

IN SOVIET POLAND AND LITHUANIA

By DAVID GRODNER

RIGID censorship and the absence of accredited news correspondents have made it impossible for American readers to learn what is really happening to Jews in Soviet Poland and Lithuania. The impression that Polish refugees have found a friendly home in these areas is fostered largely by Communist propaganda, which has publicized the letters of those elated by their escape from Nazi Poland or those who had the good fortune to make a fair adjustment under the new conditions. Having spent at least six months in Soviet Poland and more than that time in Lithuania, including the period of its occupation, I feel it my duty to tell what I have seen happen to the religious, communal and cultural life of Jews under their new Soviet masters. In particular, more ought to be known about the fate of at least one hundred thousand Polish Jewish refugees who sought a haven from the Nazi invaders only to be driven mercilessly to the frozen tundras of Siberia.

Newspapers in the United States have exaggerated the number of Jews in Soviet Poland. Altogether, there are about 1,200,000 Jews in Western Ukraine (former Galicia) and Western Byelorosya (White Russia). In addition, approximately 500,000 Jews fled there from Nazi Poland. About 60% of these refugees, it must be noted, arrived before the Red Army entered the country.

On the night of September 6, 1939, the propaganda chief of the Polish Army announced over the radio that Warsaw was to be evacuated and ordered all inhabitants of military age to leave the city.* (Later, it was rumored that this official was a German spy carrying out Nazi orders.) About 200,000 persons left Warsaw that night and headed for the Bug River, where the Polish Army was planning to make a last stand. There is no doubt that the Germans would have met with great resistance along this strategic line, had the Poles not been attacked by the Red Army from the rear.

* Conditions in Nazi Poland have been described in the CONTEMPORARY JEWISH RECORD, III, 18-25; 484-97.

While a number of refugees managed to escape before the Nazi hordes occupied their towns, most of them, including many Czech and Austrian Jews, were rounded up by the Gestapo and driven to the frontier. There they streamed across the Soviet boundaries at three points: Zaremb Koscielny, a village near Bialystok; Drohyczyn, a village bordering on the Bug River near Semiatycze; and Przemysl, the point of entry for Jews from Galicia and those deported from Czechoslovakia. It was at Zaremb Koscielny and Drohyczyn that the most poignant incidents took place. Those I witnessed at Zaremb Koscielny, I shall never forget.

During the first few weeks of this mass exodus, the Red Army guards permitted everyone to cross the border and frequently showed a sympathetic attitude. About the fifteenth of October, however, the borders were suddenly shut tight. The sentries were no longer friendly, and frequently towns and villages near the border were searched for refugees who had somehow got across. The hunt extended as far as the railroad station of Czyzew, a town ninety *versts* from the border. Those caught were shipped back to Nazi Poland. Soviet border guards shot at anyone trying to cross the border. Nazi guards, in turn, fired at anyone trying to get back. The unfortunate refugees, caught between two lines of fire, had no choice but to remain in a no-man's-land along the border.

Meanwhile, the weather had grown bitterly cold and many froze to death. Only after great difficulties could Jews living in the border towns receive permission from the Soviet authorities to bury the dead and the murdered. I myself witnessed the tragic burial of a seventy-year-old man, a young mother and her three-months-old baby, all of whom died of exposure.

Thousands eventually gathered in these no-man's-lands. Nazi guards would have "fun" with them, and their cries would be heard on both sides of the boundary. The actress, Ida Kaminsky, was forced to clean open latrines with her hands. The actor, Zisha Katz, was beaten so badly by the Nazis that he was incapacitated for days. Later he committed suicide in the "happy" and "liberated" Bialystok. It is impossible to describe the appearance of these refugees, hungry, starved, ill, and dressed in rags. Local Jews did their utmost to help them, frequently sharing with them their crowded quarters and their last piece of bread. On the other side, the Red soldiers stood grimly and silently holding their guns ready. When

finally the refugees had reached a point of desperation, they stampeded past the Soviet guards. Several were shot, but most of them got across after overpowering the sentries by sheer weight of numbers. Sometimes Red soldiers who sympathized with these unfortunates disregarded the orders of their superiors.

