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Hrubieszów at the Crossroads: Polish Jews Navigate the German and Soviet Occupations

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In the fall of 1939, Jews across western Poland faced a momentous dilemma: whether to stay in their homes under Nazi occupation or to flee to the area controlled by the Soviets. The question was particularly acute for residents of Hrubieszów, mere kilometers from the new border at the Bug River. Testimonies and memoirs of Hrubieszower Jews illuminate the factors individuals and families weighed in making their decisions. They also highlight the importance of Jewish agency and choice during the Holocaust.

“What should we do, become wanderers in Russia or stay in our homes under God’s protection?”

—Reuven Katz1

German forces entered the Polish town of Hrubieszów on September 14, 1939. After only a few days the Germans withdrew, ceding the territory to the Red Army. Soviet forces remained in the town for nearly two weeks before the border was re-negotiated. As they prepared to leave, some soldiers encouraged the local Jews to accompany them back into Soviet-controlled territory, even going so far as to offer transport. On October 3, the Soviets evacuated and established the border at the Bug River, three kilometers to the east.2 The Germans returned the following morning and remained until the Red Army liberated the area in May 1944. Jews in Hrubieszów thus faced the dilemma of whether to stay in Nazi-occupied Poland or to cross over the nearby border to the Soviet-controlled area. Many left, but most stayed. This article explores the factors that influenced their decisions.

In the waning months of 1939, all Polish Jews faced variations of this choice. Their country had been split in half by the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. Families were divided as geography determined who fell under the Nazis and who under Communist rule. Of course, the same was true for all Polish citizens, and indeed some ethnic Poles, particularly members of the Communist Party, chose to cross over from what had been western Poland into the Soviet zone. However, the question was particularly acute for Jews. Although no one could have imagined, in the
fall of 1939, the wholesale murder yet to come, the Nazis had made their opinions about Jews perfectly clear. Polish Jews were also aware of the oppression German Jews had faced since the Nazis ascended to power in 1933. Jews across Poland discussed their options, but for those in close proximity to the new border, flight was within reach.

The town of Hrubieszów, within easy walking distance of the Bug River, thus offers a useful starting point for examining how Jewish individuals and families determined whether to remain under Nazi rule or relocate to the Soviet side. Several recently published local studies have demonstrated the potential of focused research on one locale to illuminate broader issues relevant to the Holocaust as a whole. This article begins with a detailed account of the opening months of the war and occupation in Hrubieszów. This close focus reveals a number of junctures at which Jews considered and/or reconsidered their options. Memoirs, oral testimonies, memorial books, and other first-hand materials provide information about the factors that were of greatest importance to Hrubieszower Jews. The final sections of the article explore the subject of choice, and outline the ways in which the recollections of survivors from one town can shed light on the Holocaust experience more broadly.

**Hrubieszów, 1939**

The town of Hrubieszów, located on the banks of the Huczwa, a tributary of the Bug River, was part of the Russian Empire before World War I. According to the 1897 census, Jews constituted 54.5% of the total population of 5,341. In the Polish Republic formed after the war, Hrubieszów was in the center of the country, about one hundred kilometers from the larger city of Lublin. By 1939, Jews numbered about 7,500, or half the town’s total population of approximately 15,000. All of the major streams of Jewish culture were represented. In their postwar testimonies Jews from Hrubieszów recall Sabbaths and holidays in Hasidic, traditional, and even non-religious homes, and describe the activities of numerous Zionist groups and the Jewish Labor Bund. Most of the Jewish children living in the town attended the Polish school through seventh grade. Only a small number went on to the gymnasium. The many Jews who were involved in commerce lived and worked in the central market district of the town. Other Jews lived in more mixed areas farther from the marketplace. The farms surrounding the town were owned by ethnic Poles or Ukrainians.

The German attack on Poland on September 1, 1939 did not come as a surprise to the Jews of Hrubieszów. Hitler’s armies had already marched into Austria and Czechoslovakia, and the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August confirmed that Poland was the next target. The speed of the German advance and the crumbling of Poland’s defenses did come as a shock, however. On September 13—the eve of Rosh Hashanah 5700 according to the Hebrew calendar—enemy planes were sighted over Hrubieszów. The next day, on the Jewish New Year, the Germans arrived in full force, meeting no resistance. They immediately began to expropriate Jewish goods.
Then, several days later, they withdrew just as suddenly. That evening some units of
the Polish army came through the town as well, but they, too, were gone when the
Soviet forces arrived.⁶

This was an unexpected development. At first some residents of the town
believed that the Soviets had come to aid the Polish army in its fight against the
Germans. Soon, however, as the Soviets settled into their own program of expropria-
tion and established a local administration, it seemed clear that they had come to stay.
The Hrubieszowers were thus in for another surprise when the Soviets began packing
up to leave in early October. Modifications to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact now set
the border between the two invaders at the Bug River. In the several days that passed
between the announcement of the changing of the guard and the Soviet pullback,
many Soviet soldiers actively sought to persuade members of the local Jewish popula-
tion to accompany them eastward.⁷

When the German authorities returned in early October, they did not immedi-
ately establish a ghetto.⁸ Jews were allowed to stay in their homes for the time being.
Many Jewish survivors from Hrubieszów report that they encountered refugees from
elsewhere in Poland in the town during this period; in some cases, resident families
temporarily housed them. Although a border now existed between the two occupation
zones, neither side had moved to fortify it, and crossing over was still relatively easy.
As Jews from all over Poland streamed through Hrubieszów on their way eastward, no one in the city could have failed to see them. Hrubieszów Jews who hosted the refugees had the opportunity to speak with them at length and to hear their reasons for flight. Many remember being told that conditions were far worse elsewhere in the German-occupied zone.9

As fall settled into winter, Poland’s two occupiers established their respective regimes on either side of the Bug and began to patrol the border more assiduously. Border crossing, as well as the stream of refugees, slowed but did not stop entirely.10 The Germans put in place a Judenrat to implement their many demands. It appears that the appointed leader, Szmuel Brand, as well as some of the other members of the twelve-man committee, had been involved in Jewish communal leadership before the war.11 The Germans introduced curfews, armbands, and other anti-Jewish measures. Some Jews continued to work in their own businesses; others saw all of their merchandise or their entire stores confiscated. Periodically, and without warning, the Germans rounded up Jews on the streets for work details. The authorities forced them to complete back-breaking and sometimes humiliating tasks, but usually released them at the end of the day. There were, of course, isolated incidents of anti-Jewish violence, but until December none was large-scale. On the whole, the Jews of Hrubieszów tried to stay out of the way of the Germans and to go on with their lives to the extent possible.

Announcements plastered on walls and fences around the town on December 1, 1939 signaled a turning point. After two months of relative calm, all male Jews between the ages of 16 and 60 were ordered to report the following morning—a Saturday—to a central location. They were to bring their identification and work documents with them. Rumors began to spread immediately: many heard that the men were going to be taken to the Soviet Union; others assumed that they were being mobilized for forced labor.12 In any case, the Jewish men of Hrubieszów had little choice, and virtually all appeared as ordered the following morning. The men found themselves surrounded by the German forces and roughly formed into marching columns. As they moved forward, they soon were joined by the bedraggled remnants of a similar group of Jews from the town of Chełm. The latter had endured a terrible march the previous day and had been forced to sleep in a barn outside Hrubieszów. They told stories of the Germans’ unbelievable cruelty along the way.

