are personal testimonies as well as fictional and non-fictional essays written at the time. See essays by Polish peasants, written three years after the war, in Krystyna Kersten and Tomasz Szarota, eds., *Wieś Polska, 1939-1948: Materiały Konkursowe*, 4 vols. (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1967). In Czechoslovakia, the public opinion surveys were conducted in 1948. The idea originated in Prague in early 1946, in the office of the Minister of Information Václav Kopecký. Government agents conducted the first survey in April 1948, and the last one (of a total of twenty-four surveys) in November 1950. Approximately 1,000 to 1,200 respondents, selected according to sex, age, occupation, and denomination, answered six to fifteen questions on various themes, ranging from Czech and Slovak national identity, Czech and Slovak relations with the Magyar minority, to Czech and Slovak attitudes towards religion and the regime, among other issues. This material, however, does not include questionnaires on attitudes towards the Soviet Union and the Russians. See Čeněk Adamec, *What's Your Opinion? A Year's Survey of Public Opinion in Czechoslovakia* (Prague: Orbis, 1947); Čeněk Adamec, *Počátky Výzkumu Verejného Mienení v Českých Zemích* (Prague: USD, 1996).

⁷ Andrzej de Lazari and Tatiana Rongińska, eds., *Polacy i Rosjanie: Przewycięzanie Uprzedzeń* (Łódź: Ibidem, 2006). See sections by Paweł Boski and Joanna Więckowska, Adriana Skorupska, Marzena Sobczak and Roman Bäker, Ada Stajewska, and Robert Orłowski. Almost all contributors emphasized the role of history as the central determinant in shaping Polish-Russian national stereotypes and sentiments.

learnt from the popular press, sermons, political speeches, and textbooks.⁸ The generation that came of age in the 1930s and 1940s based their conception of the Soviet Union on the partitions of Poland (which they did not experience) and the more recent Polish-Russian war of 1919-21 and the Soviet occupation of September 1939 (both experienced first-hand).

What remains unclear is how widespread these views were among various strata of society across the country in the mid 1940s. For example, how common among peasants in the Kraków district was the knowledge that the NKVD had murdered Polish officers in Katyń and how influential was this knowledge in shaping attitudes toward the Soviet liberators in 1944-45?⁹ Although this subject needs more research, I speculate that the most recent events involving the Soviet Union and the Russians were still in the process of being internalized by the general population at the time. Knowledge of recent events and the translation of that knowledge into resentment was by no means complete.¹⁰ The suffering at the hands of the Russians was still in the process of becoming the central lens for the perception of Russia and the potential threat it posed.

Also, intensity of resentment depended on geographical location. In the eastern regions of Poland, for example, the Red Army could not count on a warm welcome from the overwhelming majority of Poles. For the most part, Poles in this area, having the Soviet occupation of the years 1939-41 fresh in their minds, perceived the Russian liberation as another military conquest. Noach Lasman, a young Polish Jew, remembered that a desire for liberation by the western powers instead of the Soviets was common in the town of Łosice (eastern Poland) in the summer of 1944. Lasman recalled numerous conversations with local inhabitants who admitted that they had dreamt, unrealistically, of the western allies liberating the country.¹¹

The essays, written by farmers from across Poland for the competition *Opis mojej wsi* (Description of my Village) in the spring and early summer of 1948, suggest that the further west the more relieved and welcoming the local population was.¹² While farmers from the Lublin province appeared, by and large, skeptical (sometimes relieved but never enthusiastic) about the approaching Soviets, their counterparts from the provinces of Kielce and Kraków often described “enthusiastic” welcomes and general happiness accompanying the entry of Soviet soldiers.¹³ A farmer from the province of Kielce wrote, “The day of 14 January 1945, was the day of liberation for my village. I, with a few neighbors, welcomed with bread, salt, and vodka the first Soviet tank that was bringing us freedom, liberty, and democracy.”¹⁴ Also, Lasman noted that the celebratory mood was particularly evident in western Poland, which had been incorporated into the Reich in 1939. For example, in the Łódź area “the population received the Russians as liberators without any ‘but’ ...they were choked

⁸ In November 2005, sixty-seven percent of Poles claimed that Russia was the country Poland should fear the most while “only” twenty-one percent pointed to Germany as the main enemy. Data collected, analyzed, and published by the Institute of Public Affairs (Instytut Spraw Publicznych, ISP), Jarosław Cwiek-Karpowicz, “Public Opinion on Fears and Hopes Related to Russia and Germany,” <http://www.isp.org.pl/?v=page&id=268&ln=eng> (accessed June 23, 2008). Also see *Ibid.*

⁹ NKVD (*Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*) or People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs – the secret police of the Soviet Union created during the October Revolution in 1917.

¹⁰ A process of incorporation, transformation, and constant renegotiation of particular moments and events from the past into collective memory in Poland, in general, and of Polish-Russian experience, in particular, still awaits research. Collective memory remains one of the most ambiguous and difficult categories of historical analysis. See, among others, “AHR Forum: History and Memory,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997).

¹¹ Noach Lasman, *Wspomnienia z Polski: 1 Sierpnia 1944-30 do Kwietnia 1957*, *Wspomnienia, Relacje, Dzienniki* (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1997), 15.

¹² The competition was announced in newspapers by Instytut Prasy *Czytelnik* (the Press Institute *Reader*). Kersten and Szarota, eds., *Wieś Polska, 1939-1948: Materiały Konkursowe*.

