

# Evacuation and Escape of Jewish Civilians in the Soviet Union during World War II

By Anna Shternshis

## *Introduction*

During World War II, the majority of Soviet Jews went through one or more of these four experiences: service in combat or participation in the partisan movement; ghetto or concentration camp imprisonment; contention in the Gulag, or escape in the country's rear (Siberia or Central Asia), which in Soviet historiography is referred to as "evacuation." The possibility of evacuation or escape is one of the features that make the Soviet Jewish experience during World War II unique among European Jewry. During the post-war period, the Soviet government credited itself with saving many of its Jews during the war specifically through the organized evacuation from the invading German Army. Indeed, of the approximately 5 million Jews who resided under Soviet rule in 1941, more than a million survived the war away from the combat zones, ghettos and concentration camps.<sup>1</sup> Yet, historians agree that despite numerous official claims to the contrary, the Soviet government did not have clear strategies and policies on evacuating civilians, including Jews, at the outset of the war. Historian Rebecca Manley asserts, after going through thousands of governmental documents, there is no evidence a centralized plan existed nor even a single directive from the central government that supports the policy of evacuating Jews first.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The exact statistics are still debated. For more, see M. Altshuler, "Escape and Evacuation of Soviet Jews at the Time of the Nazi Invasion: Policies and Realities." In: Lucjan Dobroszycki, Jeffrey S. Gurock (eds.), *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union and the Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941-1945* (New York, 1993), pp. 77-104.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Manley, *The Evacuation and Survival of Soviet Civilians, 1941 – 1946*, Berkeley: Ph.D. Dissertation, 2004, p. 45.

An excellent article by the historian Mordekhai Altshuler analyzes Soviet state policies that facilitated or hindered Jewish escape, and discusses the reasons behind the decision of the Jews to evacuate or stay behind, and finally examines the state policies' impact on survival of some Jews in the USSR during the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> My study also deals with this issue, but from "below," namely the perspective of the subjects of state policies. In this paper, I will also prove that the decision or an order to evacuate often became the turning point when Soviet Jews largely stopped seeing themselves as average Soviet citizens, and instead as Soviet Jews. I will also analyze the process of this crucial identity shift. In order to do this, I will examine how Jews learned about Nazi treatment of Jews, what they knew about the possibility of war, what they did when they found out about the start of the war, what they feared most when news of the war arrived, and, ultimately, what all this meant for their chances of survival.

### ***Methodology***

This research, like other studies on Holocaust and Soviet evacuation, is based on oral testimonies. I use 198 in-depth interviews conducted with Jewish men (75) and women (123), who spent at least a portion of the war years as an evacuee or a refugee in Soviet Central Asia or the Ural mountains. I conducted most of the interviews myself. I also used transcripts of interviews recorded by sociologists from the Institute for Studies of Judaica in Kiev under the leadership of Leonid Finberg in 1998 – 1999 (further referred to as the "Kiev interviews). Some of the interviewees (27) originate from the

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<sup>3</sup> Altshuler, "Escape and Evacuation of Soviet Jews at the Time of the Nazi Invasion: Policies and Realities." In: Lucjan Dobroszycki, Jeffrey S. Gurock (eds.), *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union and the Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941-1945* (New York, 1993), pp. 77-104.

territories that became Soviet in 1939 or 1940, such as Eastern Poland and the Baltic states; the rest (171) grew up under the Soviet regime.

Most of my respondents were born in the 1920s and earlier, and in the 1990s (when the interviews were conducted) lived in New York, Philadelphia, Moscow, Toronto, and Berlin. These people survived Stalinism, World War II, post-war anti-Semitism, and often painful immigration. When asked about the most important historical event that they experienced, they would almost unanimously say: the evacuation. The initial goal of this project was to record their stories about pre-war life, but the respondents overwhelmingly preferred to speak about the war period. Even when they remembered much of the pre-war experiences, they still started their testimonies with the recollections of what had happened from 1941 - 1945. In fact, many did not understand why someone would be interested in any other part of their biography. Many felt especially strongly about this when I mentioned that I was interviewing them to collect materials to write about Jewish life and culture in the Soviet Union. Indeed, World War II was not only the most significant historical event that these people remembered, but it was also a turning point in their national self-identification.

While this study certainly takes into account informants' pre-war experience and their background, it mainly utilizes answers to questions related to subject's war-time experience. Specifically, I analyze their replies to the following prompts and follow-ups: "Tell me what you did when the war began." "How did you manage to escape?" "Who helped you? What were the major obstacles?"

The texts of relevant answers of these testimonies constitute almost 1000 pages. While the respondents were asked directly about the impact of their experiences onto

their ethnic identity, their indirect answers are most often used in the analysis, as I believe these testimonies were more accurate and frank. For example, when asked directly whether the fact that he or she had been Jewish influenced their experience of evacuation, many respondents firmly answered “No.” Yet, in describing the process of decision-making, they often spoke about how it had been different for them as Jews, because they had to take into account German anti-Semitism. Other respondents also spoke of similar “Jewish” factors, while denying the importance of their ethnicity if asked directly. However, others specifically emphasized that they left because they were Jewish, and denied that any other factors (such as government position, a family member in the army or a simple co-incidence) mattered at all. All testimonies are discussed not only in historical context, but also from the point of view of memory and self-presentation.

### ***To Leave or Not to Leave: Was There a Choice?***

Evacuation of industry had been the priority of the Soviet government from the outset of the war, and it was a largely successful endeavor. As a result, between July and November 1941, 1523 industrial enterprises from Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia were evacuated to the Volga region, the Urals, Western and Eastern Siberia, and Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> The earliest resolutions by the newly formed Committee for Evacuation provide detailed instructions on how to transport equipment, livestock and such, whereas the first regulations regarding evacuation of civilians appeared only a few months after the

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<sup>4</sup> Sanford Lieberman, ‘The Evacuation of Industry in the Soviet Union during World War II,’ *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 35, No 1 (Jan. 1983), pp. 90 – 102 (pp. 90 - 91).

outbreak of the war. As a result, the first weeks of military action resulted in chaos, accompanied by a lack of official information. Civilians in western parts of the Soviet Union, especially Ukraine and Byelorussia were often left to their own devices to decide whether to stay and hope for the best if confronted by the German army, or escape.