The situation was much worse at Drohyczyn. Here, the refugees had to cross the Bug River in rowboats, frequently under a hail of bullets from both Nazis and Soviets. Bodies of the unlucky ones were usually found on the banks of the river a few days later. It was in this way that the Labor Zionist leader, Tarczyc, former City Councillor of Pulawy, found his eternal rest together with his family of five.

IT WAS not long before the larger cities of the newly-occupied eastern provinces were crowded with refugees. Their condition was unbelievable. Refugee relief was organized on a systematic scale with the aid of the Joint Distribution Committee only in Bialystok, Wilno and Kowle. In other places, the refugees were left to their own meager resources, and relatively few of them could find permanent quarters or sufficient food. At first, they slept in the fields and woods. Later, they found temporary shelter in railroad stations, empty freight cars, *batei midrashim* (houses of study), synagogues, school buildings and the collective quarters of the Halutzim (pioneers training for settlement in Palestine). Here they lived for months, herded together like cattle, hungry and unwashed.

Most fortunate were those who found quarters in the Halutz shelters, where it was clean and possible to get warm food. In Kowle, for instance, more free meals were handed out by the Halutz co-operative than by the official Soviet kitchens for refugees. The manager of the *kibutz* (co-operative), a young energetic member of the Hashomer Hatzair, had an uncanny faculty for producing food almost by magic. And the motto of his group everywhere was the formula pronounced at the Passover *seder*: "All who are hungered—let them come and eat!"

Despite their unbearable living conditions and anxiety over the fate of their families across the border, the refugees considered themselves fortunate in having escaped the Nazi hell. They believed their difficulties were temporary and felt certain that the

Soviet authorities would give them full opportunity to become adjusted. Former merchants, middle-class people and artisans were willing to become workers, and determined to ignore politics if only they could earn their daily bread. The Soviet authorities, however, made a sharp distinction between local residents and refugees, treating the latter as lepers and excluding them from the right to work.

The problem created by these unfortunates could have been solved in a decent and humane manner had the government so desired. The authorities, however, rejected every proposal presented by the J. D. C. and local agencies and with few exceptions refused to do anything themselves. The result was that about half a million refugees were left to shift for themselves as best they could. Only in Kowle, Bialystok, Lwow, Rowno and Luck did the authorities establish free kitchens for them, and then half-heartedly. In Bialystok, for the 33,000 refugees officially registered in November 1939, and for the hundreds who arrived with each day, only one kitchen was used. It was located in a Talmud Torah on Piekna Street, and the needy had to stand in line for hours in order to get a bowl of watery soup and a piece of black bread.

Government regulations, which followed each other in rapid succession, added to their troubles. Local residents in comfortable circumstances were frequently driven out together with the refugees whom they had sheltered and their apartments "re-distributed," usually among army officers and the Soviet officials who had flocked to the occupied regions. Even those unfortunates who had found shelter in public halls and offices of sympathetic organizations were in constant fear of being thrown out. Several hundred refugees who lived in the headquarters of the Merchants Association in Bialystok were driven out in the middle of the night when the authorities suddenly decided to use the offices for a new tailors' co-operative.

DURING the first weeks of the Soviet occupation of Poland, few economic changes were perceptible. Factory owners were ordered to double the salaries of their workers but were promised no further interference. Stores remained open, but speculation was rampant and complaints to the authorities about the rapid rise of prices were of no avail. Russian soldiers and officials, who were well supplied with rubles and did not have to wait in line, soon bought out all the

available supplies. Some merchants were wise enough to exchange their rubles for dollars via the Black Bourse—an institution still very much alive in the U.S.S.R.—and then leave for Lithuania. When I left, the value of the dollar on the Black Bourse ranged between 170 and 190 rubles.

Speedy nationalization of all economic life was ordered at the end of this brief period. Declassed merchants and artisans were left without means of earning a living, while those working in factories lost the pay increases the Soviets had originally given them. Dissatisfaction was prevalent and riots broke out in the factories in Bialystok late in December 1939, and in other towns.

Special employment offices, called "labor departments" in Western Byelorosya and "labor bourses" in the Western Ukraine, were opened and soon crowded with refugees seeking work. Officials, however, refused to register them. Instead, efforts were made to persuade them to leave for the interior of Russia. Representatives of factories in the Donbas and other regions offered them jobs, promising them good working conditions and an advance of fifty rubles. The response was immediate; people stood in line for days and nights to register for these jobs. In Bialystok alone, 20,000 registered in one week; in Brest-Litovsk, 10,000. Many of them were accepted, given special passports and rushed to the interior.

At first, they sent back glowing reports of their new circumstances, but shortly thereafter they began to return in large numbers. Most of them, it was learned, had been employed as unskilled laborers, quartered in wooden barracks and paid only five rubles a day despite the fact that a modest meal cost eight rubles. Local residents in these towns were sympathetic and helped them to run away. Nevertheless, those who remained, particularly the professionals, made relatively good adjustments.

NATIONALIZATION of industry brought with it a flurry of illegal trading. In every town and village there suddenly arose illegal markets, called "*Tolichok*." (Such places still exist throughout the Soviet Union, twenty-three years after the November revolution.) Some refugees managed to eke out a precarious existence through the illegal sale of necessities, but after a short time many of them in desperation began to return to Nazi Poland. The abrupt devalua-

tion of the zloty in December 1939 gave added impetus to the movement. It is unbelievable but true that the first to steal back to Nazi Poland were the workers who had formerly been most radical. Men who had been jailed in Poland for communist activities, including a former member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Poland, returned to face an uncertain future in the Generalgouvernement. They were joined by others who for one reason or another lost all hope of a decent life under Soviet rule. In some weeks, the number going back reached thousands.

The refugees, however, were not the only ones to suffer from the rapid transition to Soviet economy. The native residents—particularly the urban Jewish population—who automatically received Soviet citizenship, were also severely hit. The declassed and those unable to get jobs in the new state-owned establishments either lived on the earnings of their relatives or sold their personal belongings. Even those fortunate enough to obtain jobs had to lower their standard of living radically because of the low wages and high prices. For instance, a weaver in Bialystok earning 250 rubles a month as a Stakhanovite, could never lift himself above the level of mere sustenance. Bread was sold at the official price of one ruble a kilogram; meat, eight rubles; and butter, twenty rubles. Clothing was too expensive for the average worker to buy. A small wagon-load of firewood sold at the official price of sixty to seventy rubles.

Following the Soviet-Nazi agreement of April 1940 for an exchange of populations, but excluding Jews, Soviet authorities began a grim resolution of the refugee problem. Those who refused to go to Siberia and Kazakstan or rejected an offer of Soviet citizenship, either because it meant permanent separation from their families or the end of their hopes for emigration, were rounded up by the N.K.V.D. (secret police, formerly the OGPU). Raids were made night after night, and those caught were packed in freight trains and shipped to Siberia, Kazakstan, the Arkhangelsk region, and even far-off Kamchatka. No distinction was made between young and old, women and children. Frequently families were separated in the rush, since refugees were given only two hours to pack forty kilograms of their belongings.

In one case, during the temporary absence of a prominent Labor Zionist who had all his papers ready to leave for Palestine, his wife and thirteen-year-old son were seized in Bialystok at one o'clock

in the morning and shipped to a labor camp in Siberia, 150 kilometers from the nearest railroad. Although the Labor Zionist leader—who must remain anonymous for obvious reasons—made strenuous efforts to free his family, he finally had to leave without them. The wife and children of an outstanding scholar, at present residing in New York, are inmates of another Siberian labor camp. Ironically enough, none of the Jewish deportees were settled in Biro-Bidjan, the supposed autonomous Jewish region of the Soviet Union. It is estimated that the number of Polish Jews exiled to Siberia and similar regions is well above 100,000.

The high-handed methods of Soviet authorities aroused resentment even among local residents who had welcomed the entry of the Red Army. No discussions were permitted at meetings of factory or Communist Party cells. In the campaign preceding the elections to the National Assemblies, speeches delivered by local Jewish and Polish Communists usually were disregarded by the Russian leaders. It took time for the native Communists to learn the real Moscow line, and frequently the process of learning was painful.

I witnessed an illustrative incident at a meeting held in the market place of Zaremb Koscielny, where 90% of those gathered were Jews and the chairman was a captain in the Red Army. A Polish Jewish Communist, evidently unaware that it was forbidden to speak against fascism, delivered a speech bitterly attacking the Nazis and comparing their persecution of Jews to the new freedom from racism under Soviet rule. The chairman, after several vain attempts to check him, finally drove him unceremoniously off the platform.

Little did the local Communists know that their end was soon to come. Even before instructions arrived from Moscow they had begun a rapid but thorough liquidation of Jewish community life. Special decrees brought to an end the existence of the *Kehilloth* (official Jewish communities), while free loan societies, co-operative banks, the Joint Distribution Committee offices, the TOZ and ORT branches were closed. All Yiddish schools, *yeshivoth*, Talmud Torahs and Hebrew schools were shut and soon after replaced by Yiddish Communist schools. Libraries were purged and sports clubs disbanded. Ideological and political organizations, such as the Zionists, the Bund and the Agudath Israel, were also speedily liquidated.

The zeal of the Communists was of no avail. When the Russian officials arrived to take over power, they suspected the local Polish

Communists as well as those who were refugees of Trotskyism and other heresies. However, local Communists who had formerly been arrested by the Poles for their activities enjoyed the confidence of the Russian officials and were given jobs. All others were dismissed from the usurped offices and, in many cases, arrested.

Different methods were applied in the Baltic countries, particularly Lithuania. Even before their official incorporation into the Soviet Union, the "People's Governments" had liquidated all political parties, including Jewish groups. The Jewish National Fund, the Keren Hayesod (Palestine Foundation Fund) and other pro-Palestine institutions met with a similar fate. The properties and funds of these organizations were handed over to the Bureaus for National Minorities of the local Communist parties.

FOR a while, a revival of Yiddish cultural activities was attempted in the occupied territories. White Russian, Ukrainian and Yiddish writers came from the interior to visit their "liberated" colleagues. Bialystok was honored by a visit from the famous poets, Itzik Fefer and Izik Platner. At a meeting of Yiddish writers, Fefer exclaimed: "Back to the past! We are celebrating at present the eight hundredth anniversary of Judah Halevi. Judah the Maccabean and the Hasmonaeans are national heroes and revolutionaries."

Those in the audience accepted his statements as proof that Soviet policy on Jewish national life was undergoing a profound change. Many among them, including Moses Brodersohn, the former editor of a Lodz paper, and Ephraim Kaganovsky of the Warsaw *Haimt* atoned publicly for their "reactionary" past and promised to be good Soviet writers. Their hopes, however, were soon shattered. The prominent Soviet writer, David Hoffstein, speaking at a mass meeting of Yiddish journalists in Lwów (Lemberg) told a group headed by the Communist, Alter Katsizne, who had asked for permission to publish a Yiddish paper: "You ought to be thankful that the great Stalin permits you to live. There is no need for a Yiddish paper in Lemberg and no such paper will be published." Later, the *Bialystoker Shtern*, which never enjoyed a circulation of more than one thousand, suspended publication.

Newspapers in the Baltic countries were permitted to continue by the "People's" regime with the understanding that news would be

treated from the Soviet point of view. Some Jewish newspapers were especially careful, some of them being even afraid to publish news dispatches from Palestine. With the exception of the Kaunas *Yiddishe Shtimme*, no publication dared to print pro-Zionist articles. Following Sovietization they all met the same fate. Editors were arrested or forced to flee, while their papers were transformed into proper Soviet mouthpieces. The *Yiddishe Shtimme* became the *Kovner Emes*, and the *Vilner Togblat* displayed its new line as the *Vilner Emes*. The Poale Zion publication, *Dos Vort*, was indefinitely suspended, but the *Folksblat*, a fellow-traveler's organ, was permitted to retain its identity.

Relief organizations were treated somewhat better at first. The ORT, OZE and HIAS were allowed to function for several weeks after the Soviet occupation, and their activities were praised by the Communist press. The ORT was even permitted to reopen its trade schools and to conduct a fund-raising campaign. The OZE in Wilno, desirous of continuing its activities, made every effort to forestall Soviet objections, praising Stalin's generosity in its publication. Suddenly, however, the press began a rabid campaign against these organizations and soon afterward they were liquidated. The HIAS office was quietly closed early in September 1940. Another very popular Lithuanian relief organization, the Ezra, also ceased its activities quietly and without publicity. Decrees for the suspension of these organizations appeared in the press in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania almost on the same day.

The Yiddish Scientific Institute in Wilno, formerly a center of scholarship, is sovietized. One of its leaders, Zalman Reizen, has been under arrest since September 1939. Others, like Kalmanovitch, were dismissed. The present head, Moses Lehrer, is a former clerk in the institution, and once vociferously cursed Stalin in public. He bought his immunity and advancement by spying on writers and other groups. Another renegade, Noah Prylutski, received an appointment as professor of Yiddish at Wilno University. His anti-Zionist record was of help.

Since Hebrew is considered a counter-revolutionary language by Communists, all Hebrew schools, both secular and religious, were closed, and Yiddish-language schools opened in their place. At the same time, however, efforts were made to direct Jewish children into the Russian schools. Teachers were forbidden to urge Jewish

parents to send their children to Yiddish schools. And when one of them criticized this order at a teachers conference, he was decried in the press as a Trotzkyite, a nationalist and a "diversionist," and haled before the N.K.V.D. Had it not been for the intervention of an important Communist, he might have found himself on the way to Siberia.

In Lithuania, in particular, Soviet national policy was conducted at the expense of the Poles and Jews. In Kaunas, instead of the six Hebrew *gymnasias* (secondary schools) which existed before the Soviet occupation, only three Yiddish institutions were opened. The number of Yiddish elementary schools is also less in comparison with the former numerous Hebrew Tarbut and other schools.

In Wilno, the results of one day's registration for school revealed that 60% of the parents preferred Polish schools for their children, 30% Yiddish, and only 3½% Lithuanian. The Soviet authorities had expected more parents to show preference for Lithuanian schools and therefore immediately discontinued the registration. Nevertheless the Commissariat of Education opened sixty-five elementary schools, of which thirty-six were Polish; twenty, Yiddish; three, Russian; one, White Russian; and five, Lithuanian. The teaching of Lithuanian, a language unknown in Wilno, was made obligatory in the first year of all schools, and the language of instruction in the trade schools and in the University of Wilno, where most of the students are Jews and Poles. Of course, no Jewish history is taught in the Yiddish schools.

There is little doubt that the Jewish religion, too, will meet the same fate it has suffered in the U.S.S.R. The *yeshivah* ceased to exist in Soviet-occupied Poland immediately upon the entry of the Red Army. Prayer is permitted in synagogues and houses of study, although those used as refugee shelters are decorated with pictures of Lenin, Stalin and Molotoff. While Lithuania was still independent, about 2,000 Polish *yeshivah* teachers and students, aided by the "green railroad line," crossed the border into Wilno, where the Joint Distribution Committee provided them with shelters, food and clothing. After the Soviet occupation, students continued their studies, but as individuals in the houses of prayer. Rabbis, beadles, teachers of religion and cantors have lost their occupations. Kosher meat is accepted by the co-operatives, and therefore *shohetim* (ritual slaughterers) can still find employment.