For the next four days, the Jewish men from Chełm and Hrubieszów marched together under inhuman conditions. Many were shot along the way for falling behind, for speaking to their neighbors, or just for the amusement of their captors. The path was muddy and the days and nights increasingly cold. The prisoners received no food or water. On the second day they were formed into two groups. Half eventually reached the bridge spanning the Bug River at Sokal, where they were ordered to run across with their arms raised while chanting pro-Soviet slogans. The other group had to cross through the water in Belz. In both cases, the Soviet soldiers refused to accept the Jews who reached them safely. By the time the Jews returned to the western bank,
the German soldiers had gone, leaving the freezing, wet, and hungry survivors to find their own way to shelter and eventually back to their homes. Those who returned to Hrubieszów faced the task of telling the wives and mothers of the men murdered along the way, or drowned, of their loved ones’ fates.13

How many Jews left on what came to be known among Hrubieszower Jews as the Death March, and how many returned? Eyewitness accounts vary, but many agree that some 2,000 men left from each of the two towns and fewer than half of the total survived.14 A Jewish Telegraphic Agency report released in January 1940—most likely based on Jewish testimony as well—reported 1,900 dead.15 German military and Polish underground accounts report significantly lower numbers of victims.16 According to several testimonies, on the final morning of the march, slightly more than 400 Jewish men lined up to walk to the bridge in Sokal. The German guards wanted the columns to be even, and asked for volunteers to be shot in order to bring the number of men down to an even 400. When no one stepped forward, the guards made the exhausted prisoners race, then killed the slowest among them.17

In the waning months of 1939 the Germans launched a number of initiatives aimed at terrorizing and reducing the Jewish population in Nazi-occupied Poland. Writing about the Lublin district as a whole, David Silberklang points to the local and experimental nature of many of these attempts. He also highlights the march from Chełm and Hrubieszów as having been particularly murderous.18 A December 5,
1939 memorandum by the state secretary of Germany’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs described scuffles between border units when Jews expelled by the Germans were not accepted by the Soviets. Later that month, formal discussions led Hans Frank, the Governor General, to demand an end to such expulsions: “The complaint made by the Soviet Union is to be taken absolutely seriously; disturbances of the necessary friendly relations between the Soviet Union and Germany by such actions must in all circumstances be avoided.” It is possible that the death march from Chełm and Hrubieszów led to, or at least reinforced, these Soviet complaints and the German response.

By the end of 1939 the Jews of Hrubieszów had seen the Soviets withdraw from their town with promises of transport across the border, watched streams of refugees from elsewhere in Poland pass through their town on the way to cross on their own, felt the German occupiers gradually push them out of public life, and endured the trauma of the Death March. Many also had friends or relatives who had crossed to the Soviet zone and had sent letters describing their new lives there. The Jews of Hrubieszów could not have known what the coming years of the war would bring, but they knew what both the German and the Soviet occupations had entailed so far. It would have been unthinkable for Jews living in Hrubieszów in those times not to consider moving the few kilometers to the other side of the border. Indeed, every individual and family must have weighed and re-weighed the options. But what exactly were the factors that tipped the scales? How does someone decide whether to trade one brutal and unpredictable regime for another?

To Stay or to Go

In attempting to answer these questions, researchers must rely on the written and oral testimonies of people who lived through the experience. Beyond clarifying the context, no official documents—Nazi, Soviet, or Polish—could possibly shed light on the private deliberations of a family, much less on those of an individual. We are thus left with subjective personal recollections, often recorded decades after the events in question. Indeed, in the case of the question of whether to stay or to go, it is precisely the later testimonies that provide the answers.

The earliest attempts to collect eyewitness accounts from Jews in Europe occurred even as the war still raged. On the whole, however, testimonies from the 1940s do not focus on the question of choice. For example, in conducting interviews with Polish citizens evacuated from the Soviet Union with the Anders Army between 1942 and 1944, the Polish government-in-exile tended to focus on issues of import to the Poles—above all, Soviet crimes against Polish citizens. Similarly, when the Oyneg Shabes underground organization in the Warsaw Ghetto developed a questionnaire for refugees newly returned from Soviet territories, they focused on Jewish communal life in the Soviet-occupied zone. The mission of the first postwar historical commissions was to document Nazi atrocities for legal and historical purposes; their
researchers therefore privileged testimonies from those who had lived under Nazi occupation.24 The testimonies they elicited are laconic—closer to court depositions than to emotional retellings.25

It is thus only in later and longer testimonies that the discussion of whether or not to cross over to the Soviet side becomes more prevalent. In written memoirs in particular, witnesses control their own narrative, and there is room to expand on decisions and emotions along the way. With oral testimonies, it is often the interviewer who sets the pace and tone. Sometimes interviewers ask explicitly about choices or give witnesses the time they need to explore their experiences and reactions. At other times they rush the witnesses through a set of questions without stopping to pay attention to the unique aspects of each story.

A great deal has been written about the pitfalls and possibilities of relying on eyewitness testimony, and especially on those produced long after the events. Henry Greenspan, a particularly attentive scholar, even suggests replacing the word *testimony* with "Recounting," it has seemed to me, better connotes the provisional and processual nature of retelling a series of what are always compromises and always point beyond themselves.26 He also highlights how the preconceptions of both the survivor and the listener can influence interactions during an interview.27 Using the testimony of just one witness, Jürgen Matthäus has shown how various interpreters reinterpret and even misinterpret the subject's words.28 Others have discussed the specific natures of particular testimony collections.29 There is, however, a growing consensus that the experience of the victims must be explored and that testimonies are often the only sources available in this effort.30

Like all primary sources, testimonies must be used with care. The fact that the subject of choice, and especially the dilemma faced by Polish Jews in September 1939, has received so little attention is in some ways advantageous: Christopher Browning points out that memories may become “degraded by overexposure to Holocaust tropes.” Many witnesses, for example, remember being selected by Dr. Josef Mengele at Auschwitz, even when he was not there at the time they arrived.31 For the most part, witnesses have not been questioned about their decision-making on whether to cross the Bug. Nor have they been exposed to scholarly or popular discussion of the topic that might have influenced their memories. This is not to say that their interpretations of the events of 1939 could not have changed over the decades—only that this particular problem may be somewhat mitigated.

At the same time, self-reporting is notoriously unreliable. Even leaving aside the temptation to cover up or reformulate unflattering behavior, there is the added problem that people often do not fully understand their own motivations. For example, the influence of conformity must be taken into account. The fact that most Jews were staying in Hrubieszów does not come up in the testimonies, though surely this tendency played a role in convincing others of the wisdom of remaining. In other words, there may be a distinction to be made between reasons and causes. But of
course there is no such thing as a perfectly informative and unbiased historical document. The work of the historian is to interpret the evidence. Even if testimonies do not grant us access to the unconscious deliberations of individuals, they do give us a sense of what people were discussing.

In examining multiple testimonies, we also increase the chances of reaching a more comprehensive understanding. Hrubieszów’s size and its proximity to the Bug make it a logical choice for a case study. A town with a smaller Jewish population would have had too few survivors to represent the various aspects of the story. A large city would have had too many to contain in a study of this length. A search for Hrubieszów in the Yad Vashem database, for example, yields hundreds of archival sources. However, most of these turn out to be testimonies from people who passed through briefly, or worked in one of the satellite labor camps. The present study is thus based primarily on thirty-five oral testimonies, eight memoirs, and the brief first-person narratives collected in the memorial book for the town, as well as on several supplementary memorial pamphlets. The majority of the full-length treatments at least touch upon the question of choice. Some treat it at length.

