

Memories for a Blessing
Jewish Mourning Rituals and Commemorative Practices in Postwar Belarus and Ukraine,
1944-1991

by

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DEDICATION

To Grandma Grace (z'l), who took unbounded joy in the adventures and accomplishments of her grandchildren.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHEYM	Archive of Historical and Ethnographic Yiddish Memories
BSSU	Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic
CARC	Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults
FSU	Former Soviet Union
UkSSR	Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic
USHMM	United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

GLOSSARY

Av ha-rachamin – Father of Mercy. A prayer in memory of Jewish martyrs

Chassidic – a Jewish religious revival movement that emerged during the eighteenth century and quickly spread throughout Eastern Europe

chevra kadisha – Jewish burial society

dvadtsatka – the committee of 20 members required for a religious community to receive formal registration with the Soviet authorities

El moleh rachamim – “God full of mercy.” A memorial prayer that is part of *yizkor* and may be recited by individuals without a *minyan*. Colloquially referred to as “*moleh*.”

gorispolkom(y) – City Executive Committee

gorkom – City Committee

gorkomkhoz(y) – Municipal Department for Communal Property

gorsovet – City Council

halachah (adj. *halachic*) – Jewish religious law

kaddish – specifically, “mourner’s *kaddish*.” A memorial prayer for the dead. Requires a *minyan*.

kaddish d’rabbanan – a variant of *kaddish* that is recited only after a period of study

Kaf Sivan – the Twentieth of Sivan

Kinot (sing. *kinah*) – dirge. Primarily associated with *Tisha b’Av* and other fast days

Kolkhoz – collective farm

kohanim – descendants of the Jewish priestly class/caste

Komsomol – the youth organization of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

kurgany slavy – burial mound. Generally refers to a large, elevated mass grave that has developed into a memorial complex

landsmanshaft (pl. *landsmanshaftn*) – organization for individuals who share a common hometown or home region.

landsmanshaft (pl. *landslayt*) – individuals who share a common hometown or home region

minhag(im) – local custom

minyan – the quorum of ten Jewish men age 12 or older that is required to conduct Jewish public prayer services

Mishnayes – Literally, plural of Mishnah. Refers to the custom of reciting chapters of Mishnah in memory of the dead

obkom – Oblast Committee

oblispolkom – Oblast Executive Committee

OVIR – Office of Visas and Registrations

peh-nun – “Here lies.” Traditional opening acronym for Hebrew gravestones.

pushke – box for collecting charitable donations

raiiispolkom(y) – district/county Executive Committee

raikomkhoz(y) – district/county Department for Communal Property

RSFSR – Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

selichot (sing. *Selichah*) – penitential prayer

sel'sovet(y) – Village councils

shiva – the seven day mourning period after a death

shtetl – small towns and cities in the former Pale of Settlement where Jews lived for centuries

shtiebl – Literally, a small house. Refers to an informal space used for Jewish prayer services, often a private home.

sovnarkom (SNK) – Council of People’s Commissars

talles(im) – Jewish prayer shawl(s)

tav-nun-tsadi-bet-hey – “May his/her soul be bound up in the bonds of life.” Traditional closing acronym for Hebrew gravestones.

UkSSR – Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

vostochniki – Jews from the pre-1939 regions of the Soviet Union

Yom Hashoah – Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel. Observed during the month of Nisan.

yortzeit – the anniversary of a relative’s death.

Yizkor – Memorial services for the dead. Recited publicly in the synagogue four times a year on

Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, the last day of Passover, and the second day of Shavuot

Yizkorbukh (pl. *yizkorbikher*) – memorial books commemorating Jewish communities devastated in the Holocaust and in other calamities

ZAGS – Civil registry office for births, marriages, and deaths.

zapadniki – Jews from the western territories of the Soviet Union, which were annexed between 1939 and the mid-1940s.

ABSTRACT

Soviet Jewish mourning practices after the Second World War offer a valuable opportunity to study the evolution of ritual life in a period of dramatic social transformation and demographic decline. Immediately after liberation and continuing throughout the postwar decades, Soviet Jewish individuals and communities revived and adapted prewar mourning practices to suit contemporary concerns and conditions. The resulting commemorative culture defies linear narratives of secularization. It also offers a valuable case study in ritual persistence through partial observance, improvised substitutes, and misremembered traditions. While ritual idiosyncrasy contributed to the atomization of Soviet Jewish religious life, such adaptation was precisely what allowed traditional practices to survive. In turn, mourning sustained a distinctive Jewish culture and reinvigorated Jewish communal life under unlikely circumstances.

Just as Soviet Jews strategically selected the rituals they observed, they also strategically chose the venues in which they performed these rituals—cemeteries, private homes, synagogues, *shtiebls*, mass graves, and monuments. The first chapter of my dissertation addresses the interaction of families, local Jewish communities, and varying levels of the Soviet bureaucracy in the maintenance and usage of Jewish cemeteries. The second chapter analyzes individual and familial commemorative practices in the domestic sphere where the distinction between “religious practice” and “folk practice” remained murky. The third chapter examines individual and communal mourning practices in local Jewish cemeteries and emphasizes the ability of the burial landscape to elicit traditional observances. The fourth chapter turns to public mourning

rituals in the synagogue or *shtiebl* and analyzes the role that these rituals played in sustaining holiday observance and synagogue attendance in the postwar period. The fifth chapter turns to a final site of mourning and commemorative activity—the mass grave—and examines Soviet Jews’ efforts to construct Holocaust memorials and conduct memorial services at the sites of Nazi mass shootings.

By focusing on smaller towns and cities in Ukraine and Belarus, my project emphasizes local specificity and trans-regional comparison while examining regions in which Soviet secularization remained incomplete and contested well into the post-war era. To craft a compelling historical narrative that integrates state policy, material culture, and individual experience, this project draws on three major categories of primary sources: archival documents, memorial objects (such as monuments and memorial plaques), and personal accounts (including oral history interviews, memoirs, and *yizkor bikher*). Collectively, these sources compensate for each other’s silences, yielding a nuanced and unique perspective on postwar Soviet Jewish mourning culture.