When faced with the danger of war or natural disasters, human beings go through several stages when making a decision on whether to stay or leave. First, they assess the reliability of information of danger by cross-examining various sources, including government officials, mass media, and word of mouth. Second, they estimate their ability to leave, including availability of transportation. Finally, they factor in personal circumstances, such as presence of sick and immobile family members and fear of losing property. When the sense of danger prevails over all reasons to stay, residents seek all possible means to escape, and often leave the older family members behind in order to evacuate the young.

In the context of the Soviet Union in 1941, each stage of decision-making can illustrate the complexities of the relationship between bureaucracy, media and public opinion in the totalitarian state. It has to be noted once again, that a significant part of those who left their places of residence were evacuated by the government which provided trains and allowances. Workers were often permitted to take their family members. Yet, in the chaos of the first weeks of the war, the roles of evacuees, refugees and state officials blurred. Individual fates were frequently decided by co-incidence, as state officials had unprecedented power to show extraordinary compassion, and sometimes extraordinary lack of it. While details of this phenomena will be discussed in due course, it is worth mentioning now that the way officials used this power once again

demonstrates that even in a supposedly totalitarian state, there existed many ways to maneuver the orders from above. Similarly, it seems that numerous ways existed for the Jewish residents of the Soviet Union to obtain and dissect information about the dangers of war.

Altshuler points out that the most important factors affecting the evacuees' departure included the proximity to railway stations, the timing of the German invasion, and, most importantly, belonging to a workforce of a strategically important institution that was given priority to evacuate. In other words, these are factors beyond the individual's control. However, some evacuees, especially refugees and workers' family members did have to decide whether they wanted to leave. What informed their decisions? In the next sections, we examine five factors:

1. The availability of information on how the German army treats Jews (as opposed to other civilians)
2. Rumors and prophecies
3. The fear of outbursts of local anti-Semitism
4. The attitude of local officials towards Jews (and facilitation of their escape)
5. Past personal experiences with the German army, primarily during World War I

### **Information on German treatment of the Jews vs. Past Experiences with Germans**

One crucial issue that has not been settled definitively is how much Soviet Jews knew about the Nazi treatment of Jews. Our respondents had access to three types of information: instructions from state officials, reports by the media and rumors.

Because the media was largely produced and controlled by the central organs, we will

consider it here as official information. Refugees from Poland were often sources of rumors and alternative information about the German army. Instructions by the government officials at public meetings, while generally confirming newspaper reports, often also expressed doubt as to their accuracy and presented their own interpretations, especially in informal settings. Therefore, the information coming from them lies somewhere in the middle ground between those two.

## **Soviet Media**

The message in the Soviet media in regards to Soviet-German relations and German-anti-Semitism was by no means uniform. Before the Molotov Ribbentrop Peace Treaty between the Soviet Union and Germany in 1939, the Soviet media condemned Nazi policies and the Nazi regime, and their discriminatory practices towards the Jews . After the treaty, the Russian-language press did not speak about those injustices,<sup>5</sup> whereas the Yiddish language central press (which by then consisted of two newspapers, Kiev-based *Shtern* (Star) and *Oktober* (October), published in Minsk) continued to write about it, albeit sparingly.<sup>6</sup> By the late 1930s, most Jews read Russian-language press, and trusted its message more than that of its Yiddish counterparts.<sup>7</sup> However, the readers of Yiddish newspapers were able to relate the message to their family members and friends, so that eventually the information published there reached many individuals, but in the

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<sup>5</sup> Yitshad Arad, 'The Holocaust as Reflected in Soviet Russian Language Newspapers in the Years 1941 – 1945,' in *Why Didn't The Press Shout*, pp. 199 - 220.

<sup>6</sup> Dov Ber Kerler, 'The Soviet Yiddish Press: During the War, 1942 – 1945' in Robert Moses Shapiro, ed. *Why Didn't The Press Shout*, (New York: Ktav, 2003), pp. 221 – 250.

<sup>7</sup> Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923 – 1939*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

form of rumors. We will soon see that this played an important role in assessing and analyzing this information.

Other important official sources were movies that criticized German policies, and featured Jewish suffering under fascism. The first film is *Ruddy's Career* (Dir. V. Nemolyaev), produced in 1934, and re-released in 1938. The plot centers around Ruddy Voltmeyer and Iosif, German and German Jewish students, who receive the medal of honor for successfully completing college. During the graduation ceremony, other students beat up Iosif, and his friend Ruddy attempts to defend him. The film follows Ruddy's search for truth, and his eventual involvement in the communist movement. While the Jewish character was minor in the story, Soviet Jews still saw the picture as a source of knowledge about German anti-Semitism.

Three other films with similar messages were released in 1938. *Swamp's Soldiers* (Dir. Alexander Macheret, 1938) was the first movie that spoke about concentration camps in pre-war Germany. It portrayed concentration camp prisoners as the most decent Germans, including students, artists, Communists, and Jews. An elderly prisoner, who was curiously portrayed as a Pale of Settlement East European religious Jew (as opposed to an assimilated German one), helped everyone in the camp by providing advice and moral support. While the film never attained high popularity, it still informed audiences about Fascist treatment towards Jews, as well as the fact that the Soviet government did not approve of the Nazi regime. Another important film is *Professor Mamlok* (Dirs. Adolf Minkin and Gerbert Rappaport, 1938) based on a play by the German dramatist Fridrikh Wolf. It tells the story of the Mamlok family. Its head, Professor Mamlok is expelled from his own clinic when Nazis come to power, simply because he was Jewish.

