

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Crossing between Nazi-Occupied and Soviet-Occupied Poland in 1939

By Barbara Krasner

Abstract: In accordance with the von Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union occupied Poland in September 1939. Germany took control of the western sector and the Soviet Union the eastern sector. Families considered their options and made critical choices about staying in place or crossing the border. As entry points became more heavily guarded, movement became more difficult. At Soviet request, the Nazis opened the border for fifteen minutes on November 15, 1939. Using Yizkor (memorial) books from the author's ancestral villages of Ostrów Mazowiecka on the Nazi side and Zaręby Kościelne on the Soviet side, this article examines the effect of the early occupation on the people living in these villages and their migrations within the larger historical context. It pays particular attention to the no-man's land the Germans called the *Judenpass*, the Jewish land strip, that both safeguarded and threatened refugees and separated these two villages.

Keywords: *World War II, border crossings, Sovietisation, Yizkor books, Judenpass, no man's land*

In August 1939, fifty-nine-year-old Yankel Dovid Pryzant went about his business just as his ancestors did before him in the Mazovian shtetl of Zaręby Kościelne (Zaromb in Yiddish). His parents deceased, he stood now as the second oldest of the family. The first-born was Icchok, who ran a dry-cleaning business in the larger town of Ostrów Mazowiecka (Ostrova in Yiddish), eighteen kilometres across the fields and lush forests that gave Zaromb its name, *Zaręby*, forests. Their father had come from Ostrova, where Jews had made their home since 1765. Many of Zaromb's two thousand Jews had family in Ostrova, although its own Jewish community dated back to 1681. In Ostrova, Icchok found good company and good business, as the town boasted a population of some twenty-thousand people, eight thousand of whom were Jews (Gordin & Gelbart, *Memorial Book*: 154).

Neither brother or any of the Jewish residents of these two towns would have known that on 23rd August, Nazi Germany's foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and the Soviet Union's foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov signed a Treaty of Non-Aggression to split Poland between themselves. It contained a secret protocol stipulating that the two countries would reorganise the Polish state approximately following the lines of the Pissa, Narew, Wisła, and San Rivers as the

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boundaries for their respective spheres of interest (General Sikorski Historical Institute, *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations: I*, 40). It was amended on 28th September with the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty to roughly use the Bug River as the demarcation boundary between western Poland and eastern Poland.¹ A confidential protocol to this agreement addressed the transfer of persons of German descent to the Reich and the transfer of those of Ukrainian and Byelorussian descent to the Soviet Union (51).

After the smoke from Nazi bombs cleared, Ostrova became part of German-occupied western Poland. On 17th September, the Soviet army claimed Zaromb and other towns in eastern Poland. The space between the Pryzant brothers and the two towns became a no-man's land. The Pryzants exemplify how fate placed them between a rock and hard place. Should they stay in Ostrova? Stay in Zaromb? Cross from western to eastern Poland? Should they travel farther east into the Soviet Union's interior? Key to responding to these questions are first-hand accounts of survivor testimony in the Ostrova and Zaromb Yizkor (memorial) books and a larger historical context that frames these accounts.

Ostrów Mazowiecka in Nazi-occupied territory

The Nazis arrived in Ostrova with swastika-laden tanks and machine-gun-armed motor squads on 8th September after several days of bombing. SS members followed, possibly members of *Einsatzkommando 2* of *Einsatzgruppe V* (Roth & Schmidt, *Judenmord*: 22). Ostrova's Jews quickly realised this occupation was going to be vastly different from the one they experienced during World War I. The Germans now murdered Ostrova's Jews quickly. As survivor Chana Lewitt observes, "as soon as the Germans arrived in Ostrova, they began shooting everywhere. They even shot dogs and cats. My friend, who looked out of a small window in the attic of her house thinking that she could see the Germans, but they could not see her, was immediately shot" (512). During that first night, the Germans stole into Jewish homes and grabbed the men. They killed more people. In these first few days, the number of Jews in Ostrova swelled as refugees arrived from neighbouring communities of Ostrołęka, Rozan, Myszyniec, and Komorowo carrying baskets and bundles. The Ostrova Jewish community established a fund to help feed and house the refugees.

On the morning of 10th September, the German Security Police called in Rabbi Jakob Zynger and congregation secretary Tuwia Makower. The two men were forced to cut off each other's beards. Then the police ordered Ostrova's Jewish men

between the ages of sixteen and sixty to gather at City Hall at noon. Survivor Jakob Widelec recounts, “those who do not come will be shot immediately. The news spread with lightning speed through the city and everyone was frightened. Nobody was able to make up his mind whether to go or not” (491). Widelec watched as Nazis began to storm homes by eleven am and drag out the men. By four pm, the old marketplace filled with thousands of men, including the male refugees from surrounding towns, all with hands in the air. They marched en masse to the Polish gymnasium and shooting broke out, killing twenty-one and injuring twelve. The crowd quickly dispersed.