In the wake of the Holocaust and the Second World War, Soviet Jewish individuals and communities faced the dual challenge of commemoration and rebuilding. Despite logistical challenges and political barriers, Soviet Jews forged an autonomous memorial culture centered on local landscapes, experiences, and networks. The survival of traditional Jewish mourning rituals in postwar daily life reminds us that secularization is neither inevitable nor linear. Furthermore, it suggests a symbiotic relationship between mourning and rebuilding—death and the affirmation of communal bonds among the living. As a site of encounter between elderly and young, secular and religious, mourning fostered intergenerational continuity and revitalized otherwise crumbling communities.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately two million of the Holocaust's Jewish victims perished on Soviet territory,¹ including the Baltic states, Western Ukraine, and Western Belarus—regions that the Soviet Union annexed in 1939-1941 and retained after the war.² Unlike Jewish populations from Central and Western Europe, most Soviet Jews were not deported *en masse* to concentration camps and were not murdered in gas chambers. Instead, they were executed near their hometowns in mass shootings in forests, fields, ravines, and cemeteries. This “Holocaust by bullets”³ had dramatic implications for the mourning culture that emerged among Soviet Jewish survivors⁴ as they rebuilt their lives in the postwar era.

Whereas Holocaust survivors in Western Europe, Israel, and the United States generally had no bodies to bury and no graves to visit, Soviet Jews could return to their hometowns. There, with the help of local eyewitnesses, they could often identify the exact location where their loved ones had been killed. Once located, the physical remains of the victims demanded care and

¹ Zvi Gitelman, “Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union,” 14.

² In addition to the heavy demographic toll inflicted by the Holocaust, a disproportionate number of Soviet Jews died while fighting in the Red Army and the Soviet partisans, and many others died in evacuation due to harsh conditions in the Soviet interior. The total deaths exacted on Soviet Jews between 1941 and 1944 reaches 2.5 to 3.3 million. See Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry since the Second World War*, 4. See also Mark Kupovetsky, “Estimation of Jewish Losses,” 2.

³ A term coined by Father Patrick Desbois, who has been instrumental in bringing this lesser-known aspect of Holocaust history into public view.

⁴ I use the word “survivor” to encapsulate the relationship of these Soviet Jewish returnees toward their relatives who had been murdered during the Holocaust. Most were not Holocaust survivors in the strictest sense of the word. Instead, they had survived the war in evacuation or through military service. Very few survived in hiding on Nazi occupied territory.

commemoration. While the burial landscape in Eastern Europe was ripe for the emergence of a dynamic mourning culture, the war years had devastated Soviet Jewish communities across the formerly occupied territories. Mass shootings had erased entire communities and dispersed survivors to all corners of the world. After the war, many survivors returned to their hometowns only briefly before emigrating westward⁵ or resettling to larger Soviet cities. Furthermore, the Nazi occupation had destroyed numerous synagogues and cemeteries—the traditional institutions of Jewish mourning—which disrupted the existing commemorative culture and complicated efforts to adapt it to novel, catastrophic circumstances. For years after the war’s conclusion, extreme poverty and the lack of raw materials stymied efforts to rebuild these sites.

Under these catastrophic conditions, we would hardly expect to find a widespread or consistent effort among Soviet Jews to commemorate Holocaust victims or to restore the prewar rituals and burial sites. Yet, beginning immediately after their liberation, Jewish individuals and communities from across the formerly occupied territories of the Soviet Union worked energetically to renovate local Jewish cemeteries, conduct memorial services, and erect makeshift monuments at the sites of Nazi mass shootings. Furthermore, these activities were not simply confined to the immediate postwar years. Instead, Soviet Jews continued to engage with mourning and commemorative practices throughout the postwar decades, reviving and adapting prewar Jewish rituals to suit contemporary concerns and conditions. For many secular Jews, participation in distinctively Jewish mourning practices represented their only engagement with Jewish community and ritual.

⁵ Between 1944-1946, Jews from the Western regions of Belarus and Ukraine were permitted to repatriate to Poland under Soviet de-Polonization policies.

This emergent ritual life was rooted in local landscapes of mourning that included mass graves, monuments, cemeteries, synagogues, *shtiebls*,⁶ and private homes. Due to Soviet Jews' growing distance from traditional observance and numerous legal restrictions on religious life, postwar mourning practices were inevitably manifestations of "partial" or "incorrect" observance if we examine them from a purely halachic standpoint.⁷ While the element of choice does reflect the atomization of Soviet Jewish ritual life, I argue that Soviet Jews' selective, creative adaptation of traditional rituals was precisely what allowed these practices to survive. Individuals resourcefully negotiated legal and logistical hurdles to engage with the mourning rituals and venues that best accommodated their age, gender, educational background, career aspirations, geographic location, beliefs, and fears. In doing so, they reinvigorated Jewish ritual and communal life under unlikely circumstances. As my project demonstrates, by participating in familial and communal mourning, Soviet Jews not only commemorated the dead, they also reaffirmed communal bonds among the living.

In this study of ritual survival and adaptation, I have chosen to focus on the postwar Soviet republics of Belarus and Ukraine, each of which included significant borderland territory, including regions that were only incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1939-40 and in the mid-1940s. Belarus and Ukraine were both home to sizeable, Jewish populations,⁸ including many traditional Jews from the newly annexed regions. Furthermore, both republics had been the site

⁶ A small, underground synagogue usually hosted in a private home. In most towns, synagogues had been shut down prior to the war or were destroyed in the war. After 1944, the Soviet government avoided reopening these synagogues. Instead, unregistered Jewish communities gathered in members' apartments.

⁷ Halachah is the body of laws that govern normative Jewish religious observance. Within halachah, there is significant accommodation for local custom, known as *minhag* (pl. *minhagim*). In the wake of the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel, Jewish practice in the United States and Israel has become increasingly standardized, erasing thousands of years of local *minhagim* from across the Diaspora.

⁸ Ukraine held the second largest Jewish population in the USSR, after the RSFSR. Belarus was home to the third largest Jewish population.

of countless Nazi atrocities during the war, in particular, mass shootings. On the one hand, this calamitous history presented significant demographic challenges and material hardships for Belarusian and Ukrainian Jewish communities. Yet, as we will see, the urgency of mourning and the preponderance of funerary sites in these two republics played an important role in rebuilding Jewish ritual and communal life in the postwar period.

