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Between Hostility and Intimacy

Christian and Jewish Polish Citizens in the USSR, Iran, and Palestine

MIKHAL DEKEL

IN EARLY NOVEMBER 1942, the New York-based Jewish aid organization the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) dispatched a representative to Iran to report on Polish Jewish refugees who had recently been evacuated there from Soviet central Asia and on those who were still stranded in the USSR, and in particular on the state of roughly 800 Jewish children who had been evacuated to Iran and awaited transport to Palestine. The purpose of the report was to assess what kind of aid was needed, and how much. The representative, Harry Viteles, an American based in Jerusalem and general manager of the Central Bank of Cooperative Institutions in Palestine, left Palestine on 1 November 1942, stopping in Baghdad for a week and continuing on to Tehran. There, over three weeks, he interviewed ninety individuals—American and British diplomatic and military personnel, Jewish Agency of Palestine workers, members of the Iranian Jewish community, and the refugees themselves—in order to get a clear picture of the situation. The result was a forty-seven-page report, as damning a document of Polish–Jewish relations as exists.¹

Roughly one and a half million Polish Jewish citizens found themselves within Soviet borders early in the Second World War, whether because they escaped to the USSR or their towns fell under Soviet occupation. Of these, up to a third were exiled to labour settlements and gulags in the Soviet interior. Those who survived were released as a result of the amnesty for Polish citizens of August 1941, and by early 1942 they were mostly concentrated in the five Soviet republics of central Asia: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Of these, a small minority of Jewish refugees, including members of the Anders Army—the military force of Polish exiles set up in the Soviet Union under General Władysław Anders—and several thousand civilians, were evacuated alongside Christian Poles to Iran, India, and Palestine. These Polish Jews were, as it is often said, ‘saved by their deportation.’² Yet theirs was not exclusively a Jewish fate: they were exiled alongside ethnic Poles and other minority Polish citizens, amnestied as Polish citizens, and continued to Iran, India, and Palestine along with Christian Poles. Their ordeal, therefore, is not just a Jewish survival story, but a story of wartime relations between Jewish and Christian Polish citizens outside Nazi-occupied Poland.

These relations can be observed along a timeline that includes roughly four periods and four locations: exile to and incarceration in Soviet labour settlements (1940–1); mass migrations to and life in the central Asian republics (1941–5); life in

Iran (1942–3); and life in Palestine (1943–7). In all four locations, the lives of Jewish and Christian Polish citizens were governed and shaped by the laws and policies of empire (the Soviet empire in the labour colonies and central Asia; the British empire in Iran and Palestine). In all four there were differences between individuals, families, and host communities that greatly affected Polish–Jewish relations. Nonetheless, testimonies given by Jewish and Christian Polish refugees collected by the Polish government-in-exile, memoirs of Jewish and Christian refugees, wartime reports like that of Harry Viteles and others, bystander testimonies, and other sources offer a fairly consistent portrait of Polish–Jewish relations in each period and each location. In general, it is a picture of a progressively deteriorating relationship—until the arrival in Palestine. There—the final destination for many Polish Jews and the place where many Christian Poles remained the longest—some diminution in hostility occurred. While for most Polish Jews—whether Zionist or not—the Land of Israel became their homeland, for most Christian Poles, it was a largely agreeable, hospitable place of refuge and a centre of Polish culture outside Poland.³

Relations between Jewish and Christian Polish Citizens in Soviet Exile

One of the most useful sources available for understanding the mammoth journey Polish citizens undertook during the war years are the testimonies collected by the Polish Information Centre for the East (Centrum Informacji na Wschód; CIW), an arm of the London-based Polish government-in-exile. While the centre's official purpose was to document the living conditions of and the abuses against Polish citizens in the USSR, with the hope that this would help thwart the future creation of a Bolshevik Polish state, the testimonies (*protokoły palestyńskie*) it collected reveal much more than that.⁴ On relations between Christian and Jewish Polish citizens, the testimonies, which were collected in Iran, India, Jerusalem, and other places of evacuation, suggest that during the initial period of exile there was, alongside some strife and even violence, a degree of 'heartfelt' co-operation between Jews and Poles in the labour camps and gulags. 'Jews and Poles helped each other in anything they could', 15-year-old Hannania Teitel recounted in the testimony he gave to the CIW in 1943.⁵ It was a sentiment repeated in numerous testimonies and with regard to multiple settlements, especially those that were predominantly populated by Jews. Jewish refugees described bonding over a common language and a common desire to return to Poland, where both Jewish and Christian Polish citizens were repeatedly told by camp commanders they would never return. A Jewish child, testifying before the CIW, reported that, 'In the *posiolok* [settlement] were many Poles who were friendly to us, helped us settle in, and gave us useful advice'; another stated that, 'in our *posiolok* there were thirty Poles and six hundred Jews, and relations with them were very good. Among them was a high Polish official—a devout Catholic and an anti-semite—who became friendly with my father. They would have long conversations and became convinced that religion was the only consolation in that terrible

situation.⁶ Such testimonies reveal that, while incarcerated in labour settlements and gulags and oppressed by a common Soviet enemy (and by Ukrainian kulaks as immediate supervisors), relations between Jewish and Christian Poles were reasonable and at times even good and co-operative.