During the following few days, the Nazis looted Jewish businesses, giving away food and merchandise to the local Polish population, who “with beaming faces, stand eagerly waiting to take their share of the stolen goods” (492). The Nazis also desecrated synagogues and study houses. On Rosh Hashonah, the High Holy Jewish New Year celebration, the Nazis coerced many men into labour, breaking the religious law. Several did not return. Others managed to stay put and observed the sacred holiday in cellars.

Movement across the border appeared somewhat unchallenged and fluid during the early days and weeks of Nazi occupation. Noted Israeli historian Dori Levin claims, “the Soviet Union still allowed nearly free access to and exit from the areas under their control” (*The Lesser of Two Evils*: 6). The Red Army assisted refugees. Jews were able to escape to Zambrów, a town of more than twenty-thousand people located thirty-two kilometers east on the Soviet side. Max Mishna, a printer’s apprentice, left Ostrów Mazowiecka in early September with his uncle. He recounts that at the border three kilometres away, “the Germans didn’t ask nothing. We went through” (USC Shoah Foundation, “Max Mishna”: Segments 19-23). Refugees also set out for Szumowo, Zaromb, and farther eastern destinations such as Białystok and Slonim.²

On 17th September, some refugees returned with the news that the Russian Army was advancing. Widelec remembers, “the border between Germany and the Soviet Union will be at the Bug River. This means that Ostrowa will belong to the Russians. People were hugging each other and crying tears of joy” (Gordin & Gelbart, *Memorial Book*: 493). But on the night of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as the more religious Jews began Kol Nidre services, Nazi trucks arrived. They herded these Jews onto the trucks and drove them to the *sadzawka*, the natural pond. The Nazis instructed these men on the holiest night of the Jewish year to clean the trucks using their religious clothing as their washcloths.

Survivor Eliezer Knysinski describes:

The greater part of the Jewish population had the opportunity to go to Zambrow, that had been taken by the Russians. None of them were eager to leave everything they had work for and run off with small children into the forests, without good reason. A few weeks later, when the town was full of refugees from surrounding villages, the Jews began to go across the border that was one kilometer from us. (508)

Chana Lewitt points out that even knowing what the Nazis were capable of, deciding to leave remained a complex consideration. She explains, “everyone still hoped, maybe, maybe. That is why hundreds of Jews did not want to leave Ostrowa where they had always made their home. Families separated” (513). Others believed the war would last only a few weeks.

On 27th September, after more Jews from neighbouring Pułtusk arrived, one member of Ostrowa’s Jewish community heard on a forbidden radio that the Nazi/Soviet border was to be drawn at the Zambrów forest. Remaining Jews had difficult and heart-wrenching decisions to make. Widelec observes, “the majority of Jewish Ostrowers have decided to leave the city [...] The Nazis announced that all inhabitants who come from the eastern provinces under Soviet control are allowed to apply for a special permit in order to travel home” (495). Widelec applied for this permission, lying that he had come from Białystok. He received his permit immediately on 2nd October and traveled to Zambrów.³

German historians Markus Roth and Annalena Schmidt submit that escape movements to the east were typical of the border regions in the east of German-occupied Poland. Holding the largest Jewish population in the area, Ostrowa attracted refugees. In some places, the local occupation forces coerced Jews to move along. These forces included the SS, police branches, and the Wehrmacht (*Judenmord*: 25-26). The demarcation line between the two occupations remained ill-defined until the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty finalised it on 28th September in Moscow.

Dwojra Elson and her family escaped from the bombing of their own village to Ostrowa where they had relatives. She writes, “the Russians arrived. Then they left and the Germans arrived. People were saying that the Germans would leave and the Russians would return” (517). According to her account, many Jews had managed to flee over the border to the Russians. Some Jews too old and weak or

families with small children waited for the Russians to return. In this border confusion, Elson recalls:

After a month all the Jews were ordered to gather on the square outside town and from there they would be driven to the Soviet border [...] About two hundred Jews gathered on the square and were shot to death and some were buried alive. Afterward they paved the square with asphalt and made it a bus station (517).

Shoshana Makovitzky Ron-Fisherman and her family shared a similar experience. On Friday, September 1, 1939, Jewish families prepared for the Sabbath. In the Mazovian village of Kadzidło, Ron-Fisherman's father went to the farm to buy chickens. Her mother was making challah. A vehicle armed with a loudspeaker announced everyone had to evacuate within a few hours. Ron-Fisherman's mother made the decision to throw everything in a wagon and head by foot to Ostrołęka. Her father found them by the bridge there. They journeyed to Ostrova, where they lay in one of the synagogues with many refugees from neighbouring towns and farms, with hunger, and with lice. Ron-Fisherman's father paid some Poles to help them cross the border. She and her brother hid in the hay of a wagon until they reached the city of Lomża on the Soviet side, where her mother had family (USC Shoah Foundation, "Shoshana Ron-Fisherman": Segment 21, Segment 28-31).