Chapter Overview

While this project remains closely attuned to chronology and change over time, the following chapters are organized primarily in spatial terms, emphasizing the local landscapes in which mourning occurred: the cemetery, the home, the synagogue or *shtiebl*, and the mass grave. This arrangement highlights the unique possibilities offered by the private, semi-private, and public spheres, given the legal constraints and cultural norms within which Soviet Jews mourned.

The first chapter addresses the maintenance and usage of Jewish cemeteries in the postwar Soviet context. Within these burial spaces, I highlight the complex interactions of families, local Jewish communities, and varying levels of the Soviet state. Despite their competing interests, I argue that these actors generally cooperated to sustain Jewish cemeteries and, by extension, Jewish memory and ritual. At the same time, postwar demographic and logistical realities continued to place Jewish cemeteries at risk of overgrowth, decay, and demolition. The resulting loss of traditional funerary spaces contributed to the ongoing evolution and gradual waning of Jewish funerary practices.

The second chapter turns toward ritual life by analyzing individual and familial commemorative practices in the domestic sphere. These included the transmission of family lore,

the use of *yortzeit* candles, as well as many other practices. In this chapter, I emphasize individual creativity as Soviet Jews adapted prewar mourning practices to suit the social, economic, and political realities of the postwar era. I also highlight the importance of the home as a space of relative ritual freedom precisely because it fell outside of public, state-regulated religious institutions such as synagogues. Instead, in the private space of the home, the legal distinction between “religious practice” and “folk practice” remained murky. This ambiguity, combined with the logistical challenges of monitoring activities in the private sphere, severely constrained state jurisdiction over a wide array of Jewish mourning practices. While the informality and individual idiosyncrasies of these domestic rituals accelerated Soviet Jews’ tendency toward partial, non-normative observance, they also allowed Soviet Jews to select the commemorative settings and practices best suited to their personal circumstances, thereby contributing to the longevity of these mourning rituals.

The third chapter examines individual and communal mourning practices in the local Jewish cemetery. As hybrid, private-public spaces, cemeteries occupied an ambiguous legal status in the Soviet context, and Soviet officials rarely intervened to prevent the performance of traditional mourning rituals within cemeteries. Thus, as in the domestic sphere, cemeteries offered a relatively protected space for Jewish mourning rituals to persist. In this chapter, I emphasize the obligation that many Soviet Jews felt to mourn their deceased relatives in accordance with Jewish custom, including periodic cemetery visits. I also emphasize the ability of the local prewar burial landscape to elicit and maintain traditional rituals, including local dates for communal commemoration. In the post-Holocaust era, some of these prewar commemorative holidays were repurposed to memorialize those who had perished during the war.

The fourth chapter turns to public mourning rituals performed in the synagogue or *shtiebl*. Specifically, it examines the recitation of *yizkor*,⁹ *kaddish*, and *mishnayes*;¹⁰ the integration of these rituals into the Jewish calendar; and the role that these rituals played in sustaining holiday observance and synagogue attendance in the postwar period. The chapter considers the professional stakes for Soviet Jews who chose to participate in public mourning rituals within the synagogue and highlights the creative strategies that young and middle-aged Soviet Jews adopted in order to select, adapt, and maintain public, religious mourning practices. Again, the element of choice reflects both the gradual atomization of Soviet Jewish ritual life and the resourcefulness that Soviet Jews displayed as they negotiated logistical and legal constraints.

The fifth chapter of my dissertation turns to a final site of mourning and commemorative activity—the mass grave. Between 1941 and 1944, the German and Romanian occupations left the Belarusian and Ukrainian landscape dotted with thousands of mass graves that held the remains of Jews, Soviet prisoners of war, and other atrocity victims. The Soviet state’s triumphant, universal hagiography of the “Great Patriotic War” and accompanying Victory Day celebrations genuinely resonated with crucial facets of Soviet Jews’ wartime experience—including service in the Red Army and partisans. Nevertheless, this heroic narrative obscured Soviet Jews’ distinct, tragic experiences as civilians during the Axis occupation. Thus, even as they participated enthusiastically in Soviet war commemorations, Soviet Jews also forged autonomous, local memorial cultures centered on shared experiences, landscapes, and networks. As I demonstrate, these local commemorative cultures evolved in response to local economic and administrative conditions. Like cemeteries, mass gravesites were technically situated on public

⁹ A memorial service for the dead. *Yizkor* is said collectively in the synagogue on major Jewish holidays.

¹⁰ The practice of reciting chapters from the Mishnah in memory of the deceased.

property and, thus, were subject to state oversight. Nevertheless, Jewish individuals and communities enjoyed varying degrees of leeway to construct monuments and conduct memorial ceremonies at these sites—whether surreptitiously, or in open defiance of local administrators, or, occasionally, with the explicit permission of local authorities. However, even under the most hostile local conditions, mass graves were not subject to the same surveillance and regulation as public religious institutions. Thus, I argue that they offered a semi-private space for local commemorative activity. Furthermore, fundraising, construction efforts, and memorial gatherings played a vital role in sustaining Jewish communal networks based on shared, local memory. These networks proved remarkably resilient, persisting even as Soviet Jews migrated away from their hometowns. Thus, commemorative activities are a testament not only to the enduring power of shtetl history and identity but also to the power of mourning to sustain a community of the living.

Literature Review and Historical Background

Despite the ubiquity of loss that permeated postwar Soviet Jewish life, existing scholarship has largely overlooked the role of mourning in Soviet Jewish families and communities during the postwar decades. In this section, I present the three major historiographical conversations that form the foundation for my project. These address the nature of Soviet state power over ritual life; the conditions for Jewish life within the Soviet Union; and ways that mourning interacts with community, space, and ritual. I also outline the contributions that my project makes to these conversations and, by extension, to the fields of Soviet history, Soviet Jewish history, and cultural history in general.

Mourning and Soviet State Power

One of the most enduring debates in the field of Soviet history is the nature of state power and the degree of control that the Soviet state managed to exert over civil society. How successful was Soviet ideology in supplanting all previous identities, practices, and loyalties? Was it possible for individuals and communities to remain selectively autonomous from state ideologies and priorities even as they genuinely Sovietized? In short, was hybridity possible and, if so, did its practitioners experience a sense of internal contradiction? Scholars' widely divergent answers to these questions bear significant implications for their approach to ritual and religious practice in the Soviet Union, particularly after Stalin's consolidation of power in the 1930s.