¹³ Since the publication came out in 1948 – in the time of intense ideological struggle – its content requires cautious reading. This caveat notwithstanding, peasants’ essays give us some insight into sentiments in rural Poland in the mid 1940s. A farmer’s son, twenty-one years old and a graduate of elementary school from Gnaszyn (Kielce Province) wrote, “On the next day, at dawn, a column of vehicles along with infantry entered [the village]. The population ran out on to the streets in crowds, welcoming its liberators enthusiastically. For soldiers everything was found: vodka, beer, cigarettes, clean underwear, and the like. Each one of us, with gratitude, would share our last bite of food with the soldiers. The residents laughed, cried, and prayed with joy.” *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁴ Village Mnichów in Kielce Province. *Ibid.*, 71.

with freedom.”¹⁵ Even though the link between geography and responses to the Red Army needs more research, it is safe to say that the liberators received welcomes contingent upon the residents’ recent experiences. Those from the territories occupied by the Soviets in 1939-41 had reason to be apprehensive of their liberators and thus restrained from “enthusiastic” celebration. In contrast, inhabitants of the central and western provinces, having had no direct experience of Russian occupation in the recent past, had no such restraints.

What was the Jewish position in this complex matrix of Polish-Russian relations at liberation between 1944 and 1945? After all, Jewish responses to the Soviet advance in September 1939 had far reaching consequences for Jewish safety in the eastern territories and greatly contributed to reinforcing the belief in an alleged Jewish inclination toward communism and loyalty to the Soviet Union (and thus disloyalty to Poland).¹⁶ During the liberation of 1944-45, the Jews had again the most to gain from the Germans being driven out and who chased them away was insignificant. Lasman recalled that for him and many other Jewish survivors,

[O]nly one question existed: when were the Germans going to be driven away from Poland. I had no preferences as to who should do that in accordance with the principle “Whoever is first is best.” I knew, of course, that the majority of the residents of Podlasie would want allies from the West and the London government; however, my colleagues and I could not afford the luxury of choosing liberators.¹⁷

After five years of Nazi occupation and terror, the image of approaching liberators, no matter in what uniform, was intoxicating. Lasman recalled that

[O]n August 1, 1944, ten days after the declaration of the July Manifesto, the Red Army liberated me. A handful of Jewish survivors welcomed the liberators with enthusiasm not because they were Russians and not because they carried some ideas of brotherhood; the cause was prosaic: they were the ones who saved our lives.¹⁸

In this context, one may assume that the Soviet liberation of 1944-45 and the Jewish reaction to the Red Army further antagonized relations between Jews and non-Jews, as in September 1939. However, I suggest that the behavior of Jewish survivors in 1944-45 did not have any considerable impact and did not buttress the stereotype of a Jew-communist, even in the eastern territories of Poland. First, there were virtually no Jews left in the area and those who survived could hardly “celebrate” anything considering their physical and psychological condition. Their behavior was thus scarcely visible in the public sphere. In most cases, individual Jewish survivors emerged in silence from wells, forests, from behind walls and closets, basements, and attics, without the theatrical fanfare of liberation. The moment of liberation did not entail picturesque Jewish crowds throwing flowers on Russian soldiers.

Instead, liberation took the form described by Wilhelm Dichter in his fictionalized autobiography *Koń Pana Boga* (God’s Horse).¹⁹ For months, nine-year-old Wilhelm and his family hid in a well, in the countryside near Borysław (prewar Poland, present Ukraine) – the city they had lived in before the war. The following is a description of the moment of their liberation in the summer of 1944,

¹⁵ Noach Lasman, *Wspomnienia z Polski: 1 Sierpnia 1944-30 do Kwietnia 1957* (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1997), 41.

¹⁶ The most compelling inquiry into a cliché of Jews giving an “enthusiastic welcome” to the Red Army in September 1939 belongs to Jan Tomasz Gross. See his article “Ja za takie oswobodzenie Im dziękuję i proszę Ich żeby to było ostatni raz,” in Jan Tomasz Gross, *Upiorna Dekada: Trzy Eseje o Stereotypach na Temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców i Komunistów, 1939-1948* (Kraków: Universitas, 1998), 61-92. Also see B.C. Pinchuk, “The Sovietization of the Jewish Community in Eastern Poland 1939-1941,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 56, no. 3 (1978); Antony Polonsky and Norman Davies, *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939-46* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991); Pawel Korzec and Jean-Charles Szurek, “Jews and Poles under Soviet Occupation (1939-1941): Conflicting Interests,” in *From Shtetl to Socialism*, ed. Antony Polonsky, *Polin* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993).

¹⁷ Lasman, *Wspomnienia z Polski: 1 Sierpnia 1944-30 do Kwietnia 1957*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹⁹ Wilhelm Dichter, *Koń Pana Boga* (Kraków: Znak, 1996).

Russians approached. By night, through cracks in stones, we saw the sky flaring up. The Earth roared and trembled so heavily that we were afraid of being covered up.... At noon Maks [a Pole who had hidden them in the well] ran up. "Come out!" he screamed. "The Russians have come." "Ask him where they are," mother whispered to Nusia [her sister]. "Where are they?" asked Nusia. "Everywhere." We started to remove the stones. Maks pulled us up. The wet eye of the well, encircled by a stone shaft, looked straight into the sun.²⁰

Second, in the atmosphere of general relief no Jewish demonstration of joy could antagonize Poles at this point. After all, regardless of their feelings towards the Russians, Poles across the country were relieved at seeing the withdrawal of the Germans in 1944-45 even if effected by the USSR. As I have already shown, residents of central and western Poland in particular, mindful of the extreme anti-Polish wartime policies, were as relieved by the Russian arrival as any Jewish survivor. Even in the eastern provinces of postwar Poland, where the population was more cautious about the potential political consequences of a Soviet liberation, the average Jewish response did not dramatically stand out. Therefore, I argue that the mode of Jewish reaction to the Soviet advance during the 1944-45 campaign, in contrast to September 1939, had little or no effect on future ethnic relations in Poland. Instead it was the prolonged presence of the Soviets and their military forces in the country that triggered a far-reaching social and political transformation of ethnic relations.