To Stay
Across Nazi-occupied Poland, including Hrubieszów, most Jewish families and individuals stayed in their hometowns. Why, given even cursory knowledge of Hitler’s stance toward Jews, did they not attempt to flee? One can perhaps understand that moving from Łódź, hundreds of kilometers farther west, would have presented great obstacles, but Jews residing in Hrubieszów had only to walk to the river. As locals they were also more likely to have friends, business partners, and relatives able to help them get across and to get settled on the other side. What made them decide to try to wait out the war?

Meyer Megdal was 13 when the war broke out. Years later, in an unpublished memoir, he wrote about the agonizing decisions faced by families at that time:

A small portion of the town’s Jewish population took the advice of the Russians and, leaving behind most of their worldly possessions, sought sanctuary in border towns on the Russian side. This was a very difficult decision to reach for most Jewish families. My immediate family, after a lot of soul-searching, decided to remain—especially when news reports began reaching us of the deplorable conditions the refugees in the Russian border towns were subjected to. The towns became overcrowded and many of the newcomers were suffering from lack of food and no place with a roof over their heads. There were also instances where Jews attempting to cross the border were stopped by the Russian border guards and sent back. Even if we could have succeeded in crossing the border, my parents were reluctant to leave behind a comfortable home and expose the family to all the hardships awaiting us as refugees in a nearby Russian border town. My mother kept referring to her recollections of the German front-line soldiers [in World War I]. . . . None of us at that time imagined the suffering of the Jewish population that followed—culminating in the “Final Solution.”
Megdal was the only one of his immediate family to survive the war. Of the twenty-five relatives with whom he had shared a large house growing up, he and one other man, a Polish army prisoner-of-war interned in the USSR, lived to see liberation.\(^{35}\) He points to a number of factors that influenced his family to stay in Hrubieszów. Reports of conditions on the other side of the river could not have reached the town immediately; they help to explain why the family did not choose to relocate later. Negative reports regarding Soviets, as well as positive expectations of Germans based on the previous war, are frequently mentioned to explain initial decisions.

Eve Silver returned to Hrubieszów from Warsaw, where she had been studying, in early October. Her family, too, had better memories of Germans than of Russians, and the arrival of Soviet troops wearing unhemmed blankets in place of winter coats only reinforced these impressions. In her recollection, the question of fleeing in one direction or the other was raised only later.\(^{36}\) When Yocheved Zamari’s father tried to convince his parents to join them in fleeing east, they countered with their positive recollections of German behavior during the Great War.\(^{37}\) Witnesses often mention this memory in conjunction with other reasons for staying, which suggests that it may have been more a supplementary than a primary motivating factor.

Megdal’s reconstruction, cited above, points also to the centrality of family in Jews’ calculations. His was not the only family to attempt to reach a decision as a group. In some cases this meant that heads of families had to overrule conflicting views. Shalom Omri, interviewed for the Shoah Foundation, remembers his mother’s firm stance against leaving. His father was prepared to leave, but she convinced him
that they would be better off holding on to their property, and that German soldiers would never harm women and children. She was also reluctant to leave her own sister. The family therefore chose to stay, although they soon realized that their assumptions had been incorrect. After the Death March, Shalom, and then his father, ended up on the other side of the Bug. The two of them survived the war, whereas his mother and sister did not.38

Yochewed Deutch also describes the strains within her family. She and her mother and sister lived with her grandmother and were supported by her mother’s brothers. When Soviet officers offered to take the family across the river, Yochewed’s mother and sister went ahead to set up a place for the rest of the family. However, when Yochewed’s mother returned to get her own mother, her brothers intervened and talked her into staying. They reminded her of the last war and said that the Germans had behaved decently. Deutch recognized that others crossed the border later, but after that point the family felt that it had become too dangerous and they did not reconsider.39

Ruth Tatarko, although only 8 in 1939, remembers that her father wanted to go with the retreating Soviets, but that her mother categorically refused.40 Leonard Lerer does not mention a family discussion about staying or going, but, when he had the opportunity to escape to the Soviet Union, family brought him back. Having crossed the Bug at Sokal as part of the Death March, Lerer realized that their group was not well guarded and that he would be able to get away. However, the desire to return to his home and family kept him with the others, who were eventually returned to the German side. Previously in his testimony he had mentioned in passing that one of his older brothers did escape to the Soviet Union, but he did not provide details.41

David Gewirtz was literally brought back by family members. When his sister learned the destination of the Death March, she hired a wagon to go and fetch her two brothers. Meanwhile, David’s older brother had taken him on his shoulders so that David would not drown as they came back across the Bug. When the interviewer asks him whether it might not have been better to have stayed on the Soviet side, he answers simply, “This I don’t know.”42 Nathan Scher, when asked directly by an interviewer if he could have stolen across the border, says that anyone could have done so. His older brother Yitzchok went with the Russians when they left in early October, but his mother would not let him go, he recalls with obvious pain.43

The force of family comes through particularly strongly in the memoir of Chaim Ajzen. Chaim was keenly aware of his options, and yet bound by familial ties. He watched his two best friends leave with their families even before the Soviets arrived. “In that first week of war, my father never considered leaving Hrubieszów,” he explains. He goes on to say, “[my sister] Gutka was not yet seven and my mother was not a strong woman.” A couple of weeks later, however, when the Soviets urged them to leave before the Nazis returned, the Ajzens held a family meeting. Chaim argued strongly in favor of leaving, and had just about convinced his father to go, when his
grandfather pointed out that the Austrians had been far better than the Cossacks during World War I:

To my dismay and horror, he managed to convince my parents: they decided to stay put. I don’t know what would have happened to us if we had gone, but by staying, they brought upon us three years of suffering, followed by Hitler’s “Final Solution.” My grandfather was a man not easy to get on with, yet we had always liked each other. That night, however, as I lay awake, I really hated him. My father [had] defied this old man all his life, but in this most crucial moment of our lives—he gave in!

In the following weeks, Ajzen was beaten up for appearing in public without the armband that identified him as a Jew. When a friend of his invited him to join him in crossing the river to the Soviet side, he seriously considered doing so:

I knew that this was the sensible solution for me—but I also knew that I wouldn’t do it. I loved my family very much and was too attached to leave them here and go away. During all my sixteen years, they had given me everything. Now when I’m big and strong and able to give them some of the care they gave me, am I going to abandon them and seek security for myself? I knew I would never be able to do it. Well, never say never, but that is for later—much later.44

Ajzen eventually did leave his family, but only in the fall of 1942, and with their support. By that point it was clear that the remaining Jews in Hrubieszów would be deported, probably to their deaths, and Ajzen escaped to join the partisans.