Richard Stites, author of *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, was among the first scholars to analyze Soviet ideology as a “godless religion.” Even as the new Soviet state launched vigorous anti-religious campaigns, it also called for the creation of communist festivals and rituals:

with revolutionary songs and music, lectures and reports, and reasonable games—all timed for the cycles of the season to compete with church holidays. These festivals were to eschew all mockery and insult but were to offer fun as well as enlightenment, perhaps embellished by a voluntary act of labor in order to woo youth away from the prayers and drunkenness of the old holy days.¹¹

Komsomol Christmas and Easter soon rivaled their respective Christian counterparts, clubs replaced churches, “Octobering” ceremonies supplanted christening, and Red weddings substituted for marriage ceremonies in Russian Orthodox Churches. In the case of Judaism, Red seders with Red haggadahs sought to replace traditional seders. Clearly, Bolshevik leadership felt

¹¹ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 110.

that if the Soviet experiment was to succeed, “god-killing” and “ritual-killing” had to be immediately followed by a program of secular “god-building” and “ritual-building.”¹²

Despite a proliferation of secular rituals and mythologies, how successful were the Soviet state’s efforts to eradicate pre-revolutionary religious practices? As Stites observes, funerals and burials were “the most problematic of the invented rituals and the most resistant to innovation.”¹³ While the Soviet state saw cremations as the most rational and affordable approach to burial, their “fire did not spark the emotions of the majority of Russians, who continued to look to the life-giving earth for their place of final rest.”¹⁴ As their novel mourning rituals floundered, communist leaders feared the emergence of a “Bolshevik *dvoeveriie*” [dual belief system] that would fuse Christianity and Bolshevism into an ideologically toothless amalgam.¹⁵ Although Stalin’s consolidation of power replaced the radical ritual experimentation of the early Soviet period, Stites and many other scholars suggest that the Bolshevik Revolution remained incomplete, even as the Soviet state’s need for ritualized legitimacy remained high.

As the decades passed, the Soviet state eventually found a lasting, legitimizing “godless religion” in the ashes of the Second World War. While its hegemony over individual death and burial remained tenuous, the novel and overwhelming scale of death precipitated by the war proved to be fertile ground for the creation of new rituals and mythologies. Nina Tumarkin’s

¹² Following in Stites’ footsteps, many subsequent scholars have also approached Bolshevism as a pseudo-religion. In *Lenin Lives!: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, Nina Tumarkin argues that Lenin’s ritualized deification began during his lifetime and peaked in the late 1920s, just before Stalin rose to power and began to establish his own cult of personality. Lenin’s embalment and the public display of his body positioned him as a Christ-like figure. They also evinced an elite and a popular “god-building” that was deeply rooted in Russian religious and intellectual culture. See also Igal Halpin, *From Darkness to Light* and Robert Tucker, “Lenin’s Bolshevism,” which also offer compelling arguments for Bolshevism as an eschatological, messianic movement.

¹³ Stites, 113.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 114. Note that Russian Orthodoxy, like Judaism, upholds the sanctity of corpses and rejects cremation.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia analyzes Soviet efforts to harness war memory and commemoration as instruments of self-legitimization.¹⁶ Although she ultimately argues for the top-down imposition of the Soviet elite's war mythology, Tumarkin highlights the intermediary figures—museum directors, teachers, and historians—whose task it was to communicate a sacralized version of the war to the Soviet populace. She also emphasizes the genuine engagement of Soviet citizens with the war cult, even as tensions remained between the triumphant, official mythology and the lived experience of Soviet individuals during the war. While the former obsessively documented the names of the war dead and valorized war heroes, it also obscured the human tragedies of the war, many caused or exacerbated by poor state planning.¹⁷ Both de-Stalinization and *perestroika* shook the official narrative of the “Great Patriotic War” by revealing the brutal, unnecessary sacrifices that had been exacted from soldiers and civilians alike during the war. Rather than abandoning the war cult though, the Soviet state's leaders simply reshaped the official mythology by replacing the heroic figure of Stalin—first, with the Communist party, and later, with lingering collective memories of immense suffering at the hands of the Nazis.

Unlike Tumarkin, Lisa Kirschenbaum resists portrayals of the Great Patriotic War as a top-down, imposed narrative. While she addresses war memory as a legitimizing myth and form of propaganda, Kirschenbaum argues that official narratives and individual memories of the war were closely intertwined. *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad: Myth, Memories, and*

¹⁶ Amir Weiner's book, *Making Sense of War*, presents a similar argument. In a neototalitarian framework, he emphasizes the place of the Second World War as a legitimizing myth. He also argues that the Second World War played a crucial role in the Soviet state's ongoing effort to produce a unified, loyal, and ideologically pure society. Wartime sacrifices permitted pre-war class enemies an opportunity for redemption. At the same time, failure to adequately participate in the war effort marked certain groups, including collaborators and former POWs, as “unreliable” and deserving of excision. As Weiner argues, both Jewish heroism and suffering were obscured in the state narrative of the war and, as a result, the war actually fueled postwar Soviet anti-Semitism.

¹⁷ For more on Soviet citizens' experiences of the war, see Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War*.

Monuments examines representations of the siege of Leningrad in Soviet and Russian society from the war period through the early post-Soviet era, emphasizing siege discourses in the media and in other forms of mass communication, including public monuments. While she acknowledges the initial suppression of memories regarding the siege, Kirschenbaum shows that between 1957 and 1985, state and popular efforts to commemorate the siege flowered rapidly. In a reciprocal fashion, individual Soviet citizens gave meaning to their sacrifices by integrating their life stories into official war narratives, and, in turn, the state adapted its narratives to integrate the memories of its citizens.