By considering Polish and Slovak interaction with Russians and the Soviet state, on both the individual and collective level, it is safe to say that in the late 1940s Poles were more prone to anti-Russian sentiment than Slovaks. In Slovakia, the intellectual and discursive framework was overall less conducive to russophobia and hence to accusations of Jewish loyalty to the Soviet Union. The absence of previous Russian aggression, as well as their relative distance from the Soviet Union, left Slovaks mostly neutral toward it at the end of the war. When the First Czechoslovak Army Corps joined the Soviet military in its advance through Czechoslovakia, the alliance did not stir controversy among Czechs and Slovaks.²¹ For the Slovaks, it was Hungary that occupied a similar place in national rhetoric to Russia in the Polish collective memory. A millennium of Hungarian domination of Slovakia and the Vienna Arbitration allocating Slovak territories to Hungary in 1938 contributed to the rise of anti-Hungarian sentiment in postwar Slovakia.

Although it is difficult to estimate with certainty how the local population welcomed the liberating forces in Slovakia and the Czech territories, both armies seem to have been given a "warm welcome" much of the time. Josef Weiser, a young Slovak Jew (born in 1916 in the small village of Pušovce in eastern Slovakia), a partisan in the Slovak national uprising, recalled the "enthusiastic" welcome given to the Red Army by the local population in Žakarovce (eastern Slovakia). Without a doubt exaggerated and colored by his political sentiments, the following fragment nevertheless illustrates the mood in this particular village. Weiser described how on one morning the Red Army entered Žakarovce and a swarm (*raj*) of people came down to the village and "there was already a gate of honor...they had their own band there and bread, bacon, and so forth. So they welcomed them [the Soviets]; simply and very cheerfully [they welcomed] these Soviets."²²

After Liberation

Once liberated, Jews, who survived in occupied Eastern Europe, spent the first hours of freedom in pursuit of something to eat and wear and a place to sleep. Months, sometimes years, spent

²⁰ Ibid., 54.

²¹ The First Czechoslovak Independent Field Battalion was organized in Buzuluk (the Ural Mountains in the Soviet Union) in 1942. In November 1943 it played a key role in the liberation of Kiev (Ukraine). In the fall of 1944, after the battle of Dukla Pass, the First Czechoslovak Army Corps entered Czechoslovakia. The Corps consisted of 16,000 soldiers: Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Jews, Soviets, and others. In 1942 half the Battalion was Jewish. Within months, the proportions changed from twenty-five percent of Jews in January 1943 to 5.8 percent in September 1943. See Michal Gelbić, <http://www.czechpatriots.com/csmu/members.php> (accessed June 23, 2008).

²² "A tam už byla sláva brána, [?] mali svoju kapelu, [?] chlieba, slaniny, a tak ďalej. Tak proste ich tam vítali veľmi radostne tychto Sovietou..." Josef Weiser, interview by Peter Salner and Ingrid Kralova, 1 and 11 February 1995, interview HVT-3659, VHS, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library, New Haven, CT (hereafter cited as Fortunoff Archive).

in concentration and death camps or literally under ground, in wells, holes, forests, and the like, left survivors not only psychologically damaged but also physically wrecked.²³ Jews and non-Jews, who survived death, concentration, or labor camps, were all in terrible condition. A prisoner of Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in Terezín (the northwestern Czech Republic), remembered how just before the end of the war “all of [the inmates] had temperatures. They had diarrhea when they ate even the smallest amount of food. They were covered with lice, and all of them were suspected of having typhoid.”²⁴ Survivors of Auschwitz were in even worse shape.²⁵ Pictures, taken by the Soviets on the day of liberation, show the Auschwitz inmates in a state of extreme emaciation; walking skeletons with flesh covering their bones. These people needed the essentials; to eat, to wash themselves, and to change out of their flea-infested rags.

Excruciating hunger, a daily reality for almost six years of the war, now led people to eat anything they found or were offered. Cases of death from overeating were not uncommon right after liberation.²⁶ After years of hunger, empty stomachs could not handle the sudden intake of heavy food. When well-intentioned benefactors fed survivors with too much food, it often ended in diarrhea at best and death at worst. In this respect, Russians turned out to be “safer” liberators than Americans. While the Russians could offer limited supplies like bread, canned meat, some tea, and cigarettes, Americans brought all sorts of delicacies including salami, cheese, and real coffee. Most of the time, however, it was not an excess but a shortage of food that was the problem for the survivors. Lasman, Halina Birenbaum, and other survivors had similar memories of constant, miserable, and futile attempts to appease hunger for weeks after the war.²⁷

Clean clothing and shelter were the other major concerns in the first few hours or days after liberation. The clothes of the survivors, who had hidden in forests or underground in wells or caves of occupied Poland, were rotten, moldy, full of bugs, and in urgent need of replacement. *Pasiaki* (the striped clothing of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps) were dirty and infested with lice and fleas. Water, soap, and a clean bed became the commodities most in demand. If the liberators were Soviet, hope for organized, institutional help was most often in vain. As a rule, Russian soldiers limited liberation to opening the gates of a camp and providing the proverbial bread and butter. They also made sure that most of the freed prisoners began to make their way back to their hometown as soon as possible. Birenbaum recalled how after some time, equipped with “bread and meat,” Russians just ordered all inmates to set off for home.²⁸ The overwhelming majority of survivors and camp inmates did not eat properly, wash, or change their clothes until they reached their hometown or a bigger city with *ad hoc* organized aid.

Before that, they were left to their own resourcefulness in finding food, clothing, and shelter among the local population. Jews who survived outside camps relied completely on the good will of the local population in both Poland and Slovakia. Individuals who had rescued Jews by providing a hiding place for weeks and months of occupation most likely continued helping during the first days after liberation. For example, Chaim Weill’s rescuers in a small village near Banská Bystrica (central Slovakia) offered him and his family a house in which to stay and recuperate until they could find

²³ Dehumanization in Nazi camps in occupied Poland has been well documented and researched by scholars in Europe, America, and Israel. The most illuminating are personal testimonies of Tadeusz Borowski, Primo Levi, and Elie Wiesel. See Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (New York: Orion Press, 1959); Elie Wiesel, *Night, Dawn, the Accident: Three Tales* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972); Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

²⁴ Eva Roubíčkova, *We're Alive and Life Goes On: a Theresienstadt Diary*, trans. Alexander Zaia (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1998), 170.