It may have been the Hubert family who helped the Makovitzky family. Its home and farm lay close to Ostrów Mazowiecka near the border. The family earned a reputation for helping and never understood how refugees already knew they would actively facilitate escape. Mr. Hubert met the refugees at the border and then provided shelter before escorting them in a horse cart to the Małkinia train station. No names were given. Assisting Jewish refugees came with risks, of course. One day the Nazis discovered four Jewish men in the Hubert barn and took them behind the building. They demanded Mr. Hubert to bring a shovel. They ordered the Jews to strip and dig a pit. Both Mr. Hubert and his wife begged for their collective lives. The Nazis did not shoot, but they took the Jews away. The Gestapo eventually caught up with Mr. Hubert. They arrested him and took him to Ostrów Mazowiecka. Mr. Hubert's ability to speak fluent German undoubtedly helped him. He returned home covered in bruises. But even beatings did not deter Mr. Hubert. He continued to help guide refugees to relative safety while also safeguarding their valuables (Hubert Family).

Not crossing into Soviet territory brought severe consequences and brutality. By 5th November, only about five hundred Jews remained in Ostrova. One survivor account narrates that a business dispute erupted between Polish customer Antak Bezhestak and wallpaper shop owner Berel Tejtel, who no longer had any inventory since the looting of Jewish businesses. In retaliation, the customer set the Tejtel's house on fire and the fire spread. Bezhestak informed the Germans that Tejtel set the town on fire. This was just the excuse the Nazis needed. On orders from SS-Obergruppenführer Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger in Kraków, Fourth Police Commander Colonel Brenner conducted an "investigation" and found the Jews, including women and children, to be guilty of arson. They were sentenced to death. The Wehrmacht and SD personnel forced the remaining Jews – numbers vary from five-hundred-sixty to seven hundred – into the ice cellar of the Tejtel brewery. Local Poles received compensation of one złoty for each Jew captured. As survivor Chaim Slomka recalls, "there was no lack of volunteers" (Gordin & Gelbart, *Memorial Book*: 505). The Jews remained locked in that cellar for some time, although accounts range from overnight to several days. Then on the afternoon of 11th November, the day of Polish independence and Shabbat, members of the East Prussian police unit loaded the Jews onto trucks headed for the Warszawer Forest two kilometres outside town. The men journeyed first and were stripped naked. They were forced to dig a pit. Machine guns pummeled all but six of them. The surviving six threw the bodies of their family and friends into the mass grave. The Germans blindfolded the women and maneuvered them to the side of the grave. The women were forced to their knees and then shot. Bayonets impaled the children who had fallen from the women's arms. By seven am the following morning, the task now completed, the final six joined the others.⁴

Judenpass – the no man's land

News of Nazi atrocities traveled via refugee word of mouth. Soviet authorities intentionally cut off their occupied Jewish communities from all sources of information about Nazi policies. Polish-born Holocaust survivor and Israeli historian Ben-Cion Pinchuk asserts, "the atmosphere created in the wake of the pact made the Jews less aware of the danger inherent in Nazism" (*Sovietisation and the Jewish Response*: 131). Of Poland's three million Jews, 1,2 million lived in the eastern sector and that number was mushrooming with refugees (Pinchuk, *Shtetl Jews*: 10).

Warsaw refugee Dora Goldszajder Fajgman and her family expected to come into a village after crossing the bridge over the River Bug out of Nazi control. But she remembers, “When we came to the other side, there was this part of land, who didn’t belong to them [Germans] and not to them [Soviets], no-man’s land” (USC Foundation, “Dora Fajgman”: Segment 8). Not knowing exactly what to do, the family carefully watched the others there. One group headed to the forest. The Goldszajders followed and came to Zaręby Kościelne. There they waited a day for the train to Białystok.

Zaręby Kościelne, described by Polish-born writer and Yiddish press editor Mordechai Canin “as big as a yawn” (Gordin & Gelbart, *Memorial Book*: 820), was only eighteen kilometres away. Refugees fled through no-man’s land and stories quickly spread to the Soviet side of Nazi atrocities. The forests filled with *bezhenstsyes*, refugees. Survivor Gershon Liberman believed as many as ten thousand Jews could be found in the Judenpass in December 1939 (Dorfman and others, *Zaromb Journal*: 26-27). Canin calls special attention to Zaromb. Writing in 1952 when he visited more than thirty Polish villages, he contends this one streetlamp-shtetl became renowned in Poland because:

During the partition of Poland in 1939, Zaromb became the last outpost before the Soviet border. Zaromb became Soviet, but its neighbour Malkinia (Yiddish, Malkin) was in the hands of the Germans. The five-kilometer area between Zaromb and Malkin was a “no-man’s land” and became a dark hell for the Jews who wanted to save themselves from Hitlerism. (Gordin & Gelbart, *Memorial Book*: 821)

The Germans called this no-man’s land the *Judenpass* (Dorfman and others, *Zaromb Journal*: 26), the Jewish land strip. According to Canin, hundreds of terrified and beaten refugees remained in “no man’s land” with no food. They were afraid to go back home and the Soviets would not allow them to move forward. Canin characterises these refugees as “broken nobodies” (Gordin & Gelbart, *Memorial Book*: 822). He presents the Jews of Zaromb as heroes. He valorises,

the Zaromber Jews organized rescue expeditions to bring the Jews to Zaromb. The entire village became part of the rescue effort. Using back roads the Jews stole into the forest to get the unlucky refugees, Jews with frozen feet, frozen noses and ears, and especially Jews who were mentally broken...In those days it seems that the Zaromber Jews had a special mission from the ‘Lord of the Universe. (822)

News of Zaromb rescue traveled with the refugees as they journeyed farther east within Soviet territory to Białystok. He writes, “the world had never heard of this Zaromb in the sticks...” (822).

Gershon Liberman writes a similar account: “The forests around Zaromb are full of Jews [...] Many have been there several nights up to several weeks, waiting their turn to board a train” (Dorfman and others, *Zaromb Journal*: 25). In the forests, the refugees established a rhythm of sorts. Children hunted for kindling so their mothers could cook in their makeshift kitchens. Smoke and smells of different foods in preparation rose to the treetops.

From Zaromb, refugees like the Goldszajders could board trains heading east. Zaromb’s train station, built in 1921, lay three kilometres outside town, adjacent to Leshner Forest. Along these tracks the Soviet trains bore large five-pointed Russian stars and operated round the clock. A portrait of Stalin sat above the star while two large red flags snapped on either side. For the refugees, this sight comforted them, if only initially, issuing “Welcome.” The trains were so crowded, a friend of Dora Goldszajder pushed her head first through an open window. Liberman recalls hyperbolically, “this is how hundreds of thousands of Jews got through the Zaromb chapter of their journey. In far away Siberia, Magnitogorsk [sic], Ural, and in all the far corners of the enormous land of the USSR, Polish Jews recalled Zaromb with a blessing on their lips” (25). Small as it was, Zaromb earned a reputation as a major transit station. It, like many shtetl communities “showed greater concern and devoted more energy to helping the refugees than one could find in the larger towns” (Pinchuk, *Shtetl Jews*: 108).

October 1939 stimulated several policy questions for the Soviets. Though its agreement in the Ribbentrop-Molotov treaty carried forth the Soviet claim that it wanted to rescue and free oppressed Belorussians and Ukrainians living in Poland, did the allowance of Jewish refugees to cross the border mean the USSR also wanted to rescue Jews? Pinchuk maintains that it most assuredly did not (105). Still in October, Soviet authorities did nothing to stop wholesale border crossings, such as the entire Jewish communities of Ostrołęka and Brok forced by the Nazis to enter the Soviet side. An account of this border crossing from the Ostrołęka Yizkor book recalls, “the Russians received us cordially, offered us cigarettes and candies” (105).⁵

Fifteen minutes to run

However, Soviet patience wore thin by mid-November. On 15th November 1939, the Soviets lodged an official protest against Germans forcing refugees across the border (106; Sierkirski, *The Jews in Soviet-Occupied Eastern Poland*: 112). The Nazis opened the border for fifteen minutes that same day, four days after the mass execution of Ostrova's Jews. Zaromb survivor and refugee guide Gershon Liberman writes:

People ran. Some were carrying weaker ones on their shoulders. The officers could not control the situation. Young people from Zaromb went into the no-man's land strip and yanked children out of the tightly-packed mob, bringing them back through the wire fence. They took bundles and threw them over into the Russian side. The people of Zaromb did everything in their power to ensure that as many Jews as possible got through in those 15 minutes. (Dorfman and others, *Zaromb Journal*: 26-27)⁶

Even for the most skilled athlete, running eighteen kilometres in fifteen minutes while carrying burdens would have been a feat.

Polish and Eastern European history specialist Maciej Sierkirski notes that by December 1939, the frontier was nearly sealed, preventing the return or the escape of many central Poland refugees who became disillusioned on the Soviet side (*The Jews in Soviet-Occupied Eastern Poland*: 113). This movement west, which in hindsight appears counterintuitive, receives reinforcement from historian Jan Grabowski, who references the border escapes briefly in his discussion of southeast Polish ghetto in Dąbrowa Tarnowska. He writes, "in the first months of the war, several hundred local Jews fled eastward, under the Soviet occupation. Some of them stayed in the Soviet Union, while others – terrified of the economic and political conditions in the East – trickled slowly back to Dąbrowa during the fall and winter of 1939" (*Hunt for the Jews*, 25). This corroborates the first-hand accounts from the Zaromb memorial book as well as Canin's from the Ostrova memorial book.

Yet, Liberman's account clearly indicates refugees ran east from the Nazi to the Soviet side. Irrespective of direction, Mazovian Jews found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. But there was more to their dilemma than they knew. They served as pawns in pan-national games.

Germany relied on the Soviet production of raw materials and the return of ethnic Germans living in the USSR. The Soviets wanted to repatriate Belorussians and Ukrainians living in German territories. On 16th November, an agreement

between the two countries went into effect wherein their respective ethnic populations could officially migrate “home” (General Sikorski Historical Institute, *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations: I*, 53). However, for the Germans this agreement also provided the means through which they could legally transfer Polish Jews across the Soviet border (Pinchuk, *Shtetl Jews*: 106).

Tensions flared on both sides. In early December, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel issued a formal complaint about “repeated wrangles” on the border between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany that required German Army intervention. In a 5th December memorandum, Reich State Secretary Ernst von Weizsäcker writes, “the expulsion of Jews into Russian territory, in particular, did not proceed as smoothly as had apparently been expected” (U.S. Department of State, *Documents on German Foreign Policy*: 489). Later that month, the Soviets continued to complain about Germany’s deportation of Jews to Soviet land (560-561). Urged to take the Soviet complaints seriously and to hasten the return of ethnic Germans, the Reich practice of forcing Jews into Soviet territory ceased in early 1940.

Refugees on the march

By the end of November 1939, the Soviet border closed in Mazovia while it remained open elsewhere into 1940. Pinchuk claims, “the attitude of the Soviet guards differed from place to place. Occasionally hundreds and even thousands were allowed to cross the border” (106). Liberman continues his description of no man’s land of December 1939. Małkinia Gestapo or local vandals entered the *Judenpass* to harass and attack the thousands of unprotected and hungry refugees stuck there. Young Zarombers staged stormings of the border on several occasions. They organised the Jews there into rows. With women and children leading the way, they waved a red flag with Stalin’s portrait and sang the socialist anthem, the “International.” They marched to the border and met up against the Soviet guard. Liberman notes, “the guards were disoriented and frightened. They alarmed their headquarters with an exaggerated report of ‘ten thousand marching on us’” (Dorfman and others, *Zaromb Journal*: 26). The Soviets shot in the air. They pushed back against the mob and threatened to shoot to kill. But the refugees pushed forward and managed to get as far as the pine trees of Leshner Forest. Some people had been hit by stray bullets, but the majority of the horde found themselves now safe on the Soviet side.

Additional attempts to storm the border guards proved to be futile, however, as the Soviet units now received reinforcement. Still, the Nazis routinely inspected

the *Judenpass* and tried to force Jews back to the side they controlled. This maneuver contradicted other practices to force movement of Jews into Soviet territory and raises questions of motivation and intent. To the Russians, this was a pact violation and they insisted the Nazis leave no-man's land. Liberman writes, "Zaromb was like a boiling cauldron" (26). He notes a telegram from Stalin dictating, "let them [refugees] through" (26). Tensions between the two powers broiled with refugees as pawns.

Border protection intensified to present an ever-increasing physical obstacle. Even non-Jews required a special permit to cross into Soviet land after the USSR absorbed the eastern sector of Poland. Pinchuk cites stringent cases occurring in the Baltics and Belorussia in contrast to a more open border policy in Ukraine. People who could claim Soviet citizenship prior to 1939 gained permission to pass through (*Shtetl Jews*: 124).

Sovietisation

Eastern Poland officially became the Soviet Union by 2nd November 1939. Pinchuk posits that the sizable number of refugees from the former Nazi-occupied section of Poland made their presence felt in urban centres "augmenting the numbers of the maladjusted and frustrated among the local Jewish community" (102). Refugees contributed to this aura of despair, feeling restless, uncertain, and always under some government's watchful eye. Pinchuk estimates about ten percent of Polish Jewry moved to the Soviet Union (103).⁷

By entering the Soviet Union, Polish Jews encountered a different culture. This former eastern Poland for example, rightfully earned the reputation as being economically backward. Historian Jan Gross calls it "the backward half of a backward European county" (*Sovietisation of Western Ukraine*: 64). Nothing could be truer about Zaromb, a wagon-wheel of a shtetl with a market square and four spoked streets, one unnamed and all graveled.⁸ To say the "back roads" of Zaromb was to be redundant. Even before World War II, it encountered economic depression, especially when the Poles enacted a boycott of Jewish goods in 1937-1938. Zaromb Jews reached out to the American *landsmanshaft* (émigré/survivor town-based organisation) for relief. In its assessment of the situation, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee reported the town had two-hundred-fifty Jewish families and no good roads to connect it to neighbouring towns.⁹ Yet, despite their many troubles, it is clear the Jews of Zaromb felt an obligation to help and save Jewish refugees filling the town and the forests. Many were family and

friends. Liberman claims, “Acquaintances got priority over others who were just as desperate” (Dorfman and others, *Zaromb Journal*: 24).

The Soviets stationed near Zaromb made some improvements in stark contrast to when a retreating Russian Army burned down the shtetl in 1914. They enlarged the mills and the roads, providing some employment. They set up tradesmen cooperatives. They built cultural centers, including a club that replaced the burned synagogue, a cinema, a dance hall, a reading room, a theater group, a sports club, and a people’s court (28). The poor town came to life in the early months of Soviet occupation.

However, Pinchuk’s analysis of more than twenty Yizkor books as well as secondary sources yields a different narrative. While eastern Poland underwent twenty-one months of Soviet rule before Nazi invasion in June/July 1941, Pinchuk maintains, “centuries-old structures of community life, leadership and relations between the individual and the surrounding world were destroyed. By the time Soviet rule came to an end the Jew had been deprived of leadership, communal organisation and age-old methods of dealing with situations of crisis. He faced a threat to his very existence – and stood alone” (*Sovietisation and the Jewish Response*: 124). The Jewish self-government that had been in place for centuries was put to a stop as the Soviets installed their provincial government structure.

The Sovietisation process had clearly begun. From the Soviet perspective, there were still gains to be made through mandatory naturalisation. As Ostrova survivor Miriam Cohen explains, refugees had to register, become Soviet citizens, and receive Soviet internal passports. The Soviets required registration to manage military draft and deportations. They granted automatic citizenship to all those living in the annexed territories on 29th November 1939 (Poland, Ambassaada, United States, *Polish-Soviet Relations*: 126). To the Soviets, refugee allegiance to their new country proved paramount and attempted to buoy sentiment with newspaper spreads welcoming them to the “Soviet family of nations” (Pinchuk, *Shtetl Jews*: 6). Some refugees received orders to travel further east. Those who chose to remain Polish citizens received punitive orders. For weeks they traveled by cattle car to remote labour camps in places such as the northern Soviet city on the White Sea, Archangel. In this way, Cohen and her married sisters separated (Gordin & Gelbart, *Memorial Book*: 510).

Polish Jewish refugees who refused citizenship, as did of Cohen’s sisters, faced the Soviet deportation. Polish historian Andrzej Żbikowski attributes this refusal more to disillusionment with the Soviet system than to allegiance to Poland

(Żbikowski, *Polish Jews under Soviet Occupation*: 56). Those particularly exposed to this risk, Pinchuk argues, “showed a particular interest in the developments in the German area, had family connections across the border, had made repeated attempts to sneak through the frontier to visit relatives, and had often expressed the desire to emigrate overseas” (*Shtetl Jews*: 114). Four waves of deportations began in early February 1940 as a means of Soviet social control. A second wave initiated in mid-April 1940. A third wave in June 1940 consisted primarily of Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Poland (Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*: III, 382). The first Jews to be deported were those in positions of authority within their respective Jewish communities. Pinchuk observes, “trains with thousands of Jews moved East as deportees, on the very day the German troops crossed the borders” (*Shtetl Jews*: 129).

The ultimate fate of those who crossed

Ostrova survivor Awiezer Imber claims most Jews from the town went to the “refugee melting pot” of Białystok. But their relief did not last long. The Soviets ordered all refugees to leave since Białystok was only one hundred kilometres from the border. Imber believes, however, “the real reason was that the Russian administration would be arriving with their families from Russia and needed places to live” (Gordin & Gelbart, *Memorial Book*: 542), in a Slavic interpretation of Nazi *Lebensraum*. From there, Ostrovers moved to Slonim which swelled to a population of forty thousand Jews. They managed to find work or subsist on traded goods.

Operation Barbarossa changed everything. Jews on the Soviet side had to make their choices when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union on 22nd June 1941: Join the Red Army, flee to the east, or settle with the Germans. Pinchuk asserts, “traditionally in these regions Russia had the image of a backward, anti-semitic country, while Germany represented European culture, law and order. This image strengthened the natural tendency to stay at home, not to embark upon the unknown trail of flight and the life of a refugee” (*Shtetl Jews*: 132). Most of those who chose to flee were young people who had little to risk.

On-the-spot murders of Ostrova Jews occurred. Ghettos were established, and some Jews entered forced labour. Others escaped into the forests and took up arms as partisans. Imber numbered among them. Most, however, perished at Treblinka, built twenty kilometres from Ostrova, as well as Auschwitz, and Majdanek.

Survivors tended to be those who had moved well into the Soviet interior or served as forced labour in Siberia.

While German troops advanced and the Soviet army retreated during the initial days of the campaign, borders remained highly protected, and restricted the flight of refugees eastward. Pinchuk terms this “a rather bizarre episode” (124). For example, threats of on-the-spot shooting loomed large on signs at the border station of Rodoshkevich en route to Minsk. Meanwhile, the guards themselves, not having received any new orders, saw no other choice but to refuse entry to thousands of refugees. Many refugees chose to wait out the situation in the open fields in the border villages. The delay proved to be costly for many. As Pinchuk observes, “the time wasted near the border while trying to evade the Soviet patrols was used by the German army to move further east, trapping many of the refugees or killing them by air attack” (125).

One of most burning questions is why the Nazis killed the entire Jewish populations of some towns yet forced the Jews of other towns into the Soviet-occupied zone. During an inspection tour of the occupied Polish territories, Security Police Chief Reinhard Heydrich ordered the head of Einsatzgruppe I in Kraków on 11th September 1939 to use rigorous measures to induce Jews in particular to flee to the Russian occupied territories (Curilla, *Der Judenmord*: 28). Holocaust survivor and historian Saul Friedländer asserts that on 27th September, Heydrich informed Reich Security Main Office and Einsatzgruppen heads that the Führer had authorised the expulsion of Jews from German-occupied Poland to the Soviet side (*Nazi Germany and the Jews*: 31). To get these Jews to move might require force. Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg posits that short bursts of violence against Jews, initiated in Germany and Austria, proved useful in occupied Poland to demonstrate to local authorities and Jews the need for law and order (*The Destruction of the European Jews*: I, 189). Further, Hitler indicated to advisor Alfred Rosenberg on 29th September that all Jews including those from the Reich would be “settled” in newly-gained territory between the Vistula and Bug rivers (Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*: 27). The goal was clear: Clear the countryside of Jews, transfer them to the cities for ghettoisation as a collection point and then to concentration camps, thereby resolving the Jewish Question and providing the much-needed *Lebensraum* for Germany (26).

This strategy was not at all clear to Mazovian Jews. Yizkor books of communities throughout the region, an often overlooked and inaccessible set of sources, can provide eyewitness accounts while archival records may also prove useful if they exist. However, distinguished Jewish historian Jacob Shatzky

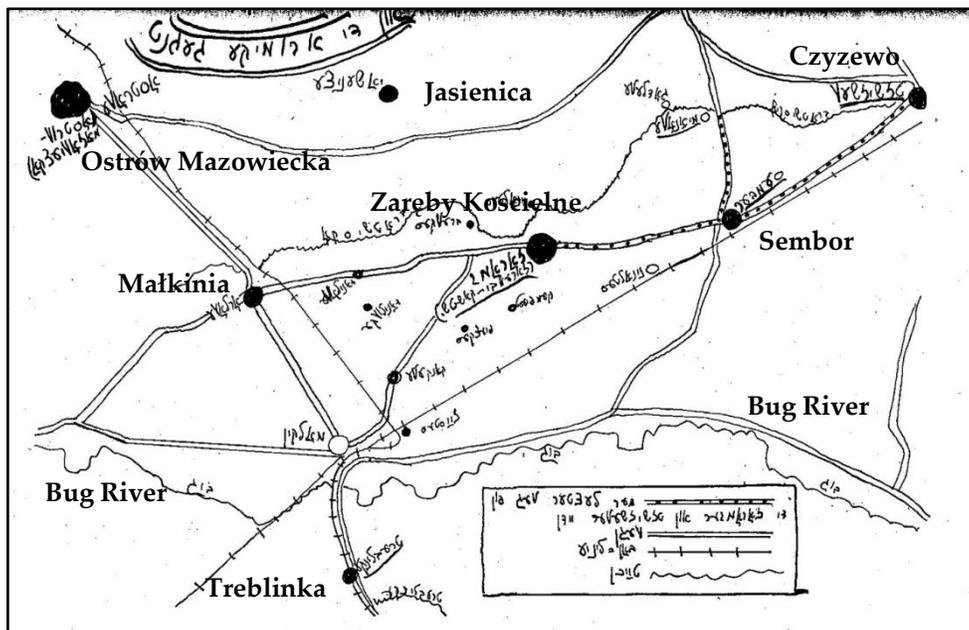
condemns the Zaromb memorial book in particular. While he applauds the historical narrative in the “Destruction of Zaromb” chapter, he finds the remaining pages “no more than a collection of small, incidental, and simple articles,” claiming that for the most part, Yizkor book editors had no qualifications to serve as editors. Yet, this source, like other Yizkor books, does “have a positive effect on our historical perspective and on the realistic approach to the past” (*Review of Yizkor Books*: Chapter 4). It becomes quite clear that most researchers do not consult memorial books as a source. Writing scholar Rosemary Horowitz historicises these grass-roots books. Typically, the *landsmanshaft* for a community, e.g., United Zaromber Relief, collected articles, essays, and other contributions from its membership. Horowitz asserts that these books maintain the communal record-keeping practice as a final volume. She also believes few scholars have attempted to analyze or write about these town histories, because there are so many towns. She posits, “the basic responsibility for writing the history of the destroyed town seems to have shifted from scholars to descendants from the place” (*Memorial Books of Eastern European Jewry*: Chapter 1). Volunteer Jewish genealogists have been working to fund and produce Yizkor book English translations, making these rich sources more accessible for researchers. To respond to the questions of the role played by the Mazovian no-man’s land wedged between the Nazi and Soviet territories, Yizkor book accounts provide the micro-level details and secondary sources provide the macro-level context to frame the accounts. As Pinchuk shows, these books paint a portrait of Jewish movement, hesitation, denial, and justification during tough times. They give the feet-on-the-street perspective of war.