Of course, some families had already separated before the war. Helen Jakubowski’s mother ran a leather business in Hrubieszów while her father worked in the lumber industry close to the old border between Poland and the Soviet Union. When the war started, Jakubowski’s brother, who was on summer vacation from the architecture school he attended in Haifa, went to help their father in the Soviet-occupied area while Helen and her mother remained under the German occupation. Her father returned to Hrubieszów only after his business was nationalized. Her brother stayed in the newly incorporated Soviet territory and completed his education there. Jakubowski, who was a teenager at the time, does not mention family deliberation in her testimony. She does not explain why her brother elected to go to the Soviet sector and remain there, while her father chose to return. The father’s decision may have had to do with the fact that his wife’s business remained in the family’s control.45

Many accounts indicate that property was associated with protection. Born in 1933, Tsiporah Horvits was still a child when the occupation began, but she remembers that the Soviet soldiers whom her father had befriended begged him to accompany them across the Bug. Her mother said “Mendel, me geyt [Mendel, we are going]”; but her father had worked his whole life to obtain their home and shoe shop and was unwilling to abandon them.46 Interestingly, in a second oral testimony conducted three years later, as well as in a subsequent published memoir, Horvits cites...
the same conversation between her parents, but goes on to say that, by the time of the
Death March in December, her father had made several unsuccessful attempts to
cross the border on his own. After losing his shop, he had reversed his initial decision
and decided to go and get an apartment on the Soviet side before bringing over the
rest of the family.47

Matla Blander, who was 11 when the war broke out, remembers her father and
older sister arguing about whether to leave with the Soviets. The family was well-off,
and her father believed that money could buy them out of any difficulties. Blander’s
perception was that the poorer families were more likely to leave.48 Josef Scher’s
father, on the other hand, was convinced that the Germans would target the wealthy.
He felt sure that his status as working-class would protect his family.49

Whether they acknowledged it or not, the fear of the unknown was ultimately a
major factor in many families’ decision-making. In an unpublished memoir,
Aleksandra Alexander explains that, although they possessed no property and faced
separation from their relatives who had left, her parents were not ready to take the
leap.

A lot of young men and girls convinced that they would have a better future went with
the Russians when they left for good on the 11th of October. Even my grandfather
Nusen with his family, ten people altogether, came to our place; everyone with a bundle
of food and a pillow. They came to convince us to leave together with them. They got a
lift from the soldiers. My grandfather said he preferred the dirty Russians even if they
were communists, as he didn’t trust the blue-eyed, clean-shaven Germans. My parents
didn’t want to move to an uncertain life as refugees.50

In trying to explain the mindset of the frightened people, and their connection to
their homes and their city of origin, Avraham Ayzen wrote in the Hrubieszów memo-
rial book: “They rehearsed every possible and impossible miracle, just to avoid taking
up their walking sticks.”51

To Go

As much as family ties played an important role in the decision to stay, some people
made individual choices to leave. When the interviewer asked Josef Scher how his
parents felt about his older brother’s flight to the USSR, he responded, “This is a time
that you decide for yourself. You can’t decide for nobody.”52 Shaul Eizen says that his
mother did not want him to leave. “Ikh loif [I am fleeing],” he told her. Later he was
able to send her packages from the Soviet zone.53

Helena Starkiewicz had already left home by the time the war started. It was
only when her nursing college in Warsaw closed in September 1939 that she made
her way back to Hrubieszów. Walking from the railroad station in Chełm, she encoun-
tered boys who were on their way to cross to the Soviet side. Later, after reuniting
with her family, she saw her brother leave to join the Bund in Vilna. Soon Starkiewicz
made her own attempt at crossing, only to be turned back by the German border
guards who at this time had orders to stop the flow of population across the river. By October, she was ready to try again. Her father did not approve of her decision. On this occasion Starkiewicz was once again caught, but this time on the Soviet side. She was jailed and then sent to Siberia. Following the Sikorski-Maiskii agreement of July 1941 and the subsequent “amnesty” of Poles in the Soviet Union, Starkiewicz relocated to Kazakhstan. Her nursing training provided her with somewhat better jobs and provisions in the USSR. She returned to Hrubieszów in 1944 as part of the medical staff of the liberating army. There she found that no one in her family had survived.54

On the other hand, some families chose at the outset to separate. As with individual deliberations, both gender and age usually played a role in such decisions. Isaac Goldman’s mother sent him with an uncle and other young men to escape the initial German invasion. However, after several days on the road, the men heard that the Soviets were coming and decided that it was therefore safe to return home.55 In the first week of the war Henry Orenstein’s immediate family packed up and headed east ahead of the German invaders along with thousands of refugees. Once news of the Soviet arrival in Hrubieszów reached them, they returned to their home—only to be forced to decide yet again. Orenstein’s family weighed their options, and finally resolved that only the men—Henry and his father—would leave this time:

Men, we thought, would be in much greater danger from the Nazis than women, who might be subjected to fines and indignities but whose lives wouldn’t be at risk. Mother and Hanka would be more comfortable at home, where they could look after our property and even get some income from the shop. As refugees under the Soviets we knew it wouldn’t be easy to make ends meet, and we hoped Mother would be able to send us some money. We believed too that, especially in the beginning, it would be possible to cross the border between German- and Soviet-occupied territory. Perhaps we could return home before long, and be with Mother and Hanka again.56

Similarly, Josef Mermelstein’s mother worried that all four of her sons would be mobilized. She urged them to escape to the Soviet Union. One brother went first to arrange for lodging and find work. The others followed, but they continued to worry about their mother and even to visit. In late November, Mermelstein and several other men from his family were arrested by Soviet soldiers as they were returning from another trip to Hrubieszów.57 Moshe Brener’s family heard a rumor among the Jews that the youth would be treated in effect as a kaparah, or “guilt offering” under German occupation. His eldest sister already had a family of her own but he, his brothers, and his younger sister left together in the fall of 1939. He recalls his mother joking darkly as she said goodbye that she had merited to marry off all of her children at once.58

From other sources, we know that some members of Jewish political parties and religious groups tried to cross into the Soviet Union or unoccupied Lithuania. For Zionist groups in particular, the latter option seemed to offer the hope of gaining
permission to emigrate to Palestine.\textsuperscript{59} The sample of testimonies from Hrubieszów does not include any party activists or religious leaders who followed this path. Only two of the witnesses mention politics as playing any role in their deliberation, and none point to religious factors. Yochewed Zemari’s father was a Communist. She was an only child, her mother having died during a second pregnancy. Immediately after the war broke out, Zemari’s father took his young daughter and fled eastward. When they encountered Red Army forces heading toward Hrubieszów, they returned. As the Red Army subsequently prepared to withdraw, Zemari’s father tried to convince as many relatives as possible to accompany them. His mother-in-law, with whom he and Yochewed lived, and several of his siblings agreed.\textsuperscript{60}

Yankl Saler’s father was a socialist involved in the Jewish Labor Bund, and Yankl joined Tsukunft (Future), the youth organization of the Bund. He and his father were tradesmen. Although the Germans, in his description, looked as through they were “dressed for a ball” and the Soviets, embarrassingly, looked even worse than the Polish army, his family believed that Communism was preferable to fascism. When the Soviets offered them the opportunity to leave with them, they discussed it as a family and decided to go. Later he and his father came back to retrieve some of their belongings.\textsuperscript{61} Saler’s brother Mendel, younger by three years, remembered fewer details of their decision-making, but agreed in principle: “We believed [that] in Russia we will be able better to survive. Better than with the Germans.”\textsuperscript{62}

Exposure to the reality of the German occupation caused some families to consider flight more seriously. Helen Zuberman’s family ran a shoe store in Hrubieszów. Her father, because of his beard, and her sister, because she was considered to be attractive, were hiding in the attic when the Germans arrived. The soldiers demanded that her mother open the store and they took all of the shoes before physically assaulting her. The family left not long afterward.\textsuperscript{63}

For some, the Death March pushed them, literally and figuratively, to cross the border. Shalom Omri, like the others, did not initially succeed in crossing. In Sokal he was detained by the Soviet border guards and then sent back to the German side. He and his cousin, whose father had been a casualty along the way, paid a man to bring them across the next night. On the Soviet side they received help from friends and relatives. Eventually Omri reached Lvov, where his father met him. His cousin decided to return to Hrubieszów and was shot trying to cross the border. Shalom and his father survived the war. His mother, who in the early fall had convinced the family to stay put, did not. After the Death March, the family decided that the men would cross the Bug and the women would stay behind.\textsuperscript{64}