²⁵ In the camp, according to the recent estimates, 1.1 million Jews, 140,000 to 150,000 Poles, 23,000 Roma, and thousands of people of other nationalities were killed. Only 7,500 prisoners were left in the camp when the 322nd Infantry Unit of the Red Army entered the area. Franciszek Piper, “Weryfikacja Strat Osobowych w Obozie Koncentracyjnym w Oświęcimiu,” *Dzieje Najnowsze* 26, no. 2 (1994).

²⁶ I have not come upon any statistical data to support this statement.

²⁷ Halina Birenbaum, *Powrót do Ziemi Praojców* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1991); Lasman, *Wspomnienia z Polski: 1 Sierpnia 1944-30 do Kwietnia 1957*.

²⁸ Survivors rarely estimated the exact timeframe of their immediate post-liberation experience. Their narratives usually indicated a span of a few days between the moment of liberation and the start of the journey home. Birenbaum, *Powrót do Ziemi Praojców*, 7.

something more permanent. Russians liberated Weill in February 1945, when he was just thirteen years old. As a son of a religious family he was supposed to have celebrated his bar mitzvah a few weeks after liberation. The non-Jewish family that had saved the Weills let them stay a couple of months longer. They even made a small celebration for Chaim's bar mitzvah; they cooked ham – the most luxurious food they knew – which, obviously, Chaim's family could not eat.²⁹

Needless to say, not all survivors were that fortunate. A survivor's postwar lot depended on the character and motives of the person on which he or she had relied for help. If money had been the prime motive, the rescued was most likely kicked out immediately after news of the end of the war had reached the household. Not unusually, the reason for the demand that they leave the premises was the owner's fear of neighbors discovering that he or she helped a Jew. Michał Borwicz, director of the Provincial Jewish Historical Commission in Kraków, recalled how after mentioning local righteous gentiles by name, "many of those ... came ...with the accusation that by naming them we were exposing them to unpleasant situations and even revenge."³⁰ As Joanna Michlic accurately observed, this testimony illustrated the social isolation of rescuers and overall public disapproval for rescuing Jews during and immediately after the war.³¹ Testimonies of Polish Jewish survivors indicate that the overwhelming majority of them had negative experiences immediately after liberation when it came to obtaining help from non-Jews.

Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War has become one of the most contested subjects of intensive research in America, Poland, and Israel over the last three decades.³² I agree with those scholars who have suggested that the most hostile (open collaboration with Nazis, denunciations, and murders) and the most empathic attitudes (rescuing activities) were the least common and on the margins of "normal" social conduct.³³ The majority, although witness to the unfolding genocide, remained passive, silent observers of their Jewish neighbors' fate. This passivity meant that the average Pole refused when asked for bread or a place to stay overnight during and after the war.

For Slovak Jews, assessment of their state and their neighbors was even more problematic.³⁴ The Slovak State, notorious for its antisemitic rhetoric and praxis, rounded up and transported Jews to death camps in Poland and labor camps in Slovakia during the first two years of the war. The same state, however, halted the deportations in 1942 saving thousands of Slovak Jews from inevitable death in the gas chambers. The survivors found themselves protected by the very state that had launched a vicious campaign against them. Meanwhile, the conspicuous involvement of ordinary Slovaks (e.g., the regular Slovak police, among others) in genocidal practices became one of the most painful disappointments for Slovak Jews. In this respect, both Slovak and Polish Jewish survivors shared an

²⁹ Chaim Weill, interview by Susanne Glaser and Adele Nudel, March 18, 1990, interview HVT-1487, VHS, Fortunoff Archive.

³⁰ Michał Borwicz, "1944-1947," *Puls* 24 (1984); Michał Borwicz, "Polish-Jewish Relations: 1944-1947," in *The Jews in Poland*, ed. Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk, and Antony Polonsky (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

³¹ Joanna B. Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 191.

³² See Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna, *Ten Jest z Ojczyzny Mojej: Polacy z Pomocą Żydom, 1939-1945* (Kraków: Znak, 1969); Antony Polonsky, ed. *'My Brother's Keeper?': Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (London: New York, 1990); Emanuel Ringelblum and Joseph Kermish, eds., *Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1992); Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: the Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (London: Arrow Books, 2001); Zimmerman, ed. *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and its Aftermath*.

³³ Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*.

³⁴ Slovak historiography on popular attitudes toward Jews during the war is much more limited. Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, Ivan Kamenec, Eduard Nižňanský, Livia Rothkirchen, and Yehoshua Büchler remain the few scholars profoundly engaged in the debate. See Livia Rothkirchen, *The Destruction of Slovak Jews: A Documentary History*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1961); Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, *The "Final Solution": the Slovak Version* (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado, 1971); Ivan Kamenec, *Po Stopach Tragedie* (Bratislava: Archa, 1991); Ivan Kamenec, "The Deportation of Jewish Citizens from Slovakia in 1942," in *The Tragedy of the Jews of Slovakia 1938-1945: Slovakia and the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question"*, ed. Waclaw Długoborski (Oświęcim, Banská Bystrica: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2002); Eduard Nižňanský and Ivan Kamenec, *Holokaust na Slovensku: Prezident, Pláda, Snem SR a Štátna Rada o Židovskej Otázke 1939-1945* (Zvolen Klemo, 2003); Yehoshua Büchler, "Reconstruction Efforts in Hostile Surroundings: Slovaks and Jews after World War II," in *The Jews Are Coming Back: The Return of the Jews to Their Countries of Origin after World War Two*, ed. David Bankier (Jerusalem: Berghahn Books, 2005).

aggravated sense of isolation and abandonment by their non-Jewish neighbors. In both Slovak and Polish Jewish survivors' eyes, people who resided outside ghetto walls, by and large, did nothing to help those inside. After liberation, when both sides of the ghetto met, in the eyes of Jewish survivors it was still hard to get help.