TOGETHER with the liquidation of Jewish communal institutions, there was begun a purge of Jewish leaders. The first victim was Professor Moses Schorr of Warsaw, a former Polish Senator and a leader in the struggle against anti-Semitism, who was arrested in Ostrog near the Russo-Polish frontier and later sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Dr. Joshua Gottlieb, a former Sejm Deputy and a valiant fighter for Jewish rights in Poland, was given the right to live in Pinsk, his native town, after signing a pledge of loyalty to the Soviet regime, but was later arrested and exiled to Siberia. Another former Sejm Deputy, Dr. Emil Sommerstein, was taken into custody in Lwow. His wife, who was deported to Siberia with her child, was reported by eyewitnesses to have committed suicide after her guards had brutally violated her.

It is impossible to list all the known names of Jewish communal leaders who were arrested. Among them were the lawyer Gorfinkel, head of the Lithuanian Keren Hayesod; Itzkowitz, the leader of the Agudath Israel; Wachstein, a prominent Zionist, who was arrested in Lemberg; Shmoish of Kolomyja, and Chmielnik of Bialystok, both active Poale Zion heads; and a number of Poale Zion municipal deputies. Also taken into custody were the Revisionist leaders Biegun and Krol, and the former Polish Consul in Honduras, Sheskin.

Newspaper editors arrested include R. Rubinstein of the Kaunas *Yiddishe Shtimme*, and Heschelless of the Lwow *Chwila*, a Polish Jewish paper. The editors of *Nasz Przegląd*, a Warsaw Polish Jewish daily, were deported to the Ural region, where they are doing forced labor in a sugar refinery. The editor of *Dos Wort*, a Kaunas Labor Zionist paper, was released from prison only after he became dangerously ill. In addition, there were mass arrests and sometimes executions of Jewish merchants and industrialists, particularly in the Bialystok area. Their families were deported to Siberia.

The brunt of the persecutions, however, was borne by the leaders of the Bund (General Alliance of Jewish Workers), a member of the Second International, which had been continually hounded by the Polish Government. Victor Alter was arrested in Kowle a few days after the entry of the Red Army while on his way to submit a declaration of loyalty to the Soviet Government. Henryk Ehrlich was arrested in Brest Litovsk by a Warsaw carpenter, a Commu-

nist. Anna Rosenthal, elderly leader of the Wilno Bund and once a prisoner in Tsarist jails, was accused of accepting bribes from industrialists to betray striking workers in spite of the fact that she had never been active in the trade unions. She is still in jail. Other Bund leaders arrested in Wilno were Zhelezniakov, Dr. Lipshitz, Leon Oler, Perez Guterman and others. The leader of the Polish clothing workers, Heshel Himelfarb, was arrested in Wilno in the winter of 1939, while the Bundist Shoel Goldman and the Polish Socialist Kapitulka were later sentenced to death in Bialystok. Less than a handful of the trade union leaders escaped Soviet justice.

A heroic example of devotion to Jewish ideals is the story of the Halutzim, about 2,000 of whom smuggled their way into Lithuania from the Nazi and Soviet-occupied areas of Poland. Many of them crossed Poland by foot from places as far off as Posen in the west and the Rumanian border on the south, seeking to escape both the Nazis and the Communists. They were the first initiators of the systematic underground railroad, the "green railroad line."

In Poland, immediately after the Soviet occupation, the authorities permitted the Halutzim to maintain their collective training farms, but six weeks later the Hehalutz movement was liquidated. Its offices, assembly halls, and shelters were confiscated. The movement, however, continues to function underground. It publishes secret mimeographed bulletins and even sends special emissaries to re-establish contact with the old existing members in the interior of Russia.

In Lithuania, however, the Halutz training farms continued to exist as late as October 1940. Soviet commissars tried to convert their members to communism and to have them reorganize as *sovkhoses* (state farms). The Halutzim refused.

In general, all labor Zionist groups are still secretly very active. The general Zionists, the orthodox, and Socialists (Bund) are politically more apathetic, but the Lithuanian Revisionists are reported to be maintaining a rather closely co-ordinated underground movement. It should be added that refugee communal leaders are permitted to leave the U.S.S.R. Some have gone to the United States; others to Palestine. However, only refugees may emigrate; Soviet citizens cannot leave the land of socialism.