Tsiporah Horvits’s mother rescued her son and nephew from the Death March, but the family worried that they would be arrested. They therefore paid to have the two adolescent boys smuggled across the border.\textsuperscript{65} Eve Silver reports that her sister guided men from Hrubieszów to the river every night after the march. Among those she guided were their father, a brother, and a brother-in-law.\textsuperscript{66} After escaping
separately from the Death March, Avraham Blander and his father and brother decided to cross to the Soviet side. Avraham became ill, however, and his father remained with him. Only his brother succeeded in crossing.67

Chaim Zemel crossed the bridge in Sokal as part of the Death March, only to be sent back across by Soviet officials. Back in German territory, exhausted, he found a place to sleep in a school with other survivors of the march. During the night, however, the men were awoken, kicked out of the school and beaten by Germans. At this point Zemel concluded that he had to escape to the Soviet zone. Once there, he located some of his siblings, but found conditions unbearable. Deciding that it would be preferable to die at home, he arranged to be smuggled back. He accidentally slept through an arranged meeting time, but more important, a letter from his wife urging him to stay where he was convinced him to remain on the Soviet side. In shtot iz a gehenom, she wrote; “It is hell in the city.”68

Just as fear motivated some people to stay in their homes, desperation sent others onto the road. A child at the time, Natan Degani recalls that, when the Germans arrived, his family left for Lublin, where they had relatives. After several difficult months in that city, they set out for the Soviet side. Degani mentions several times that many of those who had money sought exit visas; some of those who had valuable possessions or property chose to stay in their homes. His family had nothing, and so had nothing to lose.69

Choice

Part of what this exploration demonstrates is the importance of choice in the lives of Jews during the Second World War. Jews living west of the Bug River in the fall of 1939 certainly could not have known what the war would bring, but they knew they were faced with an important choice. Individuals, especially young people, had to decide whether or not to stay with their families. In small family groups or extended families, Jews met to weigh their options and discuss their prospects.

This was the first of many portentous decisions to follow. Those who stayed in the General Government would soon face choices about whether to go into hiding or volunteer for work assignments, and whether to report on December 2. For some of those who had crossed to the eastern side, the Soviet authorities held out the offer of guaranteed housing and work in exchange for taking Soviet citizenship. The tepid response of the refugees, who had to consider whether the opportunity to leave the overcrowded refugee centers was worth potentially giving up the possibility of returning home after the war, set the stage for mass deportation of the refugees into the Soviet interior.70 And as we have seen, Polish Jews on both sides of the Bug would continually consider and reconsider whether or not they might be better off on the other side.

Indeed, choice is a prominent theme in Holocaust memoirs and oral testimonies. Describing their dilemmas decades after the events, many survivors point to
moments when certain choices saved their lives, or, conversely, when other choices would have meant better chances of survival for their family. Though they had little access to information about the broader circumstances, let alone about the future, Jews under Nazi occupation had to make momentous decisions on a daily basis. Yet, despite the seemingly clear evidence from primary sources, Holocaust scholarship has tended to downplay the importance of choice. As Dina Porat points out in the only article I know of that deals explicitly with the topic of choice during the Holocaust, the problem is “both historiographical and methodological.” Not only are the sources difficult to interpret, but there has been a tendency to view Jewish victims as passive.

Two distinct, yet related phenomena help to explain this development. The first is the hindsight that sensitizes us to the implausibility of survival. The knowledge that the numerous schemes for escape would end in failure makes it difficult for scholars to take these strategies seriously. When reading about frantic attempts to obtain visas or hearing about discussions regarding escape from ghettos or across national borders, we already know that the vast majority of such efforts were in vain. It is challenging for us to imagine the real hope that these possibilities may have engendered, let alone to recall that occasionally such schemes really did lead to survival.

The second phenomenon supporting the view of Holocaust victims as passive has to do with the bleeding of a conceptual construct developed for a particular context into Holocaust scholarship more generally. Although it was originally coined in reference to the death camps, Lawrence Langer’s concept of “choiceless choice” has come to dominate in scholarship on victims’ experiences. Langer’s sensitive evocation was aimed at removing such concepts as dignity and morality from the discussion of life in the camps. He was arguing against a falsely redemptive view that he felt was mythologizing the victims and removing responsibility from the perpetrators. Emphasizing that “moral choice as we know it was superfluous, and inmates were left with the futile task of redefining decency in an atmosphere that could not support it,” Langer redefined the camp experience. Much like Primo Levi’s “gray zone,” Langer’s “choiceless choice” complicates a topic that is too easily viewed in black and white. However, when applied in an overly broad manner, his reconceptualization can end up disempowering the victims by denying them agency.

Using a sociological perspective to explain how the genocide came about, and in particular to explain the reactions of the Jews to ongoing events, Zygmunt Bauman expanded upon Langer’s foundation. In Bauman’s formulation, the Nazis created a system in which all of the Jews’ rational decisions could be predicted and used to entrap them further: “At all stages of the Holocaust, therefore, the victims were confronted with a choice (at least subjectively—even when objectively the choice did not exist any more, having been pre-empted by the secret decision of physical destruction).” Bauman acknowledges that the Jews may have thought they faced real choices, and discusses the painful deliberations of the Judenräte, but in his view, the
outcome was always predetermined: “The war, in other words, was lost for the Jews before it had started.”

Literary scholar Michael Andre Bernstein, however, pushes back against this linear and overly deterministic view: “Every interpretation of the Shoah that is grounded in a sense of historical inevitability resonates with both implicit and often explicit ideological implications, not so much about the world of the perpetrators of the genocide, or about those bystanders who did so little to halt the mass murder, but about the lives of the victims themselves.” The victims, he points out, had no way of knowing the results of their choices and actions. Perhaps even more important, neither do we know how alternate decisions at crucial moments might have influenced the course of the war. Bernstein suggests using what he terms “sideshadowing” to replace the backshadowing he finds prevalent in both literary and historical writing: “Sideshadowing’s attention to the unfulfilled or unrealized possibilities of the past is a way of disrupting the affirmations of a triumphalist, unidirectional view of history in which whatever has perished is condemned because it has been found wanting by some irresistible historico-logical dynamic.”

A more strictly historical approach, free from the implied judgment above, would simply be to say that no one knew, in 1939, what 1940 would bring, let alone 1941. Jan Gross takes this concept even further in highlighting the futility of applying normative rational considerations to Nazi policies. In discussing collaboration, he points out that neither the Vichy bureaucrats nor the Judenrat leaders could have possibly foreseen in 1940 that their jobs would soon entail active participation in mass murder. Indeed, although every system has its corrupt and self-serving members, many people actually chose to serve in those positions because they thought they might be able to make a difference for their people there. We can now see how they became entrapped in the Nazi system, but in many cases they made choices that seemed reasonable at the time.

We now know that leaving Nazi-occupied Poland in 1939 was the “better” decision, statistically speaking: more than ninety percent of the Jews who resided in the General Government perished during the war. Flight, by its nature, is unregulated. Add to this the fact that many Soviet documents have not yet been released to the public, and determining the survival rate among those who crossed the Bug becomes extremely difficult. Nonetheless, if we follow Yosef Litvak in assuming that of the approximately 400,000 Jews from western Poland who entered Soviet territory in 1939, 250,000 were repatriated in 1946, then well over half of those who left survived. This is dramatically illustrated by the fact that of the 350,000 or so Polish Jews who survived the war, approximately 70% had returned from the Soviet Union. The tiny remnant of this once more than three-million-strong Jewish community was made up mainly of what some have called “flight survivors.” Statistics demonstrate that moving east offered better chances for life, but sideshadowing highlights that
both death and survival were possible outcomes on either side of the Bug. Gross reminds us that the decision to stay made sense given what the Jews knew at the time.

