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Did Cousin Rabinowitz Die in the Holocaust?

New and Old Sources of Information.

The chaos of World War II and the Holocaust have made 20th century genealogical research in Eastern Europe difficult – sometimes seemingly impossible. While fairly good Holocaust records exist for West European countries, records for the period 1939-1945 for Poland, the former Soviet Union, and other East European countries have been fragmentary at best.

After 1939, families which had maintained extensive connections with their relatives in Eastern Europe found their contacts abruptly broken off. After World War II, contact could often not be reestablished and many assumed that their relatives in the former Soviet Union and Poland had been murdered in the Holocaust. This was not an unreasonable assumption, given the existence of death camps and Einsatzgruppen in the area.

Many sought to memorialize their lost family members and to seek closure by submitting Pages of Testimony to Yad Vashem. Others who saw these testimonials viewed them as confirmation of their own inability to explain the rupture in communications. However, in fact, only a very small percentage of Pages of Testimony reflect any first hand information, since, if the submitter had been present at those times, he/she would probably also have perished. What remains are largely conclusions drawn from the absence of actual information as to what happened to family members known to have lived prior to World War II, and, to a limited extent, information drawn from secondary sources. Millions of Polish and Soviet Jews undoubtedly died in the Holocaust and many of them will never be identified in any records, even with the opening of the International Tracing Service at Arolsen. Others died as soldiers in WWII, or as a result of disease or starvation. Some survived, but did not contact family members, since the advent of the Cold War made communication with Western relatives dangerous.

This article focuses on some long-existing and new documentary sources giving information on those from the former Soviet Union and Poland who did not perish in the Holocaust. These sources apparently have been rarely used by researchers, either due to language problems or their unavailability in many libraries. They should be consulted. In addition, new information has recently been obtained. For example, a list of over one hundred and fifty thousand Jews from the western Soviet Union who fled to Uzbekistan was placed on the web in October 2006. Research is also underway to identify a further several hundred thousand Soviet Jews who were able to escape the Holocaust elsewhere in Central Asia and in the Volga and Urals areas.

For purposes of illustration, I have examined some of the material using the name Rabinowitz, with variant spellings (Rabinovich in Russian and Ukrainian, Rabinowicz in Polish, etc), one of the most common Jewish family names in Eastern Europe.

Soviet Union

Uzbekistan and Central Asia

The most recent and dramatic "find" is a computerized database, prepared by Uzbek researchers and financed by the USHMM, of cards identifying about 152,000 Jews who fled or were deported to Uzbekistan in 1942. These Jews came primarily from the Ukraine and Belarus (including areas that were formerly eastern Poland) as well as Bessarabia, the Baltic States, and elsewhere.

This database, based on the identity cards can be seen at <http://resources.ushmm.org/uzbekrefugees>. The database has been transliterated into Latin letters, in addition to the Cyrillic. It will also be made available to Jewishgen.org.

The database contains family and given name of the individual, patronymic, year of birth, place of birth, and last place of residence. The cards themselves provide additional information, such as relationship to other family members (e.g. wife), former profession and 1942 address and profession. The card may be viewed by moving to the last column for the name of interest and simply clicking.

Searching for the name Rabinowitz, I found dozens of entries, with most coming from Bessarabia, Ukraine and Belarus. On a personal note, I found eleven persons with the name Lande, from places which had not featured in my existing family tree, such as Slaviansk and Proskurov (now Khmel'nitskiy), which I had to find in an atlas, not to speak of Odessa, Kiev and Moscow as well as Kaunas.

Uzbekistan was only one of several Central Asian Soviet Republics, later independent countries, to which persons fled or were deported. Overall, it is estimated that over 1.1 million persons, about 70 percent of them Jewish, were evacuated to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan and many other places in the southeastern parts of the former Soviet Union. Hopefully, future research will yield the names of these currently anonymous Jews. One estimate is that as many as 300,000 of these deportees perished due to diseases and starvation, while others died as Soviet soldiers during WWII. However, none of them perished in the Holocaust and, indeed, many later emigrated to Palestine/Israel or elsewhere.

In addition to Central Asia, hundreds of thousands of persons, Jews and non-Jews, fled to the Volga River and Urals areas of the Russian Federation. Material relating to this exodus is currently being filmed by the USHMM, and initial reviews indicate that a substantial percentage of these persons was Jewish. It will take considerable time until the name lists contained in these collections are digitized.

The Extraordinary Commission collection (see below) also contains a list of over 15,000 Moldavians, mostly Jews, who were permitted to relocate to eastern parts of the Soviet Union in 1941. This list has been digitized and is available at the Survivors Registry of the USHMM.

Jews Who Died as Soviet Soldiers in WW II

Another older, though rarely used source of information, is an eight volume listing of about 75,000 Jews, including 35 generals and admirals, who perished while in the Soviet military in WWII. The eight volumes, called Kniga pamiati voinov-evreev pavshikh v boiakh s natsizmom: 1941-1945 (Book of Memory of Jewish Soldiers who fell in battle with Nazism 1941-1945) were published in Moscow from 1994 to 2002. The editors of this series are hoping to computerize further name lists, with two more volumes planned, but there is no way of knowing when this project will be completed.

Each volume contains an alphabetical list of Jews who perished, with a short biographic description, including name, place of birth and residence, rank, military specialty, where the person perished, and the source of this information. Pictures of some of these persons follow at the end of each book. To give an example, Grigoriy Rabinovich, son of Abram, born 1904 in Ternovka in the Uman region, and resident in Leningrad at the time he entered military service, was a driver. He died in 1944 and was buried 1.5 km from Kondusi in Estonia. In this single volume (vol. 7) there are 35 other listings of persons with the name Rabinovich. The geographic scope of this collection includes all parts of the Soviet Union as it existed in 1941.

The authors were able to compile this list of Jewish soldiers since Soviet military (and civilian) records list "Jewish" as a nationality. While a valuable source of information, this series obviously understates the number of Soviet Jews who perished as soldiers. Records are incomplete and many Jews had the choice not to be so listed if their father was non-Jewish. Nevertheless, the authors estimate that 138,700 Jews perished, with 75,000 listed in these 8 volumes. (Overall, over 10 million Soviet soldiers died in WWII)

More complete records of Soviet military deaths are held at the Central Archives of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation in Podolsk near Moscow and requests for information can be sent to that Ministry at 142117 Moscow Region, Podolsk, Kirova Street 74.

International Historical Enlightenment Human Rights and Humanitarian Memorial.
(Commonly called Memorial)

Deportations within the Soviet Union and descriptions of the Gulag and other forced labor destinations within the Soviet Union have long been featured in fiction and non-fiction books. Estimates of the number of persons "deported" have ranged from one million to as many as four million. Many perished, while others survived and returned. For years, Memorial, located in Moscow, has been trying to identify and determine the fate of all who were deported or murdered locally between the late 1930s and 1953,

roughly the Stalinist era. Memorial cooperates with dozens of regional and local organizations inside Russia itself as well as parts of the Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Latvia and Georgia. So far they have identified about one million persons and have published 50 "books of memory", containing the names of several hundred thousand persons. A list of these books is available on Memorial's website, www.memo.ru. Only a small number of copies of each of these books was published, and they are extremely difficult to locate. However, researchers interested in any particular book may find that it is available at the Library of Congress.

While not on its website, fortunately for genealogists, Memorial furnished a digitized copy of its name lists to the USHMM and allowed this material to be placed on the web, where it is available at <http://www.stephenmorse.org/russian/gulag.html>.

As is the case with respect to all Soviet records, Jews are considered a nationality and it is, therefore, possible to identify these persons separately. To my surprise, such a search only yielded about 22,000 names, a very small percentage of the overall database. This small number may reflect the limited scope of Memorial's work so far in areas of the former Pale. Two areas which are included and may be of particular interest are Odessa and Ivano Frankivsk (city and surrounding areas).

In addition to the aforementioned sources, S. Elisavetskii's Polveka zabvenii. Evrei v dvizhenii soprotivleniia I partizanskoi bor'be v Ukraine 1941-1944 (Half Century of Oblivion) lists 2,924 Jews who died as partisans in the Ukraine. This list only gives name and year of birth and includes, for example, Avram Rabinovich, born 1900.

Extraordinary Commission

Even before the war ended, Soviet authorities began to compile records from towns and villages which had been occupied by the Germans. Their purpose was not genealogical, but rather to have an account of the damage caused by Germany as history, and as a tool for justifying German reparations after the war. Many of these town by town accounts include the names of the persons who perished there. A finding aid listing the hundreds of communities included in this massive (about 20,000 pages) collection is available on Jewishgen and copies (in Russian) of the reports on individual towns may be obtained from either Yad Vashem or the USHMM, (RG 22.002M). Some of the name lists have been digitized and are available on Jewishgen, while others are still being processed. It is expected that, ultimately, 500,000 names, Jews and non-Jews, will be identified.

POLAND

KARTA CENTER

Parallel with the work of Memorial in Moscow, Karta Center in Warsaw, commonly called Karta (Pages) has sought to document Soviet repression of Poles within Poland's prewar boundaries. It has focused on identifying and establishing the fate of all Poles, Jews and non-Jews, who were either deported by the Soviets in 1939-1941 or

immediately after WWII, as well as those Poles who were murdered in such places as Katyn. Karta estimates that one million persons, Jews and non-Jews were deported or murdered. Up to now they have come up with over 200,000 names. Unlike the Soviet Union, Poland did not consider Jews as a nationality so it is impossible to know what percentage of these persons were Jews.

It is possible, however, to search this collection by name in two different ways. One method is to consult the 20 books, mostly organized by place of origin, published up to now by Karta (these are listed on Karta's website). For example, Deportowani w obwodzie archangielskim: alfabetyczny wykaz 9320 obywateli polskich wtwiezionych 1940 roku z obwodu bialostockiego (Deportees to the Archangel Area: Alphabetical Index of 9320 Polish Citizens who were Deported from the Bialystok Area) identifies persons who were deported in 1940 from around Bialystok to the Archangel region. To take one of five persons named Rabinowicz, David Szlama Rabinowicz, born 1906, father's name Szai, was deported to the Murmansk area. His fate is not given, but in other cases a person is listed as having died or been repatriated to Poland after WWII. With the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, and the urgent need for military manpower, many of these "Poles" were absorbed into the Soviet military, while others, following an agreement with the Polish Government in exile, constituted the Anders Brigade. If they died in combat their names may turn up in Kniga (above) or Ksiega (below)

The second search possibility is to go to Karta's website, Osrodek Karta, use the Polish settings on your search engine, and simply type in any family name. This site does not include a soundex, so users should enter various possible spellings.

CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF POLISH JEWS

With the end of World War II many Polish Jews returned to Poland, either from German concentration camps or from the Soviet Union, while others came out of hiding inside Poland. About 250,000 of them registered with the Central Committee of Jews, the Polish Jewish umbrella organization, in order to get assistance, and to locate lost family members. Their registration cards, as well as a composite alphabetical list, have been microfilmed and are available at the USHMM (RG 15.057M). The single list gives name, names of parents, year of birth, place of residence in 1939 and postwar place of residence. The cards themselves often give additional information. All the material is organized in a Polish soundex system. To give the reader a sense of this source's magnitude, there are over 300 persons with the name Rabinowitz (various spellings).

For some years the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) in Warsaw has been attempting to consolidate this and other information into a single computerized database. However, lack of funding has slowed this effort, which is about one third to one half completed. New funding has recently been obtained and it is hoped that this project will be completed. Until then inquiries may be sent to the USHMM or JHI.

OTHER POLISH SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Many books have been published in Polish listing WWII and Holocaust victims. Some are memorial books from Auschwitz, Majdanek and Gross Rosen, while others list Polish soldiers, or persons from specific professions, e.g. art historians and musicologists, who died in the war. See

<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/spx/class/Biography/Polishnio/polvictims.htm>. The most extensive list of victims is contained in a five volume series Ksiega pochowanych zolnierzy polskich poległych w II wojnie swiatowej which lists 104,094 soldiers who died in the war. Unlike Soviet sources, Jews are not separately identified but Rabinowicz turns up again. This list gives name, rank, year of birth and place of former residence, as well as date of death are given, e.g. Mieczyslaw Rabinowicz, born November 24, 1915, rank of corporal, died September 6, 1939 in Gniewoszow. Benjamin Meirtchak, in his five volume Jewish Military Casualties in the Polish Armies in World War II, Tel Aviv, 1994-1999 covers much the same territory, but limits himself to Jews who died in the Polish armed forces. It includes about 6,500 names. In Volume 4 of this series he includes the names of Polish Jewish soldiers who died in the resistance, a category not included in Ksiega, above.

Other East European Lists

There are numerous lists of survivors not organized by nationality, many of which have been available for years. The largest of these is Sharit ha Platah (over 50 persons with the name Rabinowitz) and World Jewish Congress lists, each with about 50,000 names, but with considerable overlap. Both are available on Jewishgen and are primarily compiled from post-war Displaced Person camp lists located in Germany, which contained a large number of survivors originating in Eastern Europe.

Researchers should be aware that tens of thousands of East European Jews were sent, directly or indirectly, to forced labor in camps located in Germany and France. These included Lithuanians, Poles, Czechs and, the largest number, Hungarian Jews, who, fortunately, were not deported until Spring 1944. By 1944 the labor shortage in Germany was so serious that a substantial percentage of arrivals in Auschwitz were sent on to other camps. While Auschwitz records were largely destroyed, records for many of the receiving camps are available, some on the web and others through memorial sites or books. It is difficult to know what percentage of these Jews perished/survived but a random sample of 50 Jewish prisoners who arrived in Dachau from Auschwitz in 1944 indicates that over half survived in Dachau until liberation, about 30% perished there, while about 10% were transferred elsewhere. These include many Jews from Lodz who were initially sent to Auschwitz but then sent on to other camps. (Lists of Jews transferred from Auschwitz to various German concentration camps, as well as the records for concentration camp Flossenbürg with thousands of Hungarian Jews are currently being computerized by volunteers, with more volunteers welcome by Jewishgen)

Some conclusions:

While it will probably never be possible to establish the fate of millions of East European Jews in the years 1939-1945, do not automatically assume that because someone vanished off the family radar screen between 1939 and 1945, they perished in the Holocaust. Well over one million Jews resident in the Soviet Union and Poland in the period 1939-1945 did not perish in the Holocaust, though many of them undoubtedly died of starvation, disease or serving as soldiers.

Research the places where they most likely lived and the aforementioned sources. While Soviet Jews were rarely transported to the concentration camp system—there are some exceptions in the Baltic States—most Polish Jews were sent to camps. Those who were sent to such camps as Auschwitz and Stutthof were sometimes sent westward. Thus, even if they did perish, they did not necessarily perish in the first place to which they were deported.

Perhaps, when the ITS/Arolsen collections become available, and, ultimately, when this and other material is digitized, searches will become much easier. For now, you need to continue to examine all the old and new sources of information and never give up the hope that information on a long lost Rabinowitz will turn up. Of course, you will still have the problem of linking your new find to your family tree – a problem so long as access to modern vital records in Poland and the former Soviet Union remains difficult.