Desperate, he attempts suicide, but does not go through with it because a Nazi official fell ill, and desperately needed Mamlok's help. After saving the patient, the doctor is kicked out onto the street. His German citizenship is revoked. Not being able to sustain any more humiliation, Mamlock attempts suicide again. The film enjoyed a very short, yet successful release in 1938, and was revoked right after the Molotov Ribbentrop pact was signed.

The absolute majority of respondents, when asked whether they knew how Jews were treated in Germany before the war, answered that they had seen these films, and cited *Professor Mamlok* most often. Galina (born in 1931) recalls:

When the war began, my family knew we had to run. We were Jews. I grew up in an orphanage, but I heard that Germans had been killing the Jews. Before the war, they showed *Professor Mamlok* in school. My aunt also heard from people in Poland... Well, we did not know that the Jews had been killed, but we knew they were humiliated.<sup>8</sup>

As a child, Galina was not completely be aware of the nuanced situation in regards to the trustworthiness of the film as a source of knowledge about the dangers towards Jews. Moreover, this testimony is an example of how latter awareness translates into the implication that the film served as a warning for Jewish residents even before the war. Most likely, Galina watched the film again not long before our interview, remembered seeing it in her childhood, and attributed her current knowledge today to what was happening before the war. Most often, such tendencies are observed among respondents her age, those who were young children before the war. Not being the primary decision makers at the time, they see films as important pieces in a complicated

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Galina, Toronto, June 2007.

puzzle of the reality around them, without necessarily prioritizing the importance of each. Older respondents can present a much more nuanced picture. Frida Stoyanskaya (born in 1907) recalls:

I remember seeing *Professor Mamluk* as if it was yesterday. We went to see it in a Kreschatnik theater. My husband and I could not find a babysitter, and we took our child with us. Later, he was terrified, as these horrible events of how Jews were being killed were shown in the film. My child had nightmares. He was then five or six years old. Now we understand that this film was the first sign. But then, we did not think that it was relevant to us. I had no associations with any possible danger. All propaganda, all agitation, all press, and all of the media only spoke that even if war broke out, it would never happen in our land. I worked in school, and saw a map in the teacher's room. During recess, the geography teacher would approach the map, and say: "look, German troops are already here: Poland, France, Norway... Look, how fast they move, this is scary." But even he did not think that they would ever get to us.<sup>9</sup>

As shown in the quote, the connection between the information from the films and the actual decision to flee at the onset of the war did not seem apparent to most respondents and their families. In general, I believe, based on the testimonies from the respondents, the notion of "war on foreign soil" played a crucial role in the process of decision-making. This notion not only came from films, but also from party officials.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Frida Stoyanovskaya, Kiev, 2002 (Kiev interviews).

## Soviet Officials as Sources of Information

The press and the media certainly provided knowledge about Nazi Germany, but the most immediate information came from local authorities: city councilors, Communist party leaders, school teachers, and other propagandists. These men and women lectured about international politics, developments in Europe and the United States, and, of course, covered the course of the war, especially between 1939 and 1941. The most important message that was conveyed through these sources (and that had a profound influence) clearly stated that the war would not take place on Soviet soil. One respondent explains:

Once a week, our school had a lecture about international politics. We knew everything. [...] People believed that our state was so strong that it would not allow any incidents. [...] We were not afraid of the war. First, we knew about the peace treaty with Germany. [...] And we thought that even if Germany attacked, our army would not let them in onto our territory. Everyone was confident about this, adults and children. Well, maybe adults thought differently, but children were sure. [...] And when we were leaving, my father said: “Do not take anything along, we will be back in a month.”<sup>10</sup>

Chaika reproduces the rhetoric of the contemporary press and suggests that this was an authoritative source of information for her and some of her acquaintances. Yet, she also quotes her father, a member of the older generation, who also thought that the war, if it reached Russia, would be brief and relatively painless. Another respondent

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Chaika, Kiev, 2001. Kiev interviews.

spoke of her grandfather, who refused to evacuate because “Stalin knew with whom to make peace, and one should trust him.”<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the possibility of war was very much in the air, and while the media kept silent or almost silent on the subject, local propagandists often spoke of the issue. Yet, just like the film *Professor Mamlok*, the lectures did not suggest that the war should be of concern to most citizens. Iosif (born in 1926) recalls:

It was never even mentioned as a possibility, that the war would take place on our soil. Those who suggested that a foreign army can come and invade were seen as traitors and were immediately silenced. What I remember was the constant talk that “the war will take place on foreign soil, that no enemy will enter our land.” When the war broke out, my grandfather went to his rabbi, who said to stay put, as Germans had been nice to Jews during the first war. My father did not take the rabbi seriously, but he believed the Soviet officials. As a result we all stayed, and almost died a few months later.”<sup>12</sup>

Essentially, this respondent suggests that many small town residents found suitable confirmation of their fears (or lack of those) from different sources, which they believed to be most trustworthy. According to Iosif, and most other respondents, trust in Soviet official information did not depend on age, but rather on social, economic and educational background. One respondent suggested that less educated people tended not to trust Soviet officials, and therefore were more likely to evacuate.<sup>13</sup> Others say that their grandparents and parents (usually less educated than respondents themselves) did not

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Chekhova, Kiev, 1999. Kiev interviews.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Iosif A., Toronto, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Fira G., New York, 1999.

trust the Soviet media's reports of German atrocities because of their own experiences with the German army, and preferred to stay, even if they had a chance to evacuate.<sup>14</sup> We will come back to the role of the individual's experience in another section, meanwhile, I want to address another source of information: rumors.