Just as overlooking the centrality of decision-making during the Holocaust prevents us from fully appreciating what life was like for its victims, there is also a danger in exaggerating the role of choice. While it is clear that certain choices, at certain moments, and for certain individuals could make a difference, there is overwhelming evidence that in most cases, for most people, there was no way out. As Christopher Browning concludes in his recent book based primarily on first-hand testimony, “Nazi power placed Jews in a ‘less than zero-sum game’ in which they had some agency or choice, but all choices caused harm to many and no choice guaranteed saving the life of anyone.”

The key is to recognize, and to probe, the contingency with which they nonetheless lived without either dismissing or sacralizing the victims. Paying attention to the minutiae of their decision-making processes allows us to gain far more knowledge about the day-to-day unfolding of the Holocaust and how ordinary human beings responded to the extraordinary situation.

Conclusion

They are gone, gone from Poland, the little Jewish towns,
In Hrubieszów, Karczew, Brody, Falenica
In vain you would search in windows for lighted candles,
Or listen for songs from a wooden synagogue.

—Antoni Słonimski, “Elegia miasteczek żydowskich”

In Słonimski’s famous poem, Hrubieszów stands as a symbol for all the Jewish towns left empty by the war. Indeed, like other Polish towns, Hrubieszów had few Jewish residents when the war ended. A tiny number had made it through the camps, some had survived in hiding, and a somewhat larger number returned from the Soviet Union in 1946. In the aftermath of the war, surviving Jews tended to congregate in the larger cities or settle in the western areas newly incorporated into Poland. Most would soon find their way out of the country and into the Displaced Persons camps in Western Europe. Hrubieszower Jews followed these patterns as well. Hrubieszów was a Jewish “anytown,” and yet, as we have seen, it also had unique characteristics. Due to an accident of geography and the vagaries of occupation and war, Hrubieszów’s Jews could not avoid the dilemma of whether to stay under the Nazi occupation or move to the Soviet zone. To be sure, Jews all over Poland considered their options and made decisions daily relating to their status, but for many, the danger and hardship of travel, combined with a lack of knowledge about the area and about ways to cross the river were major obstacles. Additionally, in at least some cases, the initial months of occupation, when the border remained relatively open, were not overly traumatic. It was still possible to believe that German rule was harsh, but survivable. Proximity to
the newly imposed border as well as occurrences such as the 1939 Death March meant that the Jews of Hrubieszów had both the means and the motivation to leave.

It goes without saying that each village, town, and city in western Poland had unique characteristics. Moreover, the details of how the initial weeks and months of the war unfolded are integral to understanding how residents made decisions about staying or going. The Germans and the Soviets passed through other towns similar to Hrubieszów in September of 1939, and many more were occupied only by the Germans at that time. The heavy bombardment of the first week affected communities differently. In certain areas the Germans expelled all Jewish residents. Administrative policies, the attitude of the particular commanders, and the timing and implementation of anti-Jewish measures all varied significantly by location. All of these factors influenced decisions regarding flight. Indeed, in-depth research on any town would yield interesting results, and a comparative approach would surely reveal important regional differences.

Yet, examining the internal dynamics of decision-making in one locale allows us to appreciate the factors that informed the process within a region. Although Hrubieszów certainly had its own particular local events and influences, in fundamental ways it was like other Polish towns, and thus the discussions held there can be generalized to a degree. The memoirs and testimonies examined here highlight the centrality of certain decision-making factors that might have been expected, but also refines them. Our understanding of the importance played by family and youth is enhanced as a result. Expectations about gender and politics, however, are called into question. The juxtaposition of multiple testimonies, especially those of a single individual given at different times, or those given by close family members, demonstrates the vagaries of memory and the methods of recording it. At the same time, the texts also introduce less obvious factors, including most prominently the importance of timing, the mutability of decisions, and the awareness of choice.

Family ties emerge as perhaps the single most important factor in Jews’ decision-making about whether to cross the Bug. Many families held meetings to discuss the issue. Listening to opposing views, some members even changed their own positions. However, a commitment to family did not always mean staying together. Many of the young people who left did so not only with the blessing of their parents, but at their behest. Based on their conjectures of what the war would bring, some families sent all their young and middle-aged men out of the German-occupied territory. Others sent only the young men and still others sent young men and women. A few families left all together, but most stayed in their homes.

This group of testimonies is both too small and too skewed towards survival to offer valid statistical insights. Nonetheless, it does highlight the need to reexamine expectations and generalizations. Certainly, young men left, but they often did so as part of family discussions and at times with other family members. From other sources we know that Zionists and Communists crossed the border for ideological or
organizational reasons, but for the Jews of Hrubieszów, who had been exposed to the same prewar public discussions as other Polish Jews, political affiliations appear to have played a minor role in decision-making. It is premature to draw any conclusions about religious motivations. Scholars and collection institutions have only recently begun to address the lack of testimonial evidence from the so-called “ultra-Orthodox” community.86

Focusing on testimonies from one location also allows us to view the development and framing of what Greenspan termed “recounting.” Multiple documents produced by one individual, as well as sources collected from family members reveal different perspectives on the same moment, as well as how different genres (written and oral) and even different interviewers can affect testimony. Matla Blander, interviewed by a representative of Yad Vashem in her home in Israel in 2007, reports that, when some Soviet soldiers encouraged them to leave, her father expressed uncertainty about what they would do in the Soviet Union. Although the family had witnessed German harassment and humiliation of Jews, they were not encouraged by what they had seen of the Red Army. Blander remembers that many of the soldiers were barefoot, and many appeared to be consumed with buying up watches and other goods. Her father decided that the family would stay; in the end Matla was the only survivor.87

The day after Matla Blander’s interview, Yad Vashem recorded her husband, Avraham Blander, also from Hrubieszów. Avraham remembers that many young people left with the Soviets. Others, he recalls, said: “What will I do in Russia?” He, too, mentions that the fact that many of the Soviet soldiers did not have shoes made a particularly bad impression.88 Did listening to his wife testify the previous day merely remind Avraham of common experiences, or did her words influence his memory? In an earlier interview, conducted for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Blander did not mention either the question of what to do in the Soviet Union or the soldiers’ lack of footwear. However, in that interview he did not refer to flight at all, except to say that his brother crossed the river following the Death March.89 In fact, the focus of that entire first interview was particularly on the march, with the interviewers asking some very specific questions about it. Other subjects received less attention, and we learn nothing from this interview about Blander’s family’s decision to stay in Hrubieszów. Listening to multiple testimonies helps us to be aware of the peculiarities of both memory and testimony.

Josef and Nathan Scher, interviewed separately for the Shoah Foundation, were brothers born and raised in Hrubieszów. Only four years apart in age, they describe the same close extended family and modest but comfortable upbringing. When the war started, Josef remembers counseling his father to pack up the family and leave with the Soviets. An older brother, already an adult, did leave, but their father believed that their working class status would protect them from German expropriations and so the rest of the family stayed. “We had a chance,” laments Josef
in his testimony. Nathan makes no mention of Josef’s effort to convince their father. In his recollection, it was he who tried to cross with their eldest brother and their mother who would not let him go. The brothers’ testimonies do not disagree with regard to important facts; most of the family stayed in Hrubieszów and subsequently died. It is interesting to note, however, that in each brother’s story, he is the one who tried and failed to escape the German onslaught. Both stories may be true, but they point to the ways in which individual perspective colors the narrative. While this may appear obvious, the juxtaposition of multiple testimonies forces us to take note of it.

Tsiporah Horvits, in her testimony recorded for the Shoah Foundation, describes an argument between her parents over the question of whether to stay or to go; the result of the argument was that the family remained in Hrubieszów. Without access to her later testimony recorded by Yad Vashem or her recently published memoir, one would never know that her father later changed his mind and tried to cross the Bug. The researcher is forced to ponder how much more information could have been gathered from other witnesses—especially on a topic such as this one, which is hardly the main focus of organizations that collect Holocaust testimonies. How many other individuals could describe failed efforts to cross the Bug?

Among the most salient points to emerge from a review of this collection of testimonies is that the decision was fluid. Both those who stayed in their homes and those who tried to build new homes in the Soviet territories constantly reevaluated their situations. This was not simply an intellectual exercise. Numerous individuals and families switched course after having seemingly committed to one of the options. This insight requires a rethinking of the opening question. The question is no longer simply why Polish Jews stayed under Nazi occupation at a particular moment in time, but why they continued to stay, even as their situation deteriorated, and why others who had left returned.

Henry Orenstein’s family presents a particularly dramatic version of the ongoing nature of decision-making. On September 15, 1939, after discussing the pros and cons, the entire family joined the stream of refugees trying to escape the front. Several days later, with the news that the Soviets were approaching, they gratefully returned home. As the Soviets prepared to withdraw from Hrubieszów, the Orensteins once again considered their options. This time they decided that Henry and his father would go to the Soviet side and the female members of the family would stay at home. The family members were in agreement that women and children would not be harmed by the Germans. Henry and his father managed to keep in contact with the rest of the family, sometimes even sending packages. When news of the Death March reached them, they were sure that they had made the correct decision.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 put an end to the life Henry and his father had built, as well as to the possibility of contact with the
rest of the family. They spent the following year moving slowly westward and trying desperately to survive. In the late summer of 1942, Henry and his father managed to cross the Bug River and return to Hrubieszów. The family was briefly reunited in 1942 before the final deportation from the town separated them permanently. Even in this brief summary, which misses the harrowing escapes, terrible trauma, and some additional river crossings by Henry’s older brothers, we see that in the interests of survival, the Orensteins were willing not only to reconsider their options constantly, but even to move repeatedly as conditions changed.

The Orensteins’ saga highlights the importance of detailed chronology in soliciting answers to the question of why the Jews chose to stay or go. In his book, Henry Orenstein is able to detail the numerous decision points as well as border crossings of his family members. In the typical oral history interview, the witness is asked, or reflects on his or her own, only once on the family’s deliberations over flight. The answer thus represents a moment in time, rather than a spectrum of answers given at different points. The many survivors who refer to German behavior during World War I, for example, can only have been describing the family’s thinking at the earliest decision point. Once the German forces returned after the Soviet withdrawal in early October, they immediately began forcibly expropriating local Jews’ jewels and furs and other valuables at gunpoint, humiliating men by publicly and painfully removing their beards, and organizing Jews to complete backbreaking labor. Within a very short time, and certainly by the time of the Death March, Jews could no longer rely on the experience of the First World War to predict the behavior of the German troops in this war.

Similarly, the assumption that conditions for refugees in the Soviet territories were unbearable—an alternate reason to stay—can only reflect the period after those who had crossed the Bug had settled down and reestablished postal contact with their families back in Hrubieszów. No information about life in the newly Soviet-occupied areas would have been available at least through the month of September. One could point to other important junctures, such as the tightening of border control or the Death March. The crucial point here is that just as conditions changed over time on both sides of the border, so too did reasons for staying, going, or returning. There was not just one choice, but a series of choices.

Throughout this essay the concept of choice has been foregrounded. This is part of an effort to rescue choice from the realm of morality and make it available for historical research on the Holocaust. For even without a great deal of knowledge about their immediate circumstances, let alone about what the future would bring, Polish Jews were aware of having choices. Watching his friends and neighbors frantically find ways to cross the Bug in the wake of the Death March, Eliyahu Zilberblekh made a conscious choice not to join them. He explains: “I was among the number who decided to put their fate with their family’s.”
Eliyana Adler received her doctorate in modern Jewish history from Brandeis University. Since then she has taught at the University of Maryland, and has held several research fellowships. In the academic year 2010–2011, she held a Sosland Foundation Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Her monograph In Her Hands: The Education of Jewish Girls in Tsarist Russia (2011) received the Association for Women in Slavic Studies’ Heldt Prize for the best book in Slavic/Eastern European/Eurasian Women’s Studies. Dr. Adler’s current project focuses on the experiences of Polish Jews who survived the Second World War in the Soviet Union.

Notes
I would like to thank Sarah Liu, Alan Rosen, Berel Lang, and Stephen Bickel for helping me to think about choice, and Natalia Aleksiun for reading a draft of this paper. The anonymous readers for this journal also provided useful feedback.


7. Almost all of the memoirs and testimonies mention this detail. Although it is not clear that the Soviet authorities had any particular interest in rescuing Jews from the Nazis, it appears that at least some of the soldiers on the ground made an effort to do so. In her memoir, Cipora Hurwitz reconstructs an entire conversation between her parents and some Jewish soldiers they hosted at their home. See *Forbidden Strawberries* (New Rochelle, NY: MultiEducator, 2010), 37–38.

8. Indeed, the determination about whether there ever was a ghetto in Hrubieszów depends largely on definition. Although the Jews of Hrubieszów later did have to move into one area of town, that area was never fenced or otherwise closed off. Both German and Jewish sources are inconsistent in their application of the term. As Dan Michman points out in *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos During the Holocaust*, there were semantic shifts in the usage of the word during the war and it is often misleading to read later definitions into earlier usages (xx–xxi). In their introduction to the same volume, editors Guy Miron and Shlomit Shullhani state explicitly that there were open ghettos, especially in the Lublin District (xli). Yet, David Silberklang disputes whether either Germans or Jews considered Hrubieszów to be a ghetto before 1942 (“The Holocaust in the Lublin District,” 180). Jewish testimonial sources tend to label as a ghetto only that area where the diminished group of workers remaining after the deportations in 1942 was housed, and not to apply the label to the larger Jewish settlement that existed before that. The entry on Hrubieszów in the *Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe* volume of *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945* reflects this variance, stating that “according to some sources, a form of open ghetto was established in Hrubieszów close to the marketplace at some time between the summer of 1940 and June of 1942” (635).


10. Maskal and Tsimerman (“Vos mir hobn gezen un ibergelebt”) mention a German scheme to sell Jews official permission to cross the border legally. Zvi Paltzer also mentions this in his testimony recorded for the Eichmann Trial (*Pinkas Hrubishov*, 613, 634). The article on Hrubieszów in *Pinkas ha-Kehillot* provides an expanded version of this story (151).


12. The testimonies differ on the exact details of which ages were included, how the message was delivered, and its wording. All agree on the date, the day of the week, and the nature of the event.


14. Ariel Hurwitz accepts these numbers, pointing out the interesting fact that Chelm had a larger Jewish community, which suggests that a smaller percentage of eligible men there followed the German directive (“Mits’ad ha-mavet shel Yehude Chelm ve-Hrubieszow le-ever
ha-nahar Bug be-Detsember 1939,” Yalkut Moreshet 68 (October 1999): 51-68. Silberklang (“The Holocaust in the Lublin District”) uses these numbers as well (64).