Tumarkin and Kirschenbaum's work on official and popular narratives of the "Great Patriotic War" has many important implications for my project. Undoubtedly, Soviet Jewish mourning practices challenged triumphant, universalized state narratives by emphasizing civilian deaths and the specificity of Jewish loss during the war. Yet, countless oral history testimonies reveal that participants in autonomous Jewish mourning and commemorative activities also enthusiastically took part in Soviet Victory Day celebrations. How can we reconcile these seemingly contradictory activities? I believe the answer lies in the multi-faceted nature of Soviet Jewish experience during the war. A single individual could emerge from the war having been a partisan fighter, a ghetto inmate, a Red Army soldier, a witness to mass shootings, etc. Soviet Victory Day genuinely resonated with many crucial elements of Soviet Jews' wartime experience.¹⁸ Given the widespread criticism that Soviet Jews faced for having passively acquiesced to annihilation or having "sat out the war in Tashkent" as evacuees, Victory Day

¹⁸ And opportunities to celebrate Victory Day were ubiquitous. As Christel Lane notes, commemorations of the Second World War included publicly orchestrated ceremonies and spontaneous commemorative impulses. Even in the smallest Soviet towns and villages, eternal flames and other war monuments became sites for political speeches, Victory Day veterans' parades, and familial gatherings on personally or locally significant occasions. See Lane, *The Rites of Rulers*, 143-8.

offered a meaningful opportunity to display their patriotism and celebrate their heroic actions in the fight against fascism.¹⁹

Of course, the genuine appeal of Victory Day did not negate its failure to acknowledge the unique, tragic experience of Soviet Jewish civilians during the war. In response, a significant number of Soviet Jews forged an autonomous memorial culture centered on local landscapes, experiences, and networks. These autonomous commemorations paralleled and even intertwined with Soviet war commemorations. While some might argue that this hybridity was purely performative, enacted in hopes of garnering official approval, the influence of Soviet commemorative culture was inevitable given Soviet Jews' genuine affinity for Victory Day. Despite the legal difficulties, the two commemorative cultures coexisted seamlessly within individual psyches, supplementing each other to encompass the complex range of Soviet Jewish experiences during the war.

With the notable exception of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet state continued to experience mixed success in its effort to supplant pre-revolutionary ritual cultures and to forge its own, self-legitimizing alternatives. The early 1960s brought a renewed effort to accelerate the decline of religious practice and to forge a viable, secular ritualism.²⁰ In *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society—The Soviet Case*, Christel Lane argues that, after Stalin's death, ritualization served to mask the growing "discrepancy between [Bolshevik] ideology and [the

¹⁹ In "The Making of a Dominant Myth," Amir Weiner highlights the importance of wartime heroism in Soviet individuals' postwar self-fashioning. Failure to do so resulted in purging from the Party, and suspicion fell most heavily on those who had remained on occupied territory, even as prisoners or partisans (645-6).

²⁰ Sonja Luehrmann reflects, "Different from other socially troubling phenomena, religious practices were supported by full-fledged institutions, many of whom operated legally within the Soviet Union, while others appeared in unexpected places. For this reason, [official] reports of their occurrence and effects are not just expressions of moral panics but also show how Soviet bureaucracies acknowledged the limits of their own administrative and ideological reach." See Luehrmann, *Religion in Secular Archives*, 8.

postwar] reality by structuring citizens' perceptions of the latter."²¹ Serving as a means of social control and legitimization, secular rituals harnessed emotion and beauty to maintain stability in the face of growing ideological indifference and materialism. In addition to Soviet holidays, Lane examines Soviet lifecycle rituals. Like Stites, Lane notes the enduring challenges that funerals presented for Soviet ritualism. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that secular funerals gradually began to replace religious funerals among average Soviet citizens.²² However, the adoption of secular funerals did not spread to all regions of the Soviet Union. Instead, they were most popular in urban centers, whereas traditional beliefs and practices maintained a stronger foothold in the hinterlands. Thus, the success of Soviet ritual revolution remained uneven, particularly regarding mundane, individual deaths, which did not explicitly serve the state's self-legitimizing aims.

The Soviet state's protracted struggle to abolish and replace pre-revolutionary religious beliefs and practices was propelled by a determined faith in the inevitability of religion's demise. This belief was not simply confined to scientific Marxism. Ideologues and social scientists alike shared a common assumption that secularization was an inevitable consequence of modernization. However, the latter decades of the twentieth century and the global upturn in

²¹ Lane, *The Rites of Rulers*, 28.

²² Lane does not clarify whether their belated uptake was due to growing secularization or simply due to heightened logistical difficulties in securing religious funerals.

religious fundamentalism cast growing doubt on this assumption.²³ In response, scholars have begun to reevaluate previous secularization models.²⁴

Icelandic society, for example, underwent a rapid process of modernization during which church attendance dropped to extremely low levels. For this reason, sociologists often described Iceland as a fully secularized nation. However, other indices of religiosity tell quite a different story. As William Swatos argues, religion in Iceland was never primarily rooted in the public institution of the church. Instead, Swatos describes a “hearth tradition,” in which “The home was the principal place of worship and teaching [while] the church building [was] a focal point for [lifecycle] events.”²⁵ Despite low church attendance on a weekly basis, church membership in Iceland, as well as baptism, confirmation, and wedding ceremonies held in the church, remain high. In fact, contrary to secularization theory’s predictions, urbanization has led to an increase in church weddings in Iceland.²⁶ As Swatos concludes, Anglo-centric “secularization” models are ill-equipped to explain the trajectory of religious belief and practice in most, if not all, modernizing societies. Furthermore, because there was no universal model for religious institutions’ pre-modern role, “secularization” has unfolded differently in each society, depending on the local religious tradition(s) at play.

²³ Furthermore, the belief in an idealized “Age of Faith” prior to the modern period is as misleading as it is widespread, most recently in populist polemics. Rodney Stark (and others) disprove this idealized vision of the past. See Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” 255-60.

²⁴ David Martin was the first contemporary social scientist to reject the secularization thesis. See Martin, “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization,” 169-82. See also Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, which studies the “deprivatization” of religion in recent decades and its entry into public life. Talal Asad, in *Formations of the Secular*, argues that secularism should not be portrayed as the antithesis of rationalism or as successor to religion.

²⁵ William H. Swatos, “The Relevance of Religion,” 35.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 36-7.