The decision to cross or not cross the border in the first three months of Nazi and Soviet occupation of Poland had longer-term consequences for the Jews of Ostrova. Caught between the vacillating trust and distrust between Germany and the USSR as well as in the forests of no man’s land, no single solution proved to be the safest one. A family’s or individual’s decision to stay or leave was based on available information at that time and in that place without any possible frame of reference to foresee the future. They carefully chose the path that represented to them a lesser evil. In the Polish shtetl, a typical Jewish family had long roots and many branches. So many could not bear to leave their ancestral homes. Complicating the decision were long-held stereotypes of a civilised Germany and a barbarian Russia. In the generations affected by the occupation, memories of World War I and the occupation during those years blurred the realities of the new war. In both Ostrova and Zaromb, the retreating Russian Army torched buildings while residents hid in their attics and cellars. As the Russians left, the townspeople

crawled out from their hiding places and welcomed the Germans. Such memories proved difficult to repudiate.

Ichok Pryzant did not cross the border. He, his wife, and children appear in the Ostrova Yizkor book's necrology. His brother, Yankel Dovid, took a Soviet train east and temporarily resettled in Uzbekistan-Bukhara. After the war, he and his family returned to Poland. Deciding there was nothing left for them there, they created new lives for themselves in Palestine. It is unknown whether Yankel Dovid ever informed his younger brothers in America of his survival. However, the granddaughters of Yankel Dovid and younger brother Avram Mendel (Max) crossed the no man's land of time. They discovered each other in 1997 with the help of the now-defunct Bureau of Missing Relatives in Israel.¹⁰

Illustrations



A hand-drawn map in the Zaromb Yizkor book also appears in the Ostrova book, conveying that such maps were rare. As the map indicates, the Bug River did not bifurcate the Nazi and Soviet territories in this part of Mazovia.

Source: Z. N. Dorfman, N. Lava, Z. Rumianek, and Moshe Shtarkman, eds., *Zaromb – L'zikron olam: Di Zaromber Yidn Vas Zaynen Umgekumen – el Kedosh Hashem* (Brooklyn, NY: United Zaromber Relief, 1947), 15. English-language labels added.



A Jewish family crosses the border near Ostrów Mazowiecka, 1939 (courtesy Stanley Diamond and Hubert Family)

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¹ Ostrów Mazowiecka and Zaręby Kościelne are actually located on the same side of the Bug River. See map.

² For these and other destinations, see Gordin and Gelbart, Eyewitnesses chapter, 497-632.

³ Widelec had resettled in New York by 1946. He wrote a four-week diary detailing the events of the fall of 1939.

⁴ The USHMM has five photographs of these executions of Ostrova's last Jews.

⁵ Pinchuk's source is the Ostrołęka Yizkor book, *Sefer kehilat Ostroleka*, published in Tel Aviv in 1963. See also Yad Vashem's *Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities*: 151-152 and "Brok," translated by Ada Holtzman, https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas_poland/pol4_00151.html (accessed on 17th December 2018).

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- ⁶ In the original Yiddish version, the term “no-man’s land” literally translates to “the neutral land.” See also Dorfman et al., *L’zikron olam*: 26.
- ⁷ Pinchuk has accepted Bernard Weintryb’s figure of three-hundred thousand Jews (Pinchuk, *Shtetl Jews*: 107).
- ⁸ This description comes from the author’s visit to the town in 2008.
- ⁹ The report also noted Zaromb had between fifteen and twenty furriers, four windmill owners, two hosiery workshops, and many oil mills where seeds from local farmers were pressed. A fire broke out in May 1938 in which 69 people lost everything. JDC Chairman Edward Warburg wrote in June 1938, “never has the population been so poor, and the boycott stronger.” See JDC Archives, Collection 1933-1944, file #873.
- ¹⁰ Avram Mendel Pryzant was the author’s grandfather; Ichok and Yankel Dovid Pryzant were her great-uncles. She treasures her grandfather’s copy of the Zaromb Yizkor book.