Press of Stanford University, 1981); and Maciej Sierkierski and Feliks Tych, eds., Widziałem aniola śmierci: Losy deportowanych Żydów polskich w ZSRR w latach II wojny światowej (Warsaw: Rosner, 2006). For more on Jews in the Anders Army, see Ryszard Terlicki, “The Jewish Issue in the Polish Army in the USSR and the Near East, 1941–1944,” in Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939–46, ed. Norman Davies and Antony Polonsky (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991). An additional reason for omitting these documents was that this collection of over 20,000 testimonies is searchable only by last name. There is no way to find a witness’s place of birth without looking at each document.

23. Samuel D. Kassow, Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 228. For the original questionnaire, see Yad Vashem Archive (YVA), M.10, AR1, no. 142. A Polish translation, and a photocopy of the Yiddish original can be found in Andrzej Zbikowski, Archiwum Ringelbluma: Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy, vol. 3: Relacje z Kresów (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2000), 39–47. This fascinating and important collection is also fairly small and does not include any witnesses born in Hrubieszów.


25. For an early testimony of this type (collected by the Jewish Historical Institute) on the Death March, see Abraham Rejtig, YVA, M.49 ZIH, 3535. This two-page testimony was recorded in May 1946 and describes only the Death March. For more on the first postwar historical commissions, see Laura Jockusch, Collect and Record! Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). An excellent introduction to the testimony project of David Boder can be found in Alan Rosen, The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Boaz Cohen has written about a number of important collections of children’s testimonies recorded in the aftermath of the war. See for example his “The Children’s Voice: Postwar Collection of Testimonies from Child Survivors of the Holocaust,” Holocaust and Genocide Studies 21, no. 1 (2007): 73–95.


27. Ibid., 29–31.


30. Israeli scholars have long relied on testimonial literature in their historical research, but in Europe and the United States this type of source was until recently seen as less reliable than official documentation. The groundbreaking work of Jan Gross has been influential in this regard. See his Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), especially the chapter entitled, “New
Approaches to Sources.” For a more recent statement see the introduction to Browning, *Remembering Survival*.


32. For a treatment of one of these camps see Rochelle G. Saidel, *Mielec, Poland: The Shtetl That Became a Nazi Concentration Camp* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2012).

33. Nineteen of the testimonies come from the Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, 11 from Yad Vashem and 2 each from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. I am grateful to Vincent Slatt, Arthur Berger, and Tomasz Frydel for helping me with two Spanish, one Portuguese and one Polish testimony respectively. An additional interview was conducted by a local school organization in England with a copy deposited at Yad Vashem. These 43 full-length testimonies or memoirs represent 39 individuals, as some people were interviewed more than once or also wrote a memoir. Given the small sample size, and inherent selection bias, no statistical analysis will be attempted.


35. Ibid., 4.

36. Eve Silver, VHA interview 18512, Atlanta, Georgia, August 12, 1996. Tape 1, minutes 27–28; tape 2, minutes 2–3.

37. Yocheved (Hei) Zamari, YVA, 0.3/6026, Israel, December 21, 2006. Tape 1, minute 10.


40. Ruth Tatarko, YVA, 0.3/7613, Israel, February 3, 1994. Tape 1, minute 15. In a separate interview Tatarko does not refer to the initial argument, but says that as the German occupation became more brutal, her parents—and especially her father—regretted not having left when they had the opportunity. Ruth Tatarko, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives (USHMM), RG 50.120.0156, Israel. Tape 1, minute 14.


42. David Gewirtz, VHA, 11893, Flushing, New York, February 9, 1996. Tape 1, minutes 21–24. In an earlier written testimony, the topic does not come up. David Gewirtz, YVA, Record Group 0.17, 60. This testimony is undated but comes originally from the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. According to the YIVO catalog it was created in 1954.


47. Zipora (Rozensztajn) Hurwitz, YVA 0.3/11783, June 2000, minute 26. The story, somewhat expanded and changed, can also be found in Tsiporah Horvits, Tutim asurim (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 2009), 41–43, as well as the English-language translation Forbidden Strawberries, 40–41.


52. Josef Scher, tape 1, minute 23.

53. Shaul Eizen, YVA, 0.3/9407, Givatayim, Israel, November 23, 1995, minutes 6–7.


60. Zamari, tape 1, minutes 9–13.


64. Omri, tapes 3 and 4.


66. Silver, tape 2, minutes 1–2.

67. Avraham Blander, USHMM, RG 50.120.0018, Israel. Tape 1, minutes 3–6, 58. The timing of the decision and the planned attempt to cross are not clear.

68. Zemel, tape 2, minute 5–tape 4, minute 8.
69. Natan Degani, YVA 0.3/6522, minutes 5–16.

70. For more on the option offered by the Soviets, see Litvak, Plitum Yehudiyim, 94–103. It would appear that this was an interim Soviet attempt to deal with the refugee problem.

71. Dina Porat, “Jewish Decision-Making during the Holocaust,” Lessons and Legacies 2 (1998): 85. Porat’s article opens with a broad statement of the importance of the topic, but ends up dealing mainly with group decisions or those made by prominent individuals. See also Dov Levin, “The Fateful Decision: The Flight of Jews into the Soviet Interior in the Summer of 1941,” Yad Vashem Studies 20 (1990). Levin touches upon how Jews made decisions, but is more concerned with the external factors that limited their choices and hindered their actions. It is interesting to note that Omer Bartov also points to the importance of choice in testimonies, but he highlights perpetrators’ choices (Bartov, 499).


73. Primo Levi develops this concept in the second chapter of The Drowned and the Saved (New York: Vintage International, 1989). It is interesting to note that some scholars have also pointed out ways in which Levi’s concept has been applied far beyond its original context. See for example William Collins Donahue, Holocaust as Fiction: Bernhard Schlink’s “Nazi” Novels and Their Films (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 63.


75. Ibid., 137. Emphasis in the original.


77. Ibid., 3.


80. Litvak, Plitum Yehudiyim mi-Polin, 354, 358. In a recent article based on Soviet sources, Albert Kaganovitch has suggested significant reductions in the estimates of numbers deported and repatriated. See his, “Jewish Refugees and Soviet Authorities during World War II,” Yad Vashem Studies 38, no. 2 (2010): 98–100. Others believe that even larger numbers of Jews from western Poland went east in 1939. See Lucjan Dobroszycki, Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland: A Portrait Based on Jewish Community Records, 1944–1947 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 19. However, even accepting the largest estimate for flight and smallest for return, the chances of survival were still far better for those who left.


83. Browning, 297.


85. I mean survival in both senses of the word here. First, the voices of the many who perished are obviously lost. Second, as even this small selection shows, flight survivors are underrepresented in most testimony collection efforts.

86. In an effort to address these lacunae, I turned to the Oral History Division of the Institute for Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, with its particularly noted collection of testimonies from Zionist activists, and the Ganzach Kiddush Hashem, an archive devoted to collecting and disseminating materials related to the ultra-Orthodox experience during the Second World War. Unfortunately, neither institution currently holds any testimonies of Jews from Hrubieszów.

87. Matla (Kleiner) Blander, YVA 0.3/6065, Afula, Israel, February 4, 2007. Tape 1, minutes, 30–33.

88. Avraham Blander, YVA 0.3, Afula, Israel, February 5, 2007. Tape 1, minutes 32–33.

89. Avraham Blander, USHMM, RG 50.120.0018, Israel. Tape 1, minute 58.

90. Josef Scher, Tape 1, minutes 22–24.


92. Orenstein, I Shall Live.