After the amnesty for Polish citizens, the mass migration south, the creation of the Anders Army, and the arrival of aid from the United States and elsewhere, Polish–Jewish relations began to deteriorate. Polish Jewish citizens who flocked to the Anders Army were eventually largely prevented from enlisting or were dismissed after enlistment (whether because of Soviet law, antisemitism in the military’s ranks, or both); aid, paid for by Jewish and Polish charities, was distributed unequally among Jewish and Christian Polish refugees; an initial co-operation between the JDC and the Polish government-in-exile in a joint attempt to aid the refugees was eventually halted. Despite an ‘official assurance’ by the Polish ambassador in Washington that ‘the Jews are to be given the same treatment as other Polish nationals now on Soviet soil’, the distribution of aid, which was administered by delegates of the Polish government, did not, by and large, reach many Jewish refugees. This was why Harry Viteles was dispatched to Iran to assess the situation.⁷

Polish–Jewish Relations in Iran

In March and August 1942 roughly 75,000 Anders Army soldiers and 41,000 Polish civilians were evacuated from the USSR to Iran. The number of Jews among them was minuscule: roughly 3,500 soldiers and 2,500 civilians, including 871 children who would become known in Israel as *yaldei teheran*, the ‘Tehran children’. In addition to the official count were several hundred stowaways, women who had entered into marriages of convenience with Anders Army soldiers in order to be allowed to leave the USSR, and recent Jewish converts to Catholicism.⁸ These lived mostly in Tehran while official Jewish evacuees were for the most part lodged in larger Polish refugee camps across Iran. Unaccompanied Jewish children were brought from these camps into what became known as ‘Beit Hayeladim Hayehudim Beteheran’, the Jewish Children’s Home of Tehran, a building and four tents located at the edge of the Polish camp at Dushan Tappeh, inside a former Iranian airforce base.

Viteles reported that refugees from ‘all classes’ of Jewish society in Tehran—Labour, Zionist, Bundists, and even nationalists who were ‘staunch supporters of close co-operation and collaboration with the Polish Government’⁹—attested to the unequal distribution of aid between Jews and non-Jews. Iranian and British soldiers testified that during the March–April 1942 transports from Kranovodsk (now Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan) to Iran, Polish children had arrived in Pahlavi with boxes of Manischewitz matzos and wearing clothing with Hebrew trademarks, allegedly sent from Palestine for Jewish children. Members of the American Red Cross in Tehran, who routinely visited Polish refugee camps in Iran, testified that ‘the Polish administration was less concerned with the welfare and comfort of the Jewish

refugees than they were with that of non-Jews'; that non-Jews were given 'better housing facilities', while the children in the children's home 'lived under canvas'; and, in addition, that non-Jews, particularly children, had 'better food', 'more blankets', and 'more suitable clothing' than Jews.¹⁰ They also cited rampant 'dishonesty, unfairness, inefficiency, waste and extreme selfishness' in the administration of Polish refugee camps and rampant black-market dealings.¹¹ Viteles' report also found evidence of antisemitism in the Anders Army; anti-Jewish bias with regard to the number of Polish Jews who were allowed to join the army and to be evacuated from Soviet central Asia to Iran; and reports of bullying of Jewish children.

In turn, the Polish embassy in Tehran submitted to the Polish Foreign Ministry in London a report on its treatment of Polish Jews, in which it continued to maintain that the law of the Republic of Poland did not differentiate between Polish citizens on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or race. It alleged that any such discrimination had been the responsibility of the Soviet authorities, who had prevented Jews from enlisting in the Anders Army and from being evacuated to Iran. It highlighted an order from General Anders of 10 November 1941, in which he instructed his commanding officers to combat antisemitism. It claimed that the Polish embassy had tried to facilitate the evacuation to Iran of 400 additional Jewish refugees, but this had been blocked by the Soviet authorities, and also cited the names of prominent Jews it had nonetheless managed to include in the evacuations. It pointed to its efforts to intervene on behalf of Polish Jews who had not been released from camps and prisons, and of others who had been arrested, and also cited examples of attempts to appoint Polish Jews as welfare delegates in the USSR which were prevented by the Soviet authorities.¹²

Anders went still further. In a meeting of 27 October 1942 with General Henry Maitland Wilson, commander-in-chief of the British forces in Persia and Iraq, he claimed that those responsible for corruption, shortages, price gouging, and the sale of supplies earmarked for refugees on the black market were NKVD agents and civilians, 'Jews in particular', who had been evacuated from the USSR with the convoys but were now living in Tehran.¹³

The squalid living conditions of the Polish Jewish child refugees in Iran were noted by many observers and by the children themselves. When, in late October 1942, Zipora Shertok (Sharett), wife of the head of the Foreign Department of the Jewish Agency Moshe Shertok, arrived in Iran to visit the children, she reported miserable living conditions and children ill with scabies, eye disorders, and other infectious diseases. 'The children eat their bread portion at breakfast and are left without bread all day', she wrote. 'Less than a quarter of them have more than one set of underwear; two hundred are barefoot and the rest wear dilapidated shoes; no one has sweaters.' She described them as 'half naked', waiting for their only shirt or undershirt to return from the laundry.¹⁴