During the first hours and days after liberation, sharing bread or opening one's stable for a night or two, even though in most cases no longer a matter of life and death, still bore immense consequences for the survivors' mental composure and provided the basis for a future evaluation of attitudes toward Jews. Unfortunately, the available data do not reveal how many doors opened when survivors and former camp prisoners knocked to ask for food or clean clothes. Even though I am unable to assess the character of these first encounters, I argue that the very moment of knocking signified the beginning of a new process of remaking and renegotiating postwar ethnic relations. This process was in full swing during the return journey home.

Journey Home

In the first few days after liberation, Jewish and non-Jewish camp inmates, Jewish survivors in hiding or refuge, and, among others, discharged soldiers, all departed toward their hometowns, hoping to find living relatives and their homes intact. Alice Braun, a twenty-one year old Jewish woman from Michalovce in eastern Slovakia, set off on the road to her hometown because, as she said,

I just did not want to stay there [in Nachod in Bohemia, where she was liberated]. I knew I had nothing at home. Because I imagined by the time that what I had seen meant my parents could not be alive. But I went back home because I did not want to stay in Germany; I did not want to stay in strange places. I went home just in case I might find someone there.³⁵

This hope, against all odds, to find someone alive was the single most powerful motivation to go back to the place where home had been before the war.

Jewish survivors on their homebound journey represented only a small fraction of the masses of people in motion in postwar Eastern Europe.³⁶ Between 1944 and 1947, movement within state boundaries as well as across frontiers was a daily reality. Both in Poland and Slovakia, domestic migration, interwoven with movement across state borders, became the dominant characteristic of the landscape. In 1945 alone, approximately 1,117,000 prewar Polish citizens returned home from camps in Germany and another 360,000 came from elsewhere in Europe.³⁷ Kersten's comment on Poland in the years 1944-48 as a country of people in motion can equally be applied to postwar Slovakia.³⁸ In both countries, hundreds of thousands of Poles, Slovaks, Jews, Hungarians, Germans, and Ukrainians crossed the borders from the east, west, north, and south on a daily basis. Small and large columns of returnees from concentration and labor camps in Germany and Poland, from the Soviet gulag, or military service, repatriates, exiles, and so-called displaced populations, marched through, making up the postwar East European landscape.

As Kersten established, in the course of repatriation between 1945 and 1948, about 1.5 million prewar Polish citizens were repatriated to Poland from the territory of the Third Reich (including

³⁵ Alice Braun, interview by Jaschael Pery, January 23, 1992, interview HVT-1909, VHS, Fortunoff Archive. Eventually, Braun found a relative in Žilina where she stayed until she met her future husband, also a survivor. They stayed in Czechoslovakia until 1949.

³⁶ While some return movement was entirely voluntary (solely based on individual assessment of gains and losses accompanying return), thousands of returnees were forced to relocate to particular territories as a part of the so-called repatriation and population exchange projects organized and controlled by a state. In the majority of cases, even a seemingly voluntary journey was in fact forced by social and political circumstances. Considering the available data and the character of these movements, distinguishing between voluntary or forced returns is often impossible.

³⁷ Krystyna Kersten, *Między Wyzwoleniem a Zniewoleniem: Polska 1944-1956* (Londyn: Aneks, 1993), 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9. Also see Krystyna Kersten, "Ruchliwość w Polsce po II Wojnie Światowej Jako Element Przeobrażeń Społecznych i Kształtowania Postaw," *Przegląd Historyczny*, no. 4 (1986); Krystyna Kersten, "Forced Migration and the Transformation of Polish Society in the Postwar Period," in *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944-1948*, ed. Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

POWs and prisoners of labor and concentration camps).³⁹ Another staggering 1.2 million pre-1939 Polish citizens (including Jews) were officially “repatriated” to Poland from the eastern territories, now annexed by the Soviet Union.⁴⁰ Jerzy Kochanowski raised this number to 1.5 million after the inclusion of all repatriates from the prewar Polish eastern territories, Siberia, and Central Asia in the years 1944-48.⁴¹ Overall, almost three million people returned to Poland from the Soviet Union and Germany as a result of forced repatriation as well as voluntary homebound movement.

By the end of 1947, thousands of Czechoslovak citizens had also returned voluntarily (mainly from Germany) or had been forcefully transferred from the Soviet Union to Czechoslovakia. In June 1945, Czechoslovakia signed a treaty with the Soviet Union that authorized the cession of its eastern province of the Subcarpathian Ukraine to the Soviets and agreed upon provisions for subsequent population transfers. Of the projected population exchange of 50,000, approximately 27,000 Czechoslovak citizens were repatriated to Czechoslovakia by the end of 1947.⁴² Overall, between 141,000 and 161,000 Czechoslovak pre-1938 citizens (including Jews) returned to Czechoslovakia after the war.⁴³ Finally, in addition to the repatriation of citizens from abroad, the Polish and Czechoslovak states carried out grand projects of demographic engineering, including forced relocations and large-scale “ethnic cleansing,” which resulted in setting the populace of both countries in motion.

Among the migrants and returnees were Polish and Slovak Jewish survivors. According to Paul Glikson, at the beginning of January 1945, there were about 10,000 Jews in newly liberated Poland.⁴⁴ Until June 1945, about 61,000 Jews were registered in Poland, including 13,000 on active military service.⁴⁵ In the provincial and district Jewish committees, the number of registered Jews reached 106,000 in January 1946 and peaked at 240,000 six months later in June 1946.⁴⁶ This sudden increase in numbers was the result of organized repatriation of Polish citizens from the Soviet Union in the first half of 1946. By 1948, a total of approximately 175,000 Jews were repatriated from the USSR to Poland.⁴⁷

In Slovakia, the number of Jewish migrants was much smaller. As Robert Y. Büchler estimated, about 11,000 Jews survived the war in the territory of Slovakia.⁴⁸ Another 9,000 Slovak Jews returned or were repatriated from Hungary and from camps in Germany, among other places. Finally, approximately 10,000 Jews survived in the Magyar occupied territories, which now returned to Slovakia. The peak of Jewish returnees in postwar Slovakia reached about 33,000.⁴⁹

Returning Jewish survivors were not a uniform group.⁵⁰ As I have already mentioned, those Jews who had survived in occupied Poland and Slovakia – in camps, the countryside, monasteries, and forests – were marked by extreme emaciation and a frightened demeanor. They were dressed in rags or in striped prisoners’ clothes, and were almost always alone without any relatives. They clearly were the most visible returnees on the road. In contrast, this was not true for Jewish repatriates from the

³⁹ Krystyna Kersten, “Kształtowanie Stosunków Ludnościowych,” in *Polska Ludowa, 1944-1950: Przemiany Społeczne*, ed. Franciszek Ryszka (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1974), 104.