## **Rumors and Prophecies**

Suspicious about the impending crisis for the Jewish population also came from testimonies of refugees from Western Poland, who witnessed German treatment of the Jews (or rumors about these testimonies). The reaction to their stories ranged from complete belief (which inspired many to find ways to escape immediately after the war began) to almost total distrust. Younger and older respondents often tended not to believe the rumors and eye-witness accounts of the refugees. Here is a typical justification of such an attitude:

We heard rumors that Jews in Poland are being taken somewhere, and that they are being shot. We thought, maybe some of them... Here [in the Soviet Union- A.S.], enemies of people were shot. But we thought it had been impossible to shoot everyone.<sup>15</sup>

It is quite remarkable that the respondent equates Soviet arrests of the late 1930s (known as the Great Terror) with the German persecution of the Jews. Perhaps, such a comparison was not apparent in the 1930s, but the fact that it was impossible to imagine the scope of genocide is important in many respondents' testimonies about the rumors.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Vladimir Y., Berlin, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Chekhova, Kiev.

Sometimes, the rumors stated positive information about the German army. One respondent explains (in quite a typical manner):

Rumors circulated that when Germans come, they destroy the collective farms. They give everyone land. They help with new jobs. They arrest communists and Jews. My father said that anti-Semites came up with this [arresting Jews – A.S.]. He knew Germans when they came during World War I. He remembered them as cultured, polite people, some of them had even been Jews. “No,” he said. “Neighbors do not like Jews, that is why they come up with these rumors.” However, he did believe all the positive information. Because of this we did not hurry to evacuate, and when we wanted to, it was too late.<sup>16</sup>

The selectiveness in what to believe is quite representative in this testimony. Only a few respondents were able to articulate the ambivalence about the German invasion so clearly, yet the sentiments expressed were quite common. While many Soviet Jews heard about Polish Jews sharing their stories of German atrocities, many believed that it had been an exaggeration designed to provoke sympathy. The empirical knowledge of the German army’s behavior towards the Jews, combined with general dissatisfaction with Soviet economic policies made for fertile ground for the circulation and absorption of such rumors, which in turn, led to decreased worries about a possible German invasion.

An important part of local culture was the prominence of religious and other supernatural visions, which were reported by respected elders. While this phenomenon was a bit less spread among Jews, compared to Russian and Ukrainian peasants, especially the educated ones, its prominence was reported to me numerously. To be fair,

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Faina G., Toronto, 2007.

respondents often said that they did not trust the prophecies they heard from their aging relatives. Fira Belfer recalls (born in 1926):

In 1935, my grandfather was very sick. He also was religious, and always read the Bible. He kept saying: “if the war starts, you should all go away, do not stay. Bad times are coming for Jews.” He also said: “Do not hide your Jewishness, those who hide it will have problems, do not change your documents. The time will come and we will get help.” My mother listened to him, and we left as soon as we heard the news about the war. Her sister [the grandfather’s other daughter – A.S.] ignored it, and stayed behind with her family. They all died. After the war, we never wanted our children to marry non-Jews, and to change their nationality in their passports. My grandfather was probably a saint. Those who changed their nationality had more trouble immigrating, but we had a very straightforward story, when we wanted to leave [in 1994 – A.S.].<sup>17</sup>

The popular mystical stories and prophecies can reveal unresolved anxieties in society,<sup>18</sup> and my respondents often speak of such prophecies and visions that were important in their decision to evacuate. Approximately half of the reported visions were correct, and the other half was wrong. The respondents, however, tend to idealize false visions too:

My father was very religious. He could not hurt a fly. He said: “everything will pass. This will pass too. We should not go anywhere.” But when the war began,

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Fira Belfer, Berlin, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Scott Atran, ‘Religion’s Social and Cognitive Landscape: An Evolutionary Perspective’ in *Handbook of Cultural Psychology* edited by Shinobu Kitayama, Dov Cohen, New York: Guilford Press, 2007, 438.

we all fled, but my father remained. He was a saint, and he died a saintly torturous death.<sup>19</sup>

Idealization of the dead, especially those who were murdered, is not surprising in the testimonies. Still, what is important is that numerous respondents suggest that internal feelings associated with religious visions were taken seriously enough to be discussed and factored in the decision-making process. Belief in supernatural prophetic vision was not a prevailing factor, of course, yet it was taken seriously enough on the eve of the war, and often reported by respondents sixty to sixty five years after the event.

### **I Saw the Germans, and They Were Fine People: Personal Experiences as a Factor**

Younger people were more likely to trust Soviet rhetoric, but their parents and grandparents also often countered Soviet messages with their life experiences, most notably their encounters with the German Army during World War I. Chaika recalls:

My uncle Isaac and his family did not want leave, because they had a handicapped daughter, and also because they waited for their son. They were afraid that their son wouldn't be able to find them. This uncle used to say that during the revolution he saw Germans. Germans were in Kiev. They did not kill everyone, that this was not true. [...] He said that the Germans had been cultured people, and would not do that.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Asya G., New York, 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Chaika, *ibid.*

Even after the beginning of the war, elders attempted to stop their friends and neighbors from leaving using similar arguments. Another respondent explains:

Our train was on the way to Chkalov, and it stopped in Kiev. We stepped out for a moment, and were greeted by some older people. We did not look so well, my father had a heart problem during this journey, and we did not have proper seats, but sat on suitcases in the aisle. So these people told us: “Where are you going? We remember Germans. They won’t do anything to us.” [...] These people were Jewish, and many of them stayed indeed, and then ended up in Babii Yar. My father was almost convinced by them, but he knew that I, the young one, had to leave, so eventually we all left.”<sup>21</sup>

Many respondents suggested that the experience with the German Army during World War I served not as a primary, but as an additional reason to stay. The primary causes were taking care of sick family members, distance from railway stations, or even new business opportunities that opened up at the onset of the war:

We had a neighbor whose name was Lyova. He had a horse. My mother told him: Why are you not leaving? Take your family, take three young children, and leave. He said: “I am making money here.” He took all those who wanted to evacuate to the train station, and they paid him. He and his children died in Babii Yar.<sup>22</sup>

Altshuler notes that many Jews, especially those who suffered from the Soviet economic policies, secretly thought that a change of regime would be for the better, once

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Degtyar, Kiev, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Chekhova, Kiev.

again, basing their assertion on rather positive experiences with the German Army during World War I.<sup>23</sup> While very few of the respondents expressed such sentiments in regards to the Jewish community, a sizeable number sympathized with non-Jews, especially Ukrainians and Byelorussians, who had been looking forward to a change of regime. For example, Efim G. (born in 1918, Parichi, Byelorussia) explains:

Had I not been Jewish, I would have waited for the German Army as well. The Soviet Union destroyed the lives of peasants, and they hoped that Germans would give them their soil back.<sup>24</sup>

Efim's testimony is not typical in its openness in regards to the economic policies of the Soviet government, yet it reveals that while the Jewish population might have shared the concerns about the Soviet regime with their neighbors, many Jews still understood that they would be treated differently from the non-Jewish population when the war began. Such sentiment was quite common among respondents, especially those who suffered from economic, social and cultural policies (former business-owners and religious activists or *lishentsy*).<sup>25</sup>

## **Friends or Enemies?: Ethnic relations at the outset of the War**

Historian Arkady Levin suggests that the decision to evacuate (or to flee) was based not only on the availability of information, but rather on the fact whether the

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<sup>23</sup> Altshuler, *ibid.* p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Efim G., 1999, New York.

<sup>25</sup> At least seventy percent of the respondents reported that their parents had been arrested during 1920s or 1930s.

recipients believed the source.<sup>26</sup> Three factors contributed to the trust of information: age, social class and level of education. Younger people were more exposed to official information, usually through schools. As shown in the previous sections, respondents usually had fairly accurate information about how Jews were treated in the German-occupied territories. Yet, this information did not seem to be the most important factor that influenced the respondents' desire to leave or to stay. In fact, most respondents did not understand why I was asking them about their pre-war knowledge about the German treatment of Jews. Most suspected that I was testing their knowledge of history, rather than evaluating the factors that played a role in their salvation from the Holocaust.

Speaking about the factors that did matter, the respondents most often named the estimation of how locals would treat the Jewish population in the absence of Soviet rule. Many respondents agreed that the fear of an outbreak of anti-Jewish pogroms conducted by their own neighbors and colleagues had been seen as a far greater threat than measures taken by the German army. The majority worried that only Soviet laws against anti-Semitism tied the hands of potential rioters, and the failure of the Soviet regime would inevitably lead to disastrous consequences for the Jews. In the description of the dilemmas faced by her family at the outset of the war, Lisa L. (born in 1923 in Kharkov, Ukraine) elaborates on the combination of various factors that influenced their final decision, and specifically emphasizes the fear of neighbors as a factor:

My father did not want to leave. He had all of his possessions there and he did not think that there would be a danger from Germans. Even before the war,

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<sup>26</sup>Arkady Levin, “The Soviet Jews’ Survival During Nazi Genocide in 1941 – 45” in Ulf Haxen, Hanne Trautner Krottman, Karen Lisa Goldschmidt Salamon, *Jewish Studies in a New Europe* (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel A/S International Publishers, 1998), pp. 479 – 489 (p. 480 – 81)

when a young woman from Poland came to synagogue, and told us that Germans persecute and kill Jews, no-one believed her. My father survived World War I and he remembered Germans then. He said: they were civilized people, and it can't be true. We left because we were afraid of locals. My mother survived pogroms, and she remembered different armies: Whites, Greens, Reds. She saw women being raped all the time. She said: I have two girls, who are 16 and 17, and we have to leave. [...] When we came to the railway station, it was crowded with people. We spent all day there, but could not find a train, so we came back home. [...]. But when we came back, our neighbors had already moved their stuff into our house. We had to go back to the station, as we had no place to sleep. The next day, we managed to get on a cargo train.<sup>27</sup>

This testimony touches upon a wide range of issues, which are consistently mentioned by my respondents, and which have been discussed earlier in the paper. First, she speaks of her father's unwillingness to leave because of their possessions, a common reason for staying. Second, Lisa mentions her father's belief in "civilized Germans" he encountered during World War I. The respondent also mentions the availability of information from the Jewish Polish refugee, who "nobody believed." While Lisa does not specifically mention the reasons for the lack of trust in a Polish witness, she probably hints to the fact that her father's personal experience seemed like a more valid argument compared to a stranger's account. Yet, Lisa's testimony suggests that the disbelief of a

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Lisa L., August 1999, New York.

Polish witness among fellow citizens is not balanced by the trust in Soviet newspapers. In fact, earlier in the testimony, she spoke about general ignorance of Soviet newspapers that were prevalent in her home. Rather, she repeatedly emphasizes the importance of personal experience over any other sources of information. The decision to leave was also based on a personal experience (by the respondents' mother) who remembered the atrocities of Russian and Ukrainian non-Soviet armies. And this fear, rather than the fear of Germans, or trust in Soviet media, or Polish Jewish rumors, turned out to be the most significant factor in Lisa's family's decision.

Apprehension of neighbors on the eve of the German-Russian War, and especially its importance in the decision to evacuate contradicts numerous Soviet produced sources that emphasized the internationalism and unprecedented "friendship of people of different nationalities" that was achieved before the war. Moreover, respondents usually tended to agree and even reinforce this statement. Even Lisa stressed that "there had been no anti-Semitism before the war." However, the majority still asserted, sometimes in the same sentences, that at the outset of the war they were more afraid of locals than of Germans. Fear of neighbors, especially in Ukraine, was a prevalent motif in a great majority of testimonies of both men and women, but women were more likely to elaborate on additional fears of rape and humiliation than men were. I think that the discrepancy in respondents' testimonies about the absence of anti-Semitism before the war compared to after the war (and then mentioning the details of anti-Semitic attitudes) can be explained by the fact that when they say "anti-Semitism," they usually mean "state-run" anti-Semitism, not the daily life anti-Semitic remarks of their neighbors. On the eve of the war, the change or at least the weakening of the Soviet government power was expected,

and therefore, Jewish respondents feared that popular anti-Semitism (that has never been completely eliminated) could cause a real danger. Most Jewish respondents sincerely believed that if it remained in power, the Soviet government would protect them against violence and any other expressions of ethnic hatred.

Lisa's story (and that of many other respondents) is contrasted by quite numerous stories of people being convinced by non-Jewish neighbors and friends to remain in their houses. Fira Belfer from Berdichev, for example, recalls that her high-school boyfriend's family, which was Ukrainian, suggested hiding her in their cellar, until things "calmed down" after the Germans came and established their power. The only reason Belfer did not follow up on this offer was that she "did not really like this boy so much, and wanted to be with her family."<sup>28</sup> Many respondents explained that they had such good relations with their neighbors that those neighbors did not want to lose them. Golda R. echoes these sentiments:

In school, my best friend's name was Natasha. Her father was the deputy director of a factory. When the war began, and conversations started about leaving, her mother came to my mother, and said: we have a nice big cellar; we will hide you there until things settle down. My mother was worried, though, and made sure that we left. She gave her golden ring to a man with the horse and cart, who took us to the railway station in Shepetovka.<sup>29</sup>

It always puzzled me how these people, civilians, could have offered protection from the heavily armed German Army. And the answer to this question is that the neighbors and friends apparently did not offer protection from German troops (which

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Fira Belfer, Berlin, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Golda, Toronto, 2007.

they did not think had been necessary, either because they thought that the war would be fought on their territories, or because Germans were “cultured”), but rather from the hostile local residents. That is also why many members of older generations, who had better relations with the surrounding population and were better off financially chose to stay, as they hoped to be able to survive by bribing the enemy they had anticipated, instead of escaping from German troops.

What I find especially significant about these testimonies is that none of the respondents doubted that the “friendship of people,” cultivated in the Soviet ideology, would survive the attack of the German army, and that Jews would suffer. It is possible that the respondents project their current understanding into their stories of the 1940s. Yet, most testimonies suggest that both Jews and Ukrainians, sometimes having different agendas, believed that Jews would be in some sort of danger after the arrival of the Germans. The first days of war confirmed these suspicions. Azaliya L. remembers:

My father was not Jewish. He was Ukrainian. My mother was a Jew. We lived in the little town Shustko, in the Sumy region. My father worked in NKVD. When the war began, he was not allowed to leave, but asked for special permission to take me, my brother, and my mother to the railway station in Solntsevo. It was many kilometres away, and the journey was on foot. We had nothing to eat. We were very young children and cried, and did not want to walk. Sometimes, the bombs fell, and we had to hide. But the bombs were not our biggest worry. We were afraid of people. Once, we met an old man. He was dressed like a proper Ukrainian peasant, with a white shirt out, long white beard.

He carried a sharp sickle. He stopped, looked at us, especially at my mother (she had dark curly hair), and asked us: who are you? My father immediately understood what he meant. He said: "My wife is Greek." My father understood that one swing of the sickle could remove a person's head in seconds. "Fine," said the old man. "I am looking for yids, to kill them." It was during the first days of war, long before German army came.

After walking for a long time, my father got tired. He only had one lung, and his leg was injured. He was hungry. He sat down and said: "I am not going anywhere." My mother told him: "Vanya, if you don't go, we will all be killed." He said: "I will not be killed. They have no reason to kill me. I am not a Jew." My mother said then "What about kids?" He did not want to listen. Then she called me and my brother, and said: "kneel in front of your father; ask him to come with us." My brother and I kneeled and begged, and cried. He did not look at us, but he got up, and we continued the journey. Nothing like this happened again.<sup>30</sup>

Both of Azaliya's parents understood that a Jew could not survive the first days of war, without the protection of a non-Jew, lying, deceiving, and simple luck. They certainly did not receive this information from the official sources, such as the Soviet press or official warnings. Azaliya's father, as a NKVD officer, had access to the latest official news, but it did not contain any specific warning to the Jews. Rather, the awareness came from the general atmosphere of the time, from rumors and everyday conversations. Those, who realized that the danger from some non-Jews was real, and who were lucky enough to act on that knowledge, like, Azalia's parents, could manage to

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Azaliya, Toronto, 2007.

save themselves and their families, despite the official party line and government media did not speak about these dangers.

### **What the Soviet Residents Knew and Were Afraid of Before the War: A Summary**

If these findings are summarized in a systematic manner, the result for the information regarding the German treatment of Jews available to the respondents before the onset of the war on Soviet soil would be as follows,:

**Table 1**

The source of information about how Germany treats the Jews			The type of information
The media	Newspapers	Russian, Ukrainian	Neutral
		Yiddish	Negative
	Films, literature (until 1939)		Negative
State officials and teachers			Negative until 1939, mixed 1939 – 1941,

Own experience with the German Army (or a family member)	Positive
Own experience during the Civil war	Negative
Rumors	Negative and positive

As seen from the table, most of the information about Germany available to the respondents was relatively negative, with the exception of the experience of older members of the community, which was overwhelmingly positive. But who did the respondents and their families trust? Table 2 provides a glimpse:

**Table 2**

The Source	Awareness level (in %) (based on 198 respondents)	Trust Level (in % from the awareness level)	
		High	Low
Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian press	100	47	53
Yiddish media	22	36	64
Film	86	61	39
Officials and teachers	96	75	25
Own experience (e.g. encounters with the German army, civil war, and riots)	65	32	68
Own experiences during the Civil war	73	86	14
Rumors	38	23	77

As is apparent from the table, the Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian press, films, and lectures by state officials were the most accessible sources of information for

all respondents, as virtually every respondent was familiar with the official Soviet doctrine as transmitted by this media. It is notable, that only 22 percent of respondents read the two central Yiddish newspapers, *Oktober* and *Shtern* which were published until 1941, and of those only 36 percent found these sources trustworthy. The low level of trust is especially striking because the Yiddish press actually presented the most accurate and detailed information about the treatment of Jews in Germany.

The experience of older relatives with the German army seems to be at least as trustworthy as the officially available information in the non-Yiddish media. However, the experience of riots was much more common knowledge, and certainly, widely trusted (more so, than any other source of information). Thirty eight percent of respondents heard the rumors of what was taking place in Poland, or about the rumors, but of those only 23 percent took them seriously before the war actually began. Yet, everything changed as soon as the war started.

### ***Change of Information and Officials' Behavior at the Beginning of the War***

In a study devoted to disaster evacuation in the United States, scholars found that the public trusted the information from state officials most, the local commercial media took second place, and finally, rumors or personal information was barely taken seriously.<sup>31</sup> In the Soviet Union before the war, as shown in the previous section, the situation was quite similar.

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Drabek, "Social Processes in Disaster: Family Evacuation," *Social Problems*, Vol. 16, No 3. (Winter 1969), 336 – 349.

However, as soon as the war began, and the actual “disaster” was inevitably approaching, the situation became different. Officials, who did not have exact information themselves, could not serve as a reliable source, and newspapers and radio were not efficient enough to provide exact details. In the early days of the war, the belief of Jewish residents of Ukraine and Byelorussia in the strength of the Soviet government was tested, and most importantly, its ability to sustain a German attack. Ironically, most respondents who held government jobs and positions (or whose family members did) chose to leave, whereas many of those who were not quite active in government affairs, stayed, even if they had a possibility to leave for the reasons that were already discussed (material possessions, positive experience with Germans and family ties), and also because some state officials (sometimes Jewish) or neighbors convinced them that it was safer to stay. Most officials probably followed government orders about priorities to evacuate the livestock and strategically important industries. Esfir A. (born in 1908) was married to an official who was responsible for the evacuation of industrial objects from Vilnius, a newly Soviet territory. In her interview, she explained that even families of high-ranking Communists and state officials did not always have the possibility to leave easily because of state priorities:

My husband was an appointed state official in Vilnius in 1941. When we saw the first bomb, I went home and packed some of the most valuable photographs and all our documents. Then it became clear that my husband would not be able to join his regiment, so he received an order to evacuate what was necessary for the army, namely food. He received a car, and he had to bring dried bread, butter and herring to military posts. [...] He also had to prepare food and

send it to Russia. The troops that were located there did not have any weapons, so they were waiting for pistols. Meanwhile, they had to be fed, so he brought bread to them.

We were in Vilnius, and we learned what the Germans did to the Jews from the locals, and we all wanted to leave. There were many family members of military personnel, women and children, and we all wanted to leave. But our husbands had state orders, and could not give us trucks. We all stood on roads, with little children, and tried to hitchhike. When we saw a bomb, we would run into a building.

Suddenly, I saw an officer with a truck. But he was filling his truck with his furniture, clothes, and then his wife came and sat in the truck. I realized that he received the truck to evacuate all of us, but he took his family and his furniture... I approached him, and said: "We can't leave, we are hitchhiking, but nobody takes us." That man ignored me.

Then I saw my husband, who came back with the herring. He came down from the truck, and said: "Here, women, have some herring and bread! I told him: "We do not need herring. We need to get out of here. You have to save us." He said: "There is nothing I can do." Then I cried and said: "You brought me here, and you have to be a human being, and save us all! Throw the herring off the truck, and put us on it. The soldiers will not die without herring, they already ate!"

My husband had two soldiers, who helped him. He ordered: "take all the food down!" They threw the boxes on the ground. But the truck was small, so he said: "I will only take women with children, and pregnant women. Others should

walk by foot.” We were only allowed to take our documents, nothing else. I helped women to get on that truck. We loaded everyone. I was the last one. I was then seven months pregnant then, so there was no place for me in this truck. The soldier said: “Fira, there is no place for your belly here. Go sit on your husband’s lap.” I came to the front cabin, and told my husband, who was sitting next to the driver. I said: “There is no space left for me. I can only go if I push out the baby.” So I sat on his lap. [...] With big adventures, I gradually got to Tula.<sup>32</sup>

The chaos and the lack of organized evacuation mechanisms are vividly described here by the respondent. Individual fates largely depended on “luck,” expressed in good will of individuals in charge, such as Esfir’s husband. He, like many other government officials at that time, were given unprecedented power, albeit for a short time, to organize the evacuation, as the Soviet official evacuation machinery was not functioning until late autumn of 1941.<sup>33</sup> Most Jews who managed to escape Vilnyus, did so in the summer of 1941, before the Germans occupied the city, and their lives were completely in the hands of such officials.

Fira takes it for granted that she understood the danger Jews faced in the impending German occupation, and the only thing that could potentially stop her from leaving was the unavailability of a means of transportation. Also, the narrative tells us about the primary importance of personal factors, ranging from individuals in power to one’s own initiative.

Officials often were the first ones to find safety for themselves and their families. Numerous Holocaust survivors reported that members of city councils and party leaders

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Esfir Agafonova, Potsdam, June 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Sanford Lieberman, p. 91.

fled early, leaving the localities without any source of official information or instructions. As a result, those who tried to escape without the help of the authorities, were often forced to go back. But even those officials, who stayed, were often not sure what they should do. With a lack of clear directives, they often advised, or, worse, ordered, the civilians to remain in place:

Once we heard of the war, I wanted to flee. I heard that some factories and their workers were being relocated, and wanted to go with them. My son was only 2 years old at the time. I went to the party leader, and explained that. He said: “If you leave, we will consider you a deserter. How can you believe that Germans will come here? Go to work, and be a good Soviet citizen.” The next day, he fled. I, on the other hand, could not squeeze onto the train. I tried four times. My husband was in the army. In the end, I stayed, and ended up in a ghetto in Kopai. It is a miracle that my son and I survived.<sup>34</sup>

Cases like the one described are not rare in respondents’ testimonies. Often, officials based their judgments on orders from the pre-war times, or at least, imposed those orders onto others, without necessarily following them personally (just as the one described in this case). Approximately 30 percent of the respondents who did not evacuate, said that they had been prevented from doing so by local officials who did not issue them tickets, or simply suggested that leaving would lead to arrest.

In some cases, officials actually bent their orders to “discourage escape” and “prevent panic,” and helped respondents to get on trains, or at least did not stop them from finding their own means of transportation:

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Etya, New York, 1998.

The head of the Party Committee at our factory approached me, and said: “Do not quote me on this, but I heard that your people should go first. Why don’t you pack your things, and get to the train station at 6 am. He gave me the evacuation cards. My wife, kids, her parents, and my sister got into the cattle car, and eventually reached Stalingrad.<sup>35</sup>

As seen from the testimony, the official, who exercised his own judgment and compassion, based his decision on rumors (as opposed to government directives), as we know that no official instructions warning against the dangers to the Jewish population existed in 1941. In this particular case, even for some officials, to say nothing of ordinary civilians, personal experience and rumors were sometimes more important than the official sources of information.

In the first days of war, the trustworthiness and availability of the sources of information shifted dramatically compared to the pre-war period. Table 3 reflects those changes.

**Table 3**

The Source	Awareness and accessibility level (in %) (based on 198 respondents)	Trust Level (in % from the awareness level)	
		High	Low
Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian press and radio	70	50	50
Yiddish media	n/a	n/a	n/a
Film	n/a	n/a	n/a
Officials and teachers	100	69	31
Own experience and of relatives (both, positive and negative)	97	78	22

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Naum, Toronto, 2007.

Rumors	90	75	25
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As seen in the table, the role of officials grew significantly, as did the level of trust in their judgment. Unlike average residents, officials had access to the means of transportation, and therefore were able to facilitate evacuation. According to the overwhelming number of respondents, the power of officials was crucial in their path to salvation. The role of rumors and personal experiences also grew significantly, compared to the pre-war era. This makes the Soviet case very different from the American case-study quoted above. While in both emergency cases, government officials were most trusted, the commercial media enjoyed a much higher level of trust in the United States than the state-controlled media did in the Soviet Union. Moreover, officials themselves often based their judgment not on official newspapers, but rather on rumors and own their experience, as opposed to clear instructions from the center. The chaos of the first days of war can not completely explain the power of such officials and their judgment, as clear instructions did exist in regards to the industrial evacuations. Rather, the situation is explained by the fact that the Soviet government prioritized the evacuation of industry vs. the civilian population.

***Ethnic Identity and Escape: Is there Correlation?***

Two aspects of the pre-war culture were discussed in this paper. First, was the information about Germany and the possibilities and nature of a possible war available to all Soviet citizens, as well as the role this information played in the first days and weeks following the outbreak of war. Second, the ethnic relations between Jews and their

neighbors were analyzed as a factor on whether the Jews left their places of residence or not.

While the information about Germany and the war was equally available to all Soviet citizens, Jews seemed to be more alert specifically about the Jewish aspect of fascism. They watched movies, listened to rumors, and tried to read newspapers between the lines, in their quest for truth regarding German treatment of Jews. While only a few suspected that this information would become relevant to their own fate in a very short while, the majority were still interested in what was happening to their co-religionists abroad. In many ways, the specific interest in this information was one of the signs that the new Soviet Jewish identity that would develop later in the 1940s was awakening. While I have not conducted original research in regards to how information about Germans was perceived by the non-Jewish population, the Jewish respondents suggest that Jews had been more sensitive to this news than others. In addition, these respondents were interviewed 60 years after the event, and they know retrospectively that this information would have been crucial in the years after the war, both for their survival, and for their later identity. However, even in light of this knowledge, they still did not present their access to this information as a decisive factor in their future life.

Meanwhile, I would like to investigate the issue of ethnic relations a little further. If the Jews were aware, or somewhat aware of ethnic intolerance of their neighbors, where does it leave their own ethnic identity? During the 1920s and 1930s, state policies towards Jews successfully managed to divorce Jews from Judaism, the foundation of Jewish identity throughout centuries. Combined with the rapid forces of assimilation

initiated by the community members themselves, the policies resulted in almost complete disappearance of ethnicity-based conscious identity among Soviet Jews, especially among youngsters (who are now my respondents). In my previous research, I referred to these youngsters as both, the most Soviet and most Jewish of all contemporary Russian Jews. However, in the 1930s and 1940s, these people represented arguably the “most Soviet” segment of the Jewish, and probably general population. They attended Soviet schools, participated in Soviet youth movements, and dreamt of the future, associated with the Soviet regime. Their ethnic identity seemed to them the least important factor in their personalities. When the war began, this attitude changed literally overnight. Suddenly, the conversations, which were dismissed by the young people, as “provocative,” “old-fashioned,” and even “senile,” determined their future survival. In the first days of war, one’s ethnicity turned out to be the most significant determining factor of one’s fate. This realization dawned especially clearly on those who were sent to ghettos, but evacuees and refugees experienced it as well. Similarly to Holocaust victims and survivors, they saw their ethnicity as the cause of their possible persecution. Unlike Holocaust victims, however, they shared many of their tribulations with non-Jews, who went through similar experiences. The identity of evacuees and refugees possesses its own unique characteristic, created by individual circumstances. Later, this identity will transform, based on other experiences, that my respondents endured, such as travels to central Asia and Siberia, post-war discrimination, popular and state-run anti-Semitism. Yet, the first awareness, the most significant and often the most painful one, arrived together with the war. The later experiences in Siberia and Central Asia only confirmed the suspicions of Soviet Jews that their equality in the Soviet Union was only temporary.

However, this begins a new chapter in Soviet Jewish studies, which, I hope to present at a future date.