Emil Landau, a Warsaw-born Jewish teenager who kept a travel diary, described 'bread portions' that 'disappeared already after breakfast' and altercations with 'Polish antisemites':

The food is brought from the relatively distant camp kitchen. On its way it passes through several barracks of Polish antisemites who tend to block the way. At six a.m., a whole battalion is needed to march there and fetch the food for 700 people. The fetchers sometimes have no shoes, no socks, and no warm shirts. They walk with chattering teeth, freezing.¹⁵

Meanwhile, photographs and testimonies showed unaccompanied Christian Polish children living in villas, convents, and the vast estate of the pro-British former governor of Isfahan, Prince Sarem od-Doleh. Isfahan became known as the ‘city of Polish children’.¹⁶ They lived, as Iranian documentary photographer Parisa Damandan describes it, ‘behind closed doors in a Polish environment . . . The “Poland of Isfahan” was an independent state within Iran.’¹⁷ Polish children were taught a Polish curriculum by Polish teachers; studied Polish language, history, geography, and religion; listened to Polish radio and read Polish magazines; and celebrated Catholic festivals with the assistance of Catholic priests. According to a former ‘Isfahan child’: ‘We had whatever we needed . . . we were happy in Isfahan.’¹⁸ But beyond the disparity in living conditions, what developed in Iran were disparate Polish and Jewish national identities. In the larger Polish camp in Dushan Tappeh, eagles with crowns and shields—the Polish coat of arms—were carved into the ground and built out of rocks and candles. Meanwhile, in the Jewish children’s camp, a banner bearing the words ‘Beit Hayeladim Hayehudim Beteheran’ was hung at the entrance. Zionist counsellors, most of them members of Hashomer Hatsa’ir, taught the children Hebrew songs. Rabbis, Zionist-leaning Iranian Jews, Zipora Shertok, and others visited and told stories of the Land of Israel. ‘I was no longer a hapless refugee . . . but belonged to a nation,’ camp director David Lauenberg (Laor), a former Polish army officer cadet, wrote in his testimony.¹⁹

And so, in Iran, as is clear from film and testimonies, the two identities, Polish and Jewish, split off from each other and clashed even more strongly than in the pre-war period. Iran, with its decentralized, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual make-up, so radically different from the homogeneous European nation-states, tolerated the development of a Polish and to an extent also a Jewish independent state-in-exile within its borders. Shortly after the arrival of the Polish Jewish refugees, members of Mosad Le’aliyah Beit, the clandestine immigration arm of the Jewish Agency, arrived and eventually made contact with the local Jewish population. In Tehran, Hamadan, Isfahan, and Abadan, Hebrew study groups were established and Zionist booklets were translated into Persian.²⁰ ‘Tehran,’ a Mosad Le’aliyah Beit agent wrote, ‘was the beginning of Zionism as a “movement of the masses”. Like all youth movements we spoke about “the masses” . . . but our notion was of an anonymous mass . . . The real meaning of the masses, just regular Jews, we saw for the first time in Tehran.’²¹

Jews and Poles in the Land of Israel

In early 1943 the Tehran children, their caregivers, and some other individuals were evacuated to Palestine. The Iraqi government, which supported the Arab cause in Palestine, refused them passage to Tel Aviv by land, and so they travelled by sea, on a

harrowing voyage through the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean—full of mines—and the Suez Canal. In addition to the Jewish refugees, approximately 70,000 Anders Army soldiers and family members and hundreds of Polish civilians, including orphaned children, were also transferred to Palestine. Civilians travelled by car through Iraq and Syria. The army transferred from Iran to Khanakin in Iraq, then continued on a month-long trek to Palestine. Yehuda Pompiansky, a Jewish soldier in the Anders Army, testified that, en route to Palestine, Polish commanders referred to their destination as ‘the Land of Israel’ and the ‘country of the Jews.’²² Once they were in Palestine, Anders Army soldiers joined other Polish refugees who had been evacuated there earlier. In a news dispatch of 18 February 1942, Joseph Levy, the *New York Times* correspondent, reported that 30,000 Polish Jews and non-Jews had been admitted to Palestine since the war began two and a half years earlier, and that Palestine stood to become the ‘principal centre for the absorption of Polish refugees.’²³

In Palestine, the Jewish and Polish children immediately embarked on very different trajectories. The Tehran children, who were greeted ecstatically by the Yishuv, were entrusted to the care of Henrietta Szold and Youth Aliyah, and were eventually settled in kibbutzim, agricultural villages, and religious institutions (mostly Mizrachi) across the land.²⁴ Meanwhile, orphaned Christian children were lodged in Catholic boarding schools, while the adults lived in Haifa, Gedera, Rehovot, Castina, Tel Aviv, Nazareth, Jerusalem, and other cities. Soldiers, civilians, government officials, and Polish Red Cross workers now constituted the largest concentration of Poles in the east. As Valentina Brio has shown, this was where they built their largest cultural centre outside Poland. ‘Palestine was the meeting of political, cultural, and social minds. It was the place of exile in the East where the Poles stayed the longest.’²⁵

In Palestine, the Anders Army prepared for its subsequent engagement in what would become known as the Battle of Monte Cassino: in a large-scale drill they ‘conquered’ Mount Sinai, Nazareth, and other locations. Here they also lived a cultural life, with meetings of authors and journalists and poetry readings, such as the one organized by the Hebrew poet Saul Tchernichowsky with the Polish poets Władysław Broniewski and Marian Czuchnowski.²⁶

A flourishing Polish-language press emerged in Palestine: *Gazeta Polska*, a daily paper for Poles in the Middle East; a soldiers’ journal; a women’s paper; a youth magazine; and a fortnightly literary review, *W drodze*.²⁷ Books of poetry, anthologies, and textbooks were published, and the Hebrew University assisted Polish publishing houses in producing new editions of Polish books already in its library:²⁸ local Polish-born Jews and Catholic refugees collaborated. Polish articles thought to be of interest to the local population were immediately translated for the Hebrew newspapers. Articles about Hebrew poets, including Tchernichowsky, who had ties to Polish literature, were translated and published in Polish journals.²⁹ Local Polish-born musicians played in Polish orchestras and in the jazz band of Henryk Wars, a Jewish pioneer of Polish jazz who had arrived with the Anders Army.³⁰ Gatherings of authors and artists were often a way for Anders Army soldiers to secure leave. ‘Never

in the history of Poland were there so many painters, journalists, and writers in such vicinity to armed force', one wrote.³¹

Polish poets went to kibbutzim. Marian Czuchnowski took classes at an agricultural school in Kibbutz Givat Brenner and wrote a book about Degania. Władysław Broniewski held readings in a kibbutz, most likely Ein Harod; once, when a generator failed and he had no light by which to read, a young kibbutz member continued, reciting Broniewski's poem by heart.³² In Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, contact between Poles and Jews bore a resemblance to the relations of urban Poles and Jews in the large cities of Poland in the interwar period. Local nightlife, and especially the brothels of Tel Aviv, was very popular with Polish soldiers; yet quarrels between Jewish and Christian high-school students in Tel Aviv were documented by the police; and some inter-ethnic tensions 'migrated' from the old country to the place of refuge and survived in the big-city environment. The Jewish press reported two murders by Polish soldiers, a fistfight at a technical school, and an attempted arson at Beit Ha'am, the largest auditorium in Tel Aviv.³³ Alexander Zawisza, writing for the anti-semitic London-based Polish newspaper *Mysł Polska*, warned of 'the Jews of Palestine' who possessed 'no pro-Polish feelings' but awaited 'the opportunity of returning to Poland'.³⁴ Yet to some degree the tensions and nationalism that characterized the lives of Jewish and Christian Poles in Iran and before in central Asia subsided. The Polish commandant of the Tel Aviv regiment, Major Wróblewski, categorically denied that Polish soldiers been responsible for any murders, and attributed the unrest to 'a drunk Polish soldier' who provoked an argument that had been blown out of all proportion. He claimed that, in fact, it was a Polish soldier who had been murdered in Tel Aviv.³⁵ Certainly, throughout the land, members of the Yishuv and the Polish refugees collaborated. Much of the cultural collaboration rested, it seems, on the shared Polish language. The *Jerusalem Post* reported on articles in *W drodze*; according to its editor, 'most of the people involved in the *Jerusalem Post* know Polish better than English'.³⁶

At a makeshift theatre in Jerusalem's Edison House, Polish Jewish actors from Palestine performed alongside Christian ones; Polish Jewish journalists like David Lazar and Paulina Appenzlak, editor of a pre-war feminist paper, *Ewa*, a supplement of *Nasz Przegląd*, wrote for Polish papers; dozens of memoirs and diaries, such as that of the poet and Anders Army officer Bronisław Brzezicki, were written; 842 Polish-language books (out of 947 in the entire Middle East) were published, 340 volumes being donated to the central library in Jerusalem when the Polish refugees left.³⁷

Dr Stanisław Kot, who had served as the Polish government-in-exile's ambassador in Moscow and Kuibyshev and then in Tehran, was in Palestine as well. A former member of the Polish Peasant Party which had opposed Piłsudski's rule in Poland before the war, he now resided in Jerusalem, serving as minister of state for the Middle East. Upon arrival from Iran, Kot spent weeks in recovery at Carmel sanatorium, a 12-acre hilly resort in Haifa overlooking the Mediterranean, which was founded by Dr Wilhelm Bodenheimer, a German Jewish refugee. It was there that he met Moshe Shertok and hinted at the possibility of additional evacuations from the

USSR, which triggered a frenzy of rumours that thousands of Polish Jewish children would soon be arriving in the Land of Israel.³⁸

In the wake of the exposure of the murder of Polish officers by the Soviets in Katyń, Polish–Soviet relations were broken off, secret evacuation talks were halted, and the additional Polish Jewish children did not arrive. At the beginning of 1944 the Anders Army departed for Italy, but Polish civilians and military and government administrators remained in Palestine, many until the end of the British Mandate in 1947. The CIW remained active as well, continuing to interview Polish citizens in Palestine, including the Tehran children. Its questionnaire, whose main focus was on refugees' lives in the Soviet Union, was expanded to include questions on resistance, religious life, the experience of women, and Polish–Jewish relations. Testimonies had been taken from Polish Jews before, but it was in Jerusalem that identification of religious affiliation began to be documented.³⁹

At the CIW, Jewish and Christian Poles—including a Polish aristocrat, Teresa Lipkowska, and the journalists David Glazer and Dovid Flinker—worked together to collect the testimonies of both Jewish and Christian Polish refugees in Palestine. Flinker, a Warsaw-based journalist, descendant of a Ger hasidic family, and former editor of the Warsaw-based Polish-language Jewish daily *Echo Żydowskie* and the Yiddish *Dos yudishe togblat*, conducted some of the interviews in Yiddish. ‘Testimony 26’, for example, is full of Yiddish idioms, such as *es helft vi a toytn bankes* (‘it helped like applying cupping glasses to a corpse’) and the like.⁴⁰ It is unclear whether the turn from Polish to Yiddish was done for pragmatic or political reasons or both.

In Palestine, Jews and Poles lived relatively harmoniously. This seems to have been predicated on the fact that the Jews in the Land of Israel now had their own aims, separate from Poland, and on Polish admiration for the technological and agricultural innovations in Palestine.⁴¹ The relative thaw in the relationship extended elsewhere. In Iran in March 1943 the Jewish Agency of Palestine in Tehran threw a Purim party and invited Polish and British officials. A year later, in late 1944, Jewish Agency representative Dr Moshe Yishai sat side by side with the Polish consul in Tehran at a memorial service for Jews killed in the Warsaw ghetto. The speeches at the memorial, which was held at a Tehran synagogue, were given in Yiddish, and Yishai translated them for the consul. He had visited Palestine, Yishai writes in his memoir, and admired the ‘different Jew’—not the ‘merchant or a pedlar’—that the Land of Israel had produced. He respected the ‘enterprise’ but emphasized that his ‘change in thinking [about Jews] only applied to the Jews of the Land of Israel’.⁴²

In addition to serving as a place of refuge, Palestine became a centre from where aid was shipped to Polish refugees in central Asia and Africa. The Polish government-in-exile commissioned the production of typhus vaccines in Palestine, which were then sent to other places of exile, and bought vitamins and medicines. In Tel Aviv, a sweater-knitting circle provided clothing, and a soup kitchen collected food for shipment. Doctors—Poles, Jews, and non-refugees—were enlisted to care for Polish refugees in Nairobi. School supplies, textbooks, notebooks, pencils, pens, Polish books, prayer books, song books, records with Polish songs, dictionaries, typewriters

with Polish typeface, and national symbols to be hung at cultural centres were bought. These efforts, according to Polish sources, were undertaken jointly with the Jewish Agency, which contributed £250,000 for relief that was sent to the refugees in central Asia.⁴³

At a meeting of the Zionist Agency's Executive Council on 25 April 1942, Moshe Shertok, who had met Prime Minister Sikorski and the Jewish Polish government council member Ignacy Schwarzbart in London, praised the Polish government-in-exile for its report 'Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland'.⁴⁴ This was based on the reports of Jan Karski, who undertook clandestine missions out of Poland and informed the Polish government-in-exile and others about the extermination of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. According to Shertok:

We had already received news of the slaughter in Poland . . . of the systematic extermination, of the transport by trains . . . from eye-witnesses who have made it to Palestine. But, until the official declaration of the Polish government there was a pact of silence between the British government and the British press . . . What has elevated the urgency of the matter was the Polish dispatch . . . I do not analyse the Polish motives, what they are thinking or not thinking . . . But [Anthony] Eden's declaration [in the House of Lords about the extermination of Jews] would not have happened without the dispatch. It is a historical fact, the first international act to place the slaughter on the global agenda.⁴⁵

In 1943 the Hebrew University in Jerusalem invited Stanisław Kot for a tour and a meeting of its general assembly.⁴⁶

During this time, two-thirds of the Jewish soldiers in the Anders Army deserted, many joining the Yishuv's main paramilitary group, the Haganah. 'Why should we have stayed in the Polish army given how we were treated?', Yehuda Pompiansky wrote.⁴⁷ One-third of the Jewish soldiers nonetheless remained and fought at Monte Cassino, and at least one Polish-born Jewish man who had not been among the refugees joined the troops as well.⁴⁸ General Anders did not oppose Jewish soldiers leaving the army ('only the British searched for us', Pompiansky wrote in his testimony).⁴⁹ In the wake of the battle, when the song 'Red Poppies on Monte Cassino' was released, it was sung by the Polish Jewish singer Adam Aston.