⁴⁰ Kersten, “Forced Migration and the Transformation of Polish Society in the Postwar Period,” 82.

⁴¹ Jerzy Kochanowski, “Gathering Poles into Poland: Forced Migration from Poland’s Former Eastern Territories,” in *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944-1948*, ed. Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 138.

⁴² Joseph B. Schechtman, *Postwar Population Transfers in Europe, 1945-1955* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), 44.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 122-26. Also see Robert Y. Büchler, “Znovuoživenie Židovskej Komunity na Slovensku po Druhej Svetovej Vojne,” *Acta Judaica Slovaca*, no. 4 (1998).

⁴⁴ Paul Glikson, “Jewish Population in the Polish People’s Republic, 1944-1972,” in *Papers in Jewish Demography* (Jerusalem: 1977), 237-38. Compare to Józef Adelson, “W Polsce Zwanej Ludową,” in *Najnowsze Dzieje Żydów w Polsce w Zarysie do 1950 Roku*, ed. Jerzy Tomaszewski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1993).

⁴⁵ Glikson, “Jewish Population in the Polish People’s Republic, 1944-1972.”

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁸ Büchler, “Znovuoživenie Židovskej Komunity na Slovensku po Druhej Svetovej Vojne,” 67.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Also see data collected in YIVO and JOINT Archives.

⁵⁰ For this observation, I am grateful to Atina Grossmann (private conversation at the NYU campus in Florence in January 2009). Also see Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Soviet Union who were generally in much better mental and physical condition. In July 1946, Jews who had survived in Poland stepped out of their houses to stare at the survivors from the Soviet Union:

... They came, ... to gaze on walking miracles – whole Jewish families, complete with fathers, mothers, and children. In Poland, on liberation day, hardly more than a hundred Jewish families stood intact. But here were Jewish families by the hundreds.⁵¹

Clearly, putting all returning Jews into the simple category of “Jewish survivors” obscures the diversity of their experiences. The place and the character of survival contributed to the ways in which these people experienced life after liberation and the ways in which they perceived themselves and others. The nature of their journey home between the summers of 1944 and 1946 also depended on these varying war-experiences.

Repatriates from the Soviet Union had organized transportation to Poland (special PUR trains); some of them even had a place to sit on the train. But despite such “luxury” the train journey was still a difficult one.⁵² The Dichter family’s train journey to Poland in December 1944, a part of the repatriation from Ukraine, best illustrates the conditions of the railroad system in postwar Eastern Europe. Their trip began late at night after the entire day of waiting for the train to fill up. From Drohobycz (prewar Poland, present Ukraine), they traveled through Sambor, Chyrów, Malhowice, Przemyśl, Radymno, Jarosław, and Przeworsk to Rzeszów (present southeastern Poland).⁵³ The entire journey, of more than 200 kilometers, lasted three nights and three days: stops lasting for hours; sleeping in a seated position with dozens of other people around; urinating outdoors at train stops (in the freezing cold); and the inevitable shrinking of food and water supplies, all contributed to the obvious misery of the journey.

The Jews who survived the war outside the Soviet Union, used any means available to return home. The overwhelming majority had no money to buy a seat on a wooden bench. Those without a ticket were allowed to travel on top of the train or in open boxcars. For example, Joseph Kline’s trip from Prague to Budapest on a train roof in late spring 1945 was a typical train journey home of a penniless returnee,

So we all got on a train [on the roof] and we went to Budapest and on the same train we were all traveling with her [one of Kline’s traveling companions] husband together and we didn’t know that he was on the train because we were traveling [on a roof and the husband was inside]...Trains were so packed, there were no scheduled trains. You just stayed at the station, when a train came you got on it. You didn’t need any tickets; there were no conductors, there was nothing. There was total havoc... we were on the roof because there was no room inside...⁵⁴

Since a great section of the railroad system was destroyed, returnees could rarely make a complete journey on a single train. Most often the returnees combined all available means of transportation to get back home. They walked, hitchhiked, and took trains – whatever was available at the time. Joseph S. Kalina, a Slovak Jew from Prešov, started his journey home from relatively close, only 160 kilometers away, near Banská Bystrica.⁵⁵ “A hungry, lice-ridden, one hundred pound skeleton,” as he described himself, Kalina first walked until exhaustion. Then he stopped at the edge of the road and pointed his thumb eastward,

Some rides lasted only a few miles; others took me from one village to another. On foot, I begged for food, never coming up empty...When I came to a town that had a train service anywhere east, I

⁵¹ Report on “Return to Poland: 140, 000 Polish Jews Come ‘Home,’” 18 July 1946, Collection 45/54, File 734, Archives of the American JOINT Distribution Committee, New York (hereafter cited as JOINT Archives).

⁵² PUR (*Państwowy Urząd Repatriacyjny*) or State Repatriation Office – a Polish communist governmental body created in 1944 to oversee the repatriation of Polish citizens from abroad.

⁵³ Dichter, *Koń Pana Boga*.

⁵⁴ Joseph Kline, interview, August 28, 1984, interview HVT-611, VHS, Fortunoff Archive.

⁵⁵ Joseph S. Kalina and Stanley R. Alten, *A Holocaust Odyssey*, vol. 9, Studies in the Shoah (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995).

got on board and took it as far as it went... At the end of the line I started walking and hitchhiking again. The further east I went, away from the front, the fewer Russian vehicles there were. I hitched rides from farmers and townspeople in their hay wagons and buggies.⁵⁶

Janet Rogowsky had a similar recollection of joining a small group of people riding in a cart drawn by two horses, "During the ten hour trip, we had to stop many times, to feed the horses and relax a while, because our bodies were aching from our long ride on the rough roads."⁵⁷

Some returnees walked the entire journey home. Peter Cukor, a nine year old Hungarian Jew, liberated by the Russians in Strasshof near Vienna, recalled traveling through Slovakia on the way home to Hungary,

So here we [Peter, Peter's mother, and two other members of his family] were, [after] years of the concentration camps, no food, no clothing, or anything like that. And we're moving in opposite directions from two armies, you know, two armies are moving west, we are moving east and they already use... the food, and all the resources of the land and we are trying to survive over there. And it was terrible. First of all it was extremely traumatic to know that as we started walking back... like the half an hour of walking...we got ourselves in the middle of bombing...⁵⁸

Caught in the middle of fighting, Cukor's mother became hysterical over the possibility of being killed after the war was over.⁵⁹ Fortunately, Peter and his family escaped the battlefield safely. Eventually, it took them about two to three days to walk from Vienna (Austria) to Bratislava (western Slovakia).⁶⁰ They walked very slowly. Peter's mother had to carry him most of the time since he was too sick and too weak to walk by himself. Peter recalled how, frail herself, she threw out a jar of jam because it was too much for her to carry.

Similar stories of passengers walking, hitchhiking, riding carts, and "traveling on top of the wagons or hanging from the steps..." of overcrowded trains, can be multiplied.⁶¹ They all testify to the general chaos of the post-liberation period. If, as Kersten suggested, official statistical data left two to three million migrants unregistered, we are left with the difficulty of visualizing an image of millions of people moving from one place to another on a daily basis across Eastern Europe. I argue that in such a context the typical life experience in 1944-46 was located not in physical buildings but on roads, on trains, and in railway stations, turning these places into the focal spaces of human and ethnic relations immediately after the war. It was there, on crowded roads, in crowded trains and railway stations, where people lived for days before getting to their destination. By train, a 200-kilometer journey could last three to four days. On foot, it could last weeks. I argue that human interactions generated in such circumstances were not marked exclusively by fear and hatred, but also by compassion, curiosity, or by utter indifference.

Railway stations, so often overlooked by historians, were fascinating places of human interaction after liberation. After all, it was there, in crowded stations, where people lived for days before departure and where they slept for nights, having no other place to go after arrival. It was there that survivors found news about relatives, often reuniting with loved ones after years of separation. It was there that aid institutions distributed supplies for returnees, repatriates, and deportees. Finally, it was at the railway stations that political organizations welcomed travelers with leaflets promoting their political and social programs. Lasman described how, after leaving the Polish Second Army in the summer of 1945, he found himself homeless and spent the first two nights in the train station in Łódź. There, he met a few Jewish boys who informed him where the Jewish committee was and suggested

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁵⁷ Testimony of Janet Rogowsky, Collection of testimonies, Acc.1996.A.431, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC (hereafter cited as USHMM).

⁵⁸ Peter Cukor, interview by Dana Kline and Susan Millen, April 16, 1987, interview HVT-838, VHS, Fortunoff Archive.

⁵⁹ Since the late fall of 1944, the eastern front had moved rapidly westward making heavy bombings and military operations common in western Slovakia in the spring of 1945.

⁶⁰ A distance of sixty-four kilometers. Cukor and his family walked more than twenty kilometers per day and about 1.6 kilometers per hour (in daylight only).

⁶¹ Emery Gregus, *Reclaiming the Past: Memoirs of a Survivor* (Ottawa: private edition, 2001), 150.

that, instead of going to the committee, he should go to the Zionist Ha-Shomer Ha-Tsair office.⁶² Birenbaum also described the railway station in Warszawa as a place of Zionist political agitation,

Activists of various Zionist parties, representatives of kibbutzim, awaited the returnees at railway stations where they encouraged them to join their parties. Shortly after their [the returnees'] leaving a train, they [the activists] told them that no Jews survived, that everything was devastated and razed to the ground, and that various Polish gangs were hunting and killing the surviving Jews.⁶³

Also, Dichter's most vivid memories from the beginning of the journey involved images of the railway station surrounded by a cordon of soldiers supervising the repatriation process.⁶⁴

Railway stations were not the only places of human interaction. Cukor recalled that, on their way through the Austrian countryside, they knocked on the door of random farmhouses to get something to eat. As a rule, the local population never failed to share food with them. Kalina had similarly positive experience with Slovak farmers who provided food to all travelers and returnees, "Farmers everywhere [in central Slovakia, between Banská Bystrica and Prešov], despite their circumstances, had great empathy for their displaced countrymen. A few villages even set up outdoor kitchens with produce available until dark."⁶⁵ Alice Braun's account, however, contradicts Kalina's testimony,

In Nachod, I was liberated by the Russian army but I did not see the Russian army because I was in private homes. You know the Czechs took us, Czechs were marvelous people. They were wonderful, wonderful people. The Czechs, not the Slovaks. The Slovaks were hateful and they are to this day... Czechs were marvelous, they fed us, they gave us clothing, everything. The moment we crossed the border with Slovakia this is what we got: "There are more of you coming back than left!" ... This is what we got when we came in.⁶⁶

Both testimonies, as any personal account, are highly impressionistic. However, they should not be easily dismissed as unreliable sources. Although not credible enough to form evidence for sentiments among Slovaks after liberation, they testify to the existing hopes and disillusionments among Jewish survivors at the time. On the one hand, Braun and others, having personally suffered antisemitism in Slovakia, translated this experience into a general opinion on every ordinary Slovak. On the other hand, Kalina, who encountered kind and friendly gestures, was eager to think of his observations as true for the entire Slovak population.

Kalina went even further in his narrative, claiming that among all returnees on the road, regardless of their ethnicity, there was "*an esprit*" – a common spirit,

We had much in common: a shared national heritage, hunger, and suffering. War had driven most of them from their homes, dispersed their families, and destroyed loved ones and friends. Conversation was compassionate but not overly inquiring. Where are you from? Where did you end up? Where are you going? People had been through enough; they didn't want to hear any more about travail.⁶⁷

This actual or perceived common spirit among travelers – the solidarity in suffering beyond ethnic boundaries – was a significant and unique dimension of the immediate individual postwar experience.

⁶² Lasman, *Wspomnienia z Polski: 1 Sierpnia 1944-30 do Kwietnia 1957*, 53.

⁶³ Birenbaum, *Powrót do Ziemi Praojców*, 24. Although the postwar reality was not much better than its Zionist interpretation, the intentionally black version of events served particular Zionist political beliefs and goals, i.e. emigration to Palestine.

⁶⁴ Dichter, *Koń Pana Boga*.

⁶⁵ Kalina did not mention to the hospitable farmers that he was Jewish. Joseph S. Kalina and Stanley R. Alten, *A Holocaust Odyssey* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995).

⁶⁶ Alice Braun, interview by Jaschael Pery, January 23, 1992, interview HVT-1909, VHS, Fortunoff Archive.

⁶⁷ Kalina and Alten, *A Holocaust Odyssey*, 181.

People craved compassion after years of suffering and mistreatment; hence any gesture of sympathy was welcomed with gratitude. The impression of solidarity created a sense of belonging to a large group of people bonded by suffering and oblivious to ethnic differences.

It must be noted, however, that it was the concealed “Jewishness” of a traveler which enabled compassion and solidarity. Kalina admitted that he avoided mentioning that he was a Jew because “who knew what antisemitic resentments existed among the refugees. Even had I not been afraid to say I was a Jew, I still would have been reluctant to do so. Living as a second-class citizen for so long, my feeling of inferiority was ingrained.”⁶⁸ Likewise, the Dichters did not “announce” their Jewishness to co-passengers on the train, fearing a negative reaction. Dichter recalled how during the trip new passengers greeted everyone with the Catholic “Praise the Lord!” Women sang religious hymns, prayed out loud, and said the rosary. Dichter remembered one woman from near Tarnopol telling a story of the UPA attacking her village, “They burnt everyone in the church – she said, returning to her rosary.”⁶⁹ Amid similar stories and prayers, nobody bothered the Dichters.

The Dichters, Kalina, and thousands of others were not harassed perhaps because they did not disclose their origins or perhaps because they did not “look” Jewish, or perhaps and simply because nobody cared as co-passengers were overwhelmed by their own discomfort and misery. In particular, Jewish survivors like the Dichters – repatriates from the Soviet Union – were not very “visible” as far as their physical appearance was concerned. They looked no more or less destitute than any other non-Jewish traveler at the time. However, their fear that the passengers would have reacted differently knowing their background, was not just a matter of personal anxiety. In reality, trains in Poland were often the scenes of brutal attacks against Jewish passengers, especially in 1946.⁷⁰ Murders on trains, known as *akcja pociągowa* (train operation), were instances of postwar violence in which, as the historian David Engel put it, “the primary criterion for selection was simply the fact of being Jewish.”⁷¹ In these attacks, Jews, who had survived under Nazi occupation and who were the most visible returnees on the road, were the most likely targets.

Conclusion

In this brief glimpse of Jewish liberation and the subsequent journey homeward, I wanted to complicate the dominant narrative of the postwar history of Jews in Poland. I did this by highlighting the heterogeneity of human encounters in the immediate aftermath of the war. Instead of focusing the narrative exclusively on violence, I describe the moment of liberation, the post-liberation search for food, shelter, and clothes, and, finally, the journey home as an integral part of the postwar story. In such a narrative, violence remains an important but not an exclusive element. A close look at the daily encounters among returnees demonstrates agencies other than that of a victim and renders human and ethnic interaction more complicated than a simple narrative of violence and emigration suggests.

Focusing on specific stories is one way to complicate the picture. Another is to recognize geographic location as crucial in determining social dynamics after the war. For example, the reactions to the approaching Soviet Army varied not only between eastern Poland and western Slovakia, but also between eastern, central, and western Poland, and between rural and urban settlements. The focus on local contingencies breaks the homogenous narrative of the nation-state by revealing competing patterns within the national framework.

Also, breaking up the category of “Jewish survivors” into subcategories of survivors under the Nazis and in the Soviet Union illuminates multiple dimensions of social and ethnic interactions after the war. Jews who survived the war under Nazi occupation and those who survived in the Soviet

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Dichter, *Koń Pana Boga*, 97. UPA (*Ukrayins'ka Povstans'ka Armiya*) or the Ukrainian Insurgent Army – a Ukrainian guerilla group formed in 1942 to fight against the German Wehrmacht, the Soviet Red Army, and the Polish armed underground for independent Ukraine.

⁷⁰ The Central Committee of Polish Jews (Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce, CKŻP) collected dozens of reports on anti-Jewish violence on trains, especially between September and December 1946. See collection of the CKŻP, the Special Commission, RG 15.087 M, USHMM.

⁷¹ David Engel, “Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1944-1946,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 26 (1998): 74.

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Union had different postwar experiences. Their “visibility” or “invisibility” was crucial in shaping their postwar daily life. Those survivors who “looked” like everybody else had different experiences than those who were “visibly Jewish.” The majority of the former were repatriates from the Soviet Union. The latter were survivors in Poland and Slovakia.

Finally, a comparative perspective with Slovak Jewish survivors also helps to highlight the complexity of postwar encounters since it reveals those aspects of the postwar period which remain concealed or ambiguous when examined in the context of a single nation.

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