

“Wolfy, one ship has sailed without us. I’ll be on the next.

With or without you”:

Emigration of Jewish Families from Poland in the Spring of 1940

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Abstract

This article recounts the unsung independent emigration of a few dozen Jewish families from Poland in the spring of 1940 to India, Palestine, the U.S., and Canada, where they resettled and rebuilt their lives. The sense of foreboding that hovered over the Jews of Poland from the onset of the German occupation spurred this group to take risks, cut ties with extended family, and emigrate on an individual, as opposed to a mass, basis — an unorganized and unofficial collection of individuals that morphed into a group only in the wake of their decision to emigrate.

The article tracks the stops on their journeys and explains the elements that define them as either escapees or as eleventh-hour migrants. The characteristics of their journeys and the preparations therefor are examined via hitherto-unpublished sources and testimonies, all in a search for economic, political, or other characteristics unique to this group.

Given the rapid delegitimization of Polish Jewry at the beginning of 1940, there are grounds for including this period as part of the Holocaust (Friedlander, 2009). This view, however, overlooks the options that Jews in Poland still had at the beginning of the war. To classify this period as either peacetime or wartime, it is necessary to conceptualize the characteristics of the emigration being studied: Was it rapid yet planned, in the manner typical of Jews in the Reich from 1938? Or does these emigrants’ rushed departure resemble the forced departure of Jews from the expanded Reich after 1939? Or was their departure a flight, like that undertaken by a quarter of a million Jews from Polish territory to the Soviet Union in the fall of 1940? Data from the period do not offer easy answers. The Jewish Agency Statistics Department divided the period between 1922-1942 into five parts with respect to *aliya* [immigration to Mandatory Palestine] yet clusters the years

1937–1942, ruling out any distinction between those who reached Palestine before the war broke out and those who came thereafter.

How do upright, law-abiding citizens become fabricators and users of forged documents? In some cases, it appears that irregular activity organized by the Zionist Revisionists in Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia brought together members of the group with others involved in semilegal activity in the months preceding the war. Being cosmopolitan compared to the rest of Polish Jewry, these individuals were familiar with the gray area between the legal and the illegal, and knew how to maneuver therein. From 1937 onward, the Revisionists, who urged illegal immigration to Palestine and encouraged refugees and those seeking a way out of Europe to “flood the borders,” were partners in the cause at all stages of departure and emigration.

The story of this wave of emigration is a footnote in historical terms, and ordinarily would be overlooked in the absence of a specific reason to recall and retell it. It does, however, deserve a place on the bookshelf of history, if only due to the tales of individual heroism, resolve, and courage that it recounts.

The rapporteurs were an in-between group: one foot in the German occupation (and “burned” thereby), the other reaching for safety in a new land. Just months after they managed to extricate themselves from Poland, the émigrés began to receive reports of the mass murder of their friends and loved ones. Thus, their memories of the journey begin with fear and hardship before moving on to success, optimism, and salvation. How did they tell their stories? Do these stories even merit a place on the “bookshelf of recollections”?

Can the guardians of memory be anointed “High Priests of Memory”? Has a commonwealth of memory been created here? Do they nurture—independently and collectively—a “memory zone”? What is the purpose of “consuming” their past? Does it even exist? Do these questions touch the childhoods of those whose parents shared a similar, unique fate?