Throughout this period, Polish schoolchildren studied in Catholic schools in Nazareth and Jerusalem and in schools established by the Anders Army.⁵⁰ In addition, Polish adult civilians and military administrative staff studied in various institutions. The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum at Princes Gate, London, is filled with traces of their lives: expense books; lists of flowers, dresses, and typewriters bought; tuition bills for the Hebrew University in Jerusalem; courses and training programmes; receipts for rooms at the Julian Hotel in Jerusalem; recommendation letters for Polish students at the Jerusalem Conservatory of Music; lists of leisure and self-improvement items and activities; and so on.

In the Sikorski archive there are lists of Polish refugees in Palestine classified by city of residence, marital status, military or civilian, and religion. There are details of financial support, either recurring or one-off payments. There is a report of the soup

kitchen in Tel Aviv and the quantities of sugar it required. There is a letter from a physician regarding the health of Polish refugees: those who needed urgent dental care, glasses, and orthopaedic treatment. There are the bylaws of the Association of Polish Lawyers in Jerusalem. There are reports on the activities of the Association of Lawyers, the Association of Technicians and Engineers, the Society of Biologists, and the Polish Red Cross in Tel Aviv. There is a report on a higher education lecture series, with lists of specialists in the fields of health care, education, farming, engineering, accounting, and translation, and lists of available English-language courses and lectures.⁵¹

‘These were the best years of my life’, Krystyna Orłowska, a former Polish refugee who now lives in Denver, stated in a 2017 interview. Evacuated to Palestine in November 1943, Orłowska remained there until October 1947, studying and boarding at the School of Young Volunteers in Nazareth.

I studied with Poles and Jews and Arabs and on weekends and breaks we would travel together to Tiberias and Tel Aviv to see movies . . . Once my friends and I walked all the way to the Carmelite Monastery in Haifa. The priests were so friendly, and the Arab boys so polite . . . The father of one of the Arab boys had a car and would drive us to the beach. We’d get ice cream, play ball, tan . . . I don’t know what happened between Jews and Arabs, in those days everyone got along.⁵²

And yet in Kibbutz Ein Harod, less than 20 miles away from Nazareth, twenty Tehran children were actively experiencing the simmering Arab–Jewish conflict, some of them already enlisted in the Haganah, living in run-down, swelteringly hot shacks, studying Hebrew, and working in the fields. Strict work and study schedules, lack of funds, and the tense political situation meant that they could rarely travel to the beach or to Tel Aviv to watch movies, let alone live, like some of the Polish refugees, in Baka, Katamon, or Rehavia, Jerusalem’s loveliest neighbourhoods. But they now belonged to a nation-in-becoming. On the day of their arrival in Ein Harod, they were welcomed with music and singing and a banner that read, ‘You are no longer Tehran children or refugee children but Ein Harod children like us.’ Asked to choose a name for their group, they decided on *Ets*, the Hebrew word for ‘tree’ and the acronym for *olim tse’irim* (young *olim*, those who have ‘ascended’ to the Land of Israel).

‘We are all hopeful’, their teacher said, ‘that this tree will become entrenched within us and grow deep roots and abundant branches.’⁵³ Indeed, nearly all Tehran children became Israeli citizens and grew abundant family branches in Israel, many fighting and several dying in Israel’s wars. Two of them—Janusz Ben Gal and Hayim Erez—became generals; Emil Landau, the boy who had documented his journey in a travel diary, would receive one of Israel’s first medals of honour, posthumously.

Most Christian Poles—the Polish children who had been studying in Nazareth and Jerusalem, the Polish civilian refugees, the non-combatant personnel, and the workers at the Government Delegation for Poland, the Polish Red Cross, and the CIW—would leave Palestine with the end of the British Mandate. If their Jewish peers

had ‘ascended’ homeward, to the Land of Israel, the Christian Polish refugees would not be returning home to what was now the People’s Republic of Poland. Many left for the UK, some ending up in displaced persons camps in England and Wales; some went to New Zealand, where the children of Isfahan, who remained in Iran for the duration of the war, were eventually transferred.

In the end it was Palestine that would be the most hospitable and longest-lasting place of refuge for Christian Polish citizens. Yet this is a chapter in Jewish and Polish history that seems to have been erased from both Jewish and Polish cultural memory (‘I never understood and no one ever told me how come my mother’s birth certificate was issued in Tel Aviv’, Dr Asia Stefano, a scientist at MIT whose parents are Polish, said in a 2018 interview. ‘No one would explain to me.’⁵⁴)

Some Christian Poles who collected Jewish testimonies for the CIW stayed in Palestine and then in Israel. Teresa Lipkowska became a mathematics teacher in a school in Haifa.⁵⁵ Some Polish artists, such as the filmmaker Josef Lejtes, continued coming and going to Israel. Lejtes made the first English-language feature drama in the Land of Israel, *My Father’s House*. His next two films were also made in Israel: *Ein bererah* and *Faithful City*, a film that IMDb describes as depicting ‘some of the courage, patience, bravery and understanding that attended the birth of Israel as a free and independent nation.’⁵⁶

Traces of Polish lives—a plaque at a Catholic church in Ein Karem with ‘Here in Ain Karem, children from the Polish school offer their thanks to God for deliverance from exile in Soviet Russia’ carved on it in Polish; 340 Polish-language books, printed in Palestine, housed in the National Library in Jerusalem; an archive of Polish soldiers’ memoirs; books about the Land of Israel written during their stay; a neatly manicured section allotted to Polish soldiers and refugees at the Catholic cemetery in Jerusalem; Polish graves in Jaffa, Ramallah, Haifa, and Jerusalem; plaques on the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem and in a monastery in Tiberias; and spontaneous engravings on stones in Latroon and elsewhere, where the Anders Army trained—these remain in plain sight in today’s Israel, but are looked at vacantly by the many who see them as undecipherable signs.

Notes

- 1 JDC Archives, New York Office, 1933–1944, file 712: Harry Viteles, ‘Report on Visit to Bagdad (2.XI–9.XI, 1942) and Tehran (11.XI–2.XII, 1942)’, 31 Dec. 1942; see also file 713.
- 2 M. Edele, S. Fitzpatrick, J. Goldlust, and A. Grossmann, ‘Introduction: Shelter From the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union’, in eid. (eds.), *Shelter From the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union* (Detroit, 2017), 1–27: 20.
- 3 See M. Dekel, *Tehran Children: A Holocaust Refugee Odyssey* (New York, 2019).
- 4 Copies of over 10,000 of the testimonies are stored in the Hoover Institution, Stanford University (‘Poland: Ministerstwo Informacji i Dokumentacji Records, 1939–1945’, ‘Reports of Polish Detainees, 1941’); forty Yiddish testimonies, including four by Tehran children, are stored in Ginzakh Kidush Hashem, Benei Berak; and some Hebrew translations of testimonies are held by the Moreshet Archive, Mordechai Anielewicz Memorial

- Holocaust Studies and Research Center, Givat Haviva. See also H. Grynberg, *Dzieci Syjonu* (Warsaw, 1994); Eng. trans.: *Children of Zion*, trans. J. Mitchell (Evanston, Ill., 1997); Dekel, *Tehran Children*; E. Adler, *Survival on the Margins* (Cambridge, 2020); M. Siekierski and F. Tych (eds.), *Widziałem Aniola Śmierci: Losy deportowanych Żydów polskich w ZSRR w latach II wojny światowej* (Warsaw, 2006), 30–1.
- 5 Ginzakh Kidush Hashem, Benei Berak, David Flinker papers: 'Testimony of Hannania Teitel, 15 years old, born in Ostrów Mazowiecka, son of Zindel Teitel, co-owner of the Ostrów Maz. brewery. Arrived in Israel from Russia through Tehran in 1943' (Yid.); see Dekel, *Tehran Children*, 104.
 - 6 Grynberg, *Children of Zion*, 89.
 - 7 JDC Archives, New York Office, 1933–1944, file 421: minutes of the meeting of the JDC Executive Committee, 10 Dec. 1941; see Dekel, *Tehran Children*, 172–210.
 - 8 After the amnesty, the Polish government-in-exile put the total number of Poles in the USSR at 1.2 million, with at least a quarter of them Jewish. The Soviet government declared the number of 'Polish citizens deprived of freedom', which it had released, to be 345,511. Jewish sources estimated the number of Polish Jews in central Asia to between 350,000 and 500,000 (Dekel, *Tehran Children*, 235).
 - 9 Viteles, 'Report on Visit to Bagdad (2.XI–9.XI, 1942) and Tehran (11.XI–2.XII, 1942)'.
 - 10 Ibid.
 - 11 Ibid.; see J. Aldridge, 'Abuses by Poles in Tehran Reported: Correspondent Says Refugees even Sold Relief Goods Supplied by Americans', *North American Newspaper Alliance*, 13 Mar. 1943.
 - 12 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archive, Washington DC (hereafter USHMM), KOL-25-33A: Polish embassy, Kuybyshev, 'Sprawa Żydów obywateli polskich w świetle oficjalnych dokumentów oraz praktyki władz radzieckich, Kujbyszew 11 VIII 1942'.
 - 13 Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum Archive, London, AXII.65/1: 'Meeting at Tehran on 27 October, 1942 between the C.-in-C. and General Anders. Lt. Colonels Szymański and Hulls were also Present'.
 - 14 Central Zionist Archive, Jerusalem, A245\121-23: Zipora Shertok, letter to her children, 14 Nov. 1942.
 - 15 Emil Landau, diary. Courtesy of Ilana Landau; translated from the Polish by Uri Orlev.
 - 16 P. Damandan, *The Children of Esfahan. Polish Refugees in Iran: Portrait Photographs of Abolqasem Jala, 1942–1945* (Tehran, 2010); see also K. Sinai (dir.), *The Lost Requiem*, documentary (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, 1983).
 - 17 Damadan, *The Children of Isfahan*, 274.
 - 18 Sinai (dir.), *The Lost Requiem*.
 - 19 G. R. Ben-Michael, interview with David Laor (Lauenberg), in 'Yaldei teheran', *Biton forum lishemirat zikaron hasho'ah*, 33 (2010), 92–114: 108; on daily life in the Tehran camp, see G. Shamir, *Yaldei teheran* (Yaron Golan, 1989).
 - 20 See M. Yishai, *Tsir beli to'ar: rishmei shelihut umasa beparas* (Tel Aviv, 1950).
 - 21 Moreshet Archives, Mordechai Anielewicz Memorial (hereafter MAMAM), A.1584.14: Efraim Shiloh, testimony (Heb.), 28 Apr. 1980.
 - 22 MAMAM, A.1492.02: Yehuda Pompiansky, testimony (Heb.), 2 Mar. 1966.
 - 23 J. Levy, 'Palestine Serves as Refugee Haven', *New York Times*, 21 Feb. 1942, p. 4.
 - 24 See Dekel, *Tehran Children*, 307–56.
 - 25 V. Brio, *Pol'skie muzy na Svyatoi Zemle: Armiya Andersa: mesto, vremya, kul'tura (1942–1945)* (Moscow, 2017), 15.

- 26 Ibid. 63.
- 27 Ibid. 258.
- 28 Ibid. 72.
- 29 Ibid. 63, 277.
- 30 Ibid. 66, 120.
- 31 See *ibid.* 64.
- 32 M. Krutikov, 'When Polish Intellectuals Thrived in Pre-State Israel' (29 Mar. 2017): Forward website, visited 19 Oct. 2021.
- 33 'Poles attack Jews in Palestine: Polish Paper Questions Jewish Loyalty to Poland', *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 7 Feb. 1943.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 USHMM, KOL-25-39A, fos. 214–15: Major Wróblewski, report on the distribution of funds by the Polish Refugee Aid Office in Jerusalem, 30 Aug. 1942. In the report were also hundreds of typed documents detailing funds allotted for each person and institution, perhaps as a response to allegations of misuse of funds in Iran.
- 36 Brio, *Pol'skie muzy na Svyatoi Zemle*, 262.
- 37 Ibid. 2, 75–6.
- 38 Moshe Sharett (Shertok), 'Yeshivat hanhalat hasokhnut yerushalayim, 25.4.1943. Aḥarit davar', ed. Y. Sharett (11 Nov. 1942): Moshe Sharett and His Legacy website, visited 13 May 2021.
- 39 See Siekierski and Tych (eds.), *Widziałem Aniola Śmierci*, 30–1.
- 40 'Testimony of Hannania Teitel' (Yid.).
- 41 Brio, *Pol'skie muzy na Svyatoi Zemle*, 75–6.
- 42 Yishai, *Tsir beli to'ar*, 90; see also MAMAM, C.54.02.01: Mosad Le'aliyah Beit, secret memo, 29 Sept. 1942. In his memoir, Yishai described how the Polish consul came to bid him goodbye at the airport upon his return to Palestine (Yishai, *Tsir beli to'ar*, 326).
- 43 Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum Archive, London, A19II/116, 'Palestine'; Wróblewski, report on the distribution of funds by the Polish Refugee Aid Office in Jerusalem, 30 Aug. 1942.
- 44 Kenyon College, Bulmash Family Holocaust Collection, 2012.1.98: Edward Bernard Raczyński, *The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland*, brochure printed by the Polish government-in-exile's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to foreign ministers, 10 Dec, 1942.
- 45 Shertok, 'Yeshivat hanhalat hasokhnut yerushalayim'.
- 46 Brio, *Pol'skie muzy na Svyatoi Zemle*, 227.
- 47 Polish authorities blamed Jewish Agency representatives for encouraging Jewish Anders Army soldiers to desert and for conducting interviews to prove that they had deserted due to bad treatment of Jews in the army (Yehuda Pompiansky, testimony (Heb.)).
- 48 18-year-old Julian Bussgang enlisted in the Anders Army in Tel Aviv on 10 November 1943 (USHMM, Museum Photo Archive, #73240: group portrait of students, both Catholic and Jewish, in the Polish high school in Tel Aviv, Mar. 1942).
- 49 Yehuda Pompiansky, testimony (Heb.).
- 50 Brio, *Pol'skie muzy na Svyatoi Zemle*, 68.
- 51 'Meeting at Tehran on 27 October, 1942 between the C.-in-C. and General Anders. Lt. Colonels Szymański and Hulls were also Present'.
- 52 Krystyna Orłowska, phone interview with author, 10 Oct. 2017.

- 53 Ein Harod Archive: 'Yomanei ein harod', 21 May 1943; quoted in Dekel, *Tehran Children*, 341.
- 54 Asia Stefano, interview with Peter Tsvetkov, Cambridge, Mass., 12 Apr. 2018. This was one of a series of interviews I arranged with descendants of Christian Poles who had spent the war years in Tel Aviv.
- 55 That negative accounts of the treatment of the Tehran children by Poles were not edited out of their testimonies is credited to Teresa Lipkowska (see Siekierski and Tych (eds.), *Widziałem Anioła Śmierci*, 30).
- 56 'The Faithful City (1952)': IMDb website, visited 9 Sept. 2021.