As the number of case studies defying the obsolescence of religious belief has grown, scholars have instead turned their attention toward the survival of religious life under modernizing conditions and the resilience of certain traditional practices. In “Popular Religion in Twentieth Century Russia,” Moshe Lewin argues for the persistence of popular, peasant religion despite the Soviet state’s efforts to eliminate it. Because “piety” and “Orthodoxy” were so deeply embedded in peasant cultural life and everyday social interactions, peasant popular religion— itself a melding of Christian and pagan ideas—served as a bulwark against outside social and religious threats.²⁷ Like Stites and Lane, Lewin emphasizes the resilience of traditional burial and mourning practices. As Lewin argues, the majority of Russian peasants continued to view questions of life and death through traditional lenses and continued to celebrate lifecycle events in traditional ways:

The main ceremonies that related to birth, marriage, and death took place in the hut [*izba*], [as well as] the local cemetery. [...] Peasants left food for their dead parents after ceremonial meals, ‘invited’ them to come and join them at their table, went to the cemeteries at Easter time to place triple kisses on ancestors’ graves, offered them *bliny* (ritual pancakes), exchanged thoughts, and had chats with them at their graveside. The rural funeral, a solemn ceremony permeated with ancient customs and marked by the heartbreaking laments of relatives or of professional mourners, would normally end later in monumental feasts in the homes or at the cemeteries, with much heavy drinking for a better and fonder remembrance and to celebrate life. [...] Ancestors, especially parents, certainly could be relied on as benevolent spirits. And their souls were never too far away from their huts, which they too, somehow, still needed very much.²⁸

In demonstrating the persistence of traditional beliefs about death and mourning practices well into the Soviet period, Lewin challenges the supposed omnipotence of state ideology and top-down policies. He argues, instead, that the idealized Soviet vision of a complete social

²⁷ Moshe Lewin, “Popular Religion in Twentieth Century Russia,” 155.

²⁸ Ibid, 159-60. Valery Dymshits’ ethnographic article, “Evreiskoe kladbische,” studies Jewish cemetery customs in the post-Soviet era. Dymshits finds a remarkably similar graveside culture to the one Lewin describes here among Russian peasants. Among Jews, deceased parents are visited just prior to certain holidays, but their children hold extensive conversations with them, asking for aid and intercession.

transformation proved elusive. More importantly, he demonstrates that traditional practices could outlive the formal religious institutions precisely because they were embedded in commemorative landscapes beyond the Church—namely, the home and the local cemetery.

In her work on religious life in the Caucasus, Tamara Dragadze argues that, over the course of the Soviet period,

there was some internalization by the population of parts of the propaganda of ‘scientific Marxism’. On the other hand, this ‘communist religion’ was not particularly successful in competing for loyalties, since the promises of prosperity did not materialize and contradictions between the alleged rationality of scientific atheism and the irrationality of Stalin’s personality cult, as well as the discrepancies between slogans and reality more generally, all eroded popular faith in the infallibility of official propaganda.²⁹

The result of these contradictory attitudes toward Soviet secularism was a pervasive duality of belief and practice, with competing practices confined to separate spheres of individuals’ daily lives. Crucially, this *dvoeveriie* aroused no sense of internal conflict or even self-consciousness within its practitioners. As time went on, traditional “remnants” did decrease in number.

However, as I argue, those that survived remained deeply engrained and, as necessary, adapted to suit Soviet conditions. With an understanding that “tradition” is neither primordial nor static, we can examine the concrete ways in which belief and ritual evolve.

In this framework, modernization, separation of church and state, and even the closure of religious institutions do not necessarily eliminate individual belief and practice. In fact, legal restriction and overt persecution often serve as engines of religious adaptation rather than disappearance. As Tamara Dragadze argues in her study of Muslim and Christian communities in the Caucasus, the closure of religious institutions and imprisonment of clergy in the Soviet Union led, specifically, to the “domestication” of religion—a fundamental shift in the center of religious gravity. No longer able to depend on sacred buildings and professional officiants,

²⁹ Dragadze, “The Domestication of Religion under Soviet Communism,” 151.

ordinary people assumed ownership over their ritual life, often within the home and other semi-private spaces such as the cemetery. Contrary to state expectations, this development effected “a shift of the boundary between ‘profane’ and ‘sacred’, and it suggests an *enlarging* of the actual mental space of the ‘sacred.’”³⁰ Even as it preserved religious practice, this expansion of the sacred did fundamentally alter the way religion was understood and enacted. The domestication of religion brought “a simultaneous increase in ritualistic observances and the disappearance of any knowledge of, or concern with, the underlying theology and moral teaching.”³¹ While Dragadze’s case studies are drawn from Muslim and Christian communities in the Caucasus, Jews living in the western republics of the Soviet Union exhibited similar patterns of religious adaptation. Jewish law [halachah] and the prestige practice of textual study fell by the wayside as constraints on institutional religious life increased. In their place, “folk religion,” rooted in the home and the funerary landscape, attained new prominence and greater freedom to evolve as it came unmoored from Jewish legal constraints.

Despite the Soviet state’s ambitions to replace pre-revolutionary beliefs, attachments, and rituals with its own set of self-legitimizing ideologies and practices, it achieved only partial success. Particularly outside of the Soviet elite and outside of major urban centers, traditional

³⁰ Ibid, 150-1.

³¹ Ibid, 153. Similarly, Catherine Wanner’s edited volume, *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine*, argues that Soviet efforts to promote atheism through the suppression of public religious institutions did not eliminate belief in or engagement with the supernatural. Instead, these efforts merely shifted the loci of religious expression, often in the direction of a non-institutional spirituality. Wanner argues that a state-centric focus on Soviet anti-religious policy simply reifies a division between religious practice and politics and conflates state-driven secularization with actual secularization.

Tone Bringa’s study of Islam in socialist Bosnia also identifies a similar pattern in which the observance of religious practices and membership in a family and community were valued above religious belief. See Bringa, 160. Both Bringa and Dragadze argue that, as religious belief and practice moved away from traditional religious leaders and institutions, women were increasingly empowered within the “alternative” religious spaces to function as ritual authorities and preservers of religious identity. The secular state viewed women’s “folk” practices in the domestic and funerary landscape as less threatening than institutional religion.

practices persisted and evolved in ways that the state could neither dictate nor fully monitor. These developments were particularly apparent in private and semi-private spaces such as the home and the cemetery—landscapes in which individuals, families, and local communities enjoyed greater autonomy to mold their own ritual life.

Soviet Jewish Identity and Practice

Over the past decade and a half, scholars of Soviet Jewish history have begun to reevaluate longstanding assumptions that the Soviet experiment successfully obliterated all meaningful remnants of Jewish life before the outbreak of the Second World War. In this longstanding narrative, the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel were the catalysts that reignited Soviet Jews' ethno-national identity, albeit not their religious observance. While the events of 1941-1945 and 1948 certainly consolidated Soviet Jews' identity and launched a new generation of urban Soviet Jews into political activism, it is important to look beyond these seismic historical events toward the texture of Jewish daily life across the entire Soviet period. What emerges is a picture of continuity and gradual evolution in Soviet Jewish cultural and ritual life.

In her book, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Anna Shternshis challenges the notion of unmitigated Soviet state hostility toward Jewish identity and culture. While she acknowledges that Soviet antireligious campaigns were remarkably successful in reducing traditional religious observance, Shternshis convincingly argues that the Soviet state fostered the creation of a vibrant, secular Yiddish culture in service of socialist ideals.³² Yiddish songs, theater performances, literary texts, newspapers, and other

³² This effort was in keeping with Soviet *korenizatsiia* policies, which fostered the emergence of ethnic cultures that would be “Soviet in form, national in content.”

cultural productions perpetuated and Sovietized Jewish identity rather than eliminating it altogether.³³ For the generation of Soviet Jews that grew up the 1920s and early 1930s (and formed the bedrock of Soviet Jewish communities after the war), being both Soviet and Jewish was possible thanks to a rich secular Yiddish culture, and this sensibility endured long after the closure of Soviet Yiddish institutions.³⁴

Also working in a revisionist stream, Elissa Bemporad's book, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk*, argues for the hybridity of Soviet and Jewish identities. Her study of interwar Minsk, where nearly one third of the city's population was Jewish, shows that even Communist Party members continued to observe Jewish religious traditions such as eating kosher meat and performing circumcisions. Thus, she counters narratives of rapid, unequivocal assimilation and demonstrates the persistence of Jewish identity and traditional practices, especially outside of the metropolises of Moscow and Leningrad.

These new perspectives on Soviet Jewish life in the 1920s and 1930s build a strong argument for the capacity of Sovietness and Jewishness to coexist. While Shternshis emphasizes the Sovietization of Jewish culture, Bemporad reveals the continued observance of traditional, religious Jewish practices alongside the embrace of a new, ostensibly secular Soviet identity. Bemporad's focus on daily life and geographic emphasis on the Soviet periphery contribute greatly to the richness of her analysis.

Growing interest in Soviet Jewish borderland communities is, in part, a response to the rise of regional and local histories in Russian and Soviet studies. This historiographical shift

³³ Jeffrey Veidlinger's *The Moscow State Jewish Theater* and David Shneer's *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet-Jewish Culture* also work against narratives of a top-down, unequivocal destruction of Jewish culture during the 1920s and 30s.

³⁴ For many Soviet Jews, members of later generations who grew up without these institutions, being Jewish was a shameful secret to be hidden in polite Soviet society. On the other hand, some harnessed this sense of shame as an impetus for national activism in opposition to the Soviet state.

toward the borderlands challenges totalitarian readings of the Soviet state and, instead, offers a more nuanced view of state-society relations. At times, it even suggests comedic ineptitudes in the Soviet bureaucracy. The shift toward the borderlands also rejects a longstanding scholarly emphasis on the Soviet “center” that uncritically reproduced imperial narratives.³⁵ Since Jews were a minority population and, for much of Russian history, were concentrated in the borderland region known as the Pale of Settlement, this new approach is particularly fruitful for scholars of East European Jewry.

Arkadii Zel'tser's book, *Evrei sovetkoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki, 1917-1941*, provides a robust model for exploring Jewish life outside of Moscow and Leningrad. While Zel'tser acknowledges certain parallels between Vitebsk Jews and the Jews of Moscow and Leningrad, he resists the notion of a monolithic “Soviet Jewry,” and instead, emphasizes regional disparities. By looking at Jewish everyday life in Vitebsk and its environs, he reveals both the process and experience of Sovietization in the quadrilingual Soviet republic of Belarus. Like Bemporad, he overturns narratives of rapid, unequivocal assimilation or linear, unidirectional secularization in the interwar period. Furthermore, rather than focusing on Soviet nationality policy from the center, he explores variations in its local interpretation and implementation. Zel'tser's is a narrative of complex identities and variable policies. By building his analysis from periphery to center, he convincingly argues that a “detailed study of the Jews of the provinces using new sources of information, even on the basis of one region, permits us to more clearly conceptualize Soviet Jewry as a whole.”³⁶

³⁵ David Brower's 2007 review article, “Peopling the Empires,” analyzes this movement toward regional studies as a way of approaching Soviet nationalities policy through the lens of post-colonial theory. This approach addresses the so-called “borderlands” from their own perspective rather than from the center's perspective, treating them as regions in a complex, discursive relationship with an imperial power, rather than as mere objects of imperial rule.

³⁶ Arkadii Zel'tser, *Evrei Sovetskoi Provintsii*, 8.

Jeffery Veidlinger's *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine* also questions longstanding narratives about the unmitigated urbanization, secularization, and assimilation of Soviet Jews after the Bolshevik Revolution. Drawing on an extensive body of oral history research collected through Archive of Historical and Ethnographic Yiddish Memories (AHEYM) Project at Indiana University, Veidlinger finds that many shtetl Jews remained in their native towns throughout the Soviet era and maintained not only a sense of community, but also substantive connections to Jewish language, culture, and religious customs. Rather than following a prescriptive approach to religious life, Veidlinger's work delves into a broad range of folk beliefs and practices. Although primarily concerned with the pre-war and wartime eras, Veidlinger also incorporates data on postwar commemorative efforts and communal rebuilding that reveals the resilient, idiosyncratic Jewishness of postwar Soviet Jewry.

Centered on an understudied region of Soviet Ukraine, Anya Quilitzsch's recent dissertation, *Everyday Judaism on the Soviet Periphery: Life and Identity of Transcarpathian Jewry after World War II*, examines the interaction of state policy and everyday Jewish life in the Transcarpathia,³⁷ 1945-1964, using oral history interviews, memoirs, and archival documents. Echoing Shternshis and Zel'tser while expanding their argument into the postwar era, Quilitzsch challenges common narratives of the Soviet state's unremitting persecution and assimilation of Jews. Instead, she paints a complex picture of linguistic assimilation and social integration alongside the maintenance of a "comprehensive traditional lifestyle" that included Jewish neighborhoods, Jewish occupational profiles, and religious practices.³⁸ Contrary to widespread perceptions of a totalitarian Soviet state, Quilitzsch argues that policy

³⁷ Unlike the rest of Western Ukraine, Transcarpathia had not been annexed in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. It came under formal Soviet control only in 1945.

³⁸ Anya Quilitzsch, *Everyday Judaism on the Soviet Periphery*, 6.

implementation adapted to regional specificities and permitted the survival of regional identities. In the case of Transcarpathian Jewry, this regional identity was rooted in chassidic Judaism and rural models of community. As Quilitzsch demonstrates, Transcarpathian Jews found creative ways to navigate state policy and maintain private religious practice, especially, lifecycle rituals.³⁹

Mordechai Altshuler's book, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union, 1941-1964*, examines the role of religious life in Soviet Jewish ethnic identity in the early postwar decades, addressing holiday observance, religious infrastructure, etc. Altshuler devotes a chapter to cemeteries and Holocaust memorials, providing crucial information on the legal status and care of these sites in the postwar era. He also emphasizes the desperate state of neglect that plagued Jewish cemeteries after the war. The source base for Altshuler's project consists primarily of Soviet state records, especially records from the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults [CARC],⁴⁰ which he gathered at the central, republic, regional, and local levels. These materials yield great insight into regional variations in the enforcement of Soviet religious policy. Furthermore, they reveal the unevenness of policy itself, which saw periods of vigorous antireligious effort and periods of relaxation. Because of the state origin of Altshuler's sources though, his work remains primarily focused on the religious institutions and practices that were visible to the Soviet bureaucracy. These sources grant him limited access to the personal and familial aspects postwar religious life.

³⁹ Her third chapter emphasizes the importance of weddings as a marker of continuity and rebirth for Holocaust survivors.

⁴⁰ CARC was established in 1944 to oversee all religious denominations, except for the Russian Orthodox Church, which was supervised by the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church [CAROC]. In May 1965, CARC and the CAROC were combined into a single unit known as the Council for Religious Affairs. For simplicity, I use CARC throughout this dissertation.

Leonid Smilovitsky's recent book, *Jewish Life in Belarus: The Final Decade of the Stalin Regime (1944-1953)*, also addresses the intersection of Soviet religious policy and Jewish religious life as well as a broader look at Jewish cultural life and late Stalinist anti-Semitism. While Smilovitsky's work draws on extensive archival research, he also grounds his work in interviews he conducted during the 1990s with elderly observant Jews who could recall religious life during the Soviet period. He also collected a large archive of autobiographical letters from Jews who had lived in Belarus during the Soviet period, detailing aspects of their religious and cultural life. These sources grant Smilovitsky rich insight into many domestic religious observances that evaded the watchful eye of the state, in addition to more public efforts to reopen synagogues and re-establish communal religious life after the war.⁴¹

In dealing with religious practices, both Altshuler and Smilovitsky take a normative approach to religious life, emphasizing practices that conformed to traditional, halachic parameters. However, to fully understand the fate of Jewish religious life in the postwar Soviet Union, I argue for a more expansive approach that looks beyond strictly traditional observances. In the postwar decades, the number of traditionally observant Jews steadily dwindled. However, their deaths did not signal the end of Soviet Jewish ritual life. Instead, certain practices (particularly mourning and commemorative rituals) persisted, often in modified, hybridized, or misremembered form. Even though these rituals did not necessarily conform to traditional models, their practitioners experienced them as deeply, intrinsically Jewish. For this reason, I am

⁴¹ In contrast, Altshuler includes a single chapter on holiday observance in the private sphere. Altshuler highlights Soviet Jews' creative strategies for avoiding work on major Jewish holidays and briefly mentions private religious observances such as dressing up in honor of holidays and preparing festive meals to be enjoyed with relatives—practices that were widely noted in state records. However, there is no discussion of other practices that went unrecorded in state documents. In this sense, Smilovitsky provides more comprehensive insight into domestic religious life, even if he does not demarcate it as a distinct topic of study.

especially interested in the periodic participation of otherwise secular Soviet Jews in select aspects of Jewish ritual life—first and foremost, mourning and commemorative rituals.

Late Soviet Jewish identity and practice are profoundly complex and idiosyncratic, intense and inventive. Throughout the postwar decades, Soviet Jews negotiated their Soviet, Russian, and Jewish identities in ways that can seem contradictory or preposterous to Western observers. Rather than maintaining a unified Soviet Jewish culture, individuals and small affinity-groups of likeminded Jews forged new ways of being Jewish in conversation with the Jewish past and their contemporary cultural milieu. For example, in *Doubly Chosen: Jewish Identity, the Soviet Intelligentsia, and the Russian Orthodox Church*, Judith Deutsch Kornblatt studies a cohort of Soviet Jewish intellectuals who converted to Russian Orthodoxy during the postwar era. She argues that these individuals did not pursue conversion in order to become more “Russian,” though they certainly participated in the Russian intelligentsia’s turn to Russian religious philosophy in the late Soviet period. Furthermore, they did not see their conversion as a betrayal of their Jewishness. On the contrary, most experienced an *increased* sense of Jewishness after baptism and viewed themselves as “Jewish Christians.” These individuals felt that their hereditary chosenness as Jews gained added significance following conversion. As confounding as this phenomenon may be for outsiders, it highlights the unpredictable, often counterintuitive ways, in which Jewish identity and practice can endure and evolve.

On the one hand, from a traditional standpoint, postwar Soviet Jews possessed what Zvi Gitelman has termed “thin culture”—one that no longer maintains a substantive foundation and, instead, functions primarily as an intangible, collective worldview.⁴² On the other hand, if we understand all cultures and religions to be in a constant process of evolution, then Soviet Jews’

⁴² Gitelman, “Thinking about Being Jewish,” 49.

postwar ritual life was indeed substantive, even as it differed from pre-revolutionary and pre-war models. As a solution to demographic decline, geographic dislocation, and institutional weakness (and considering the devotion with which selected practices were preserved), Soviet Jews' ritual life appears no more "symbolic" than that of most American Jews'.⁴³

In a case study of Jewish burial practices in the United States, sociologist Mareleyn Schneider forcefully argues against secularization theories which assume the inevitability and linearity of secularization. Instead, she proposes the concept of "modified religiosity," in which the "Decline of religious involvement, that is, the loss of (many) traditional practices... does not mean a wholesale dismissal of traditional practices."⁴⁴ Although Schneider acknowledges the genuine pressure that secularizing forces exert on religious institutions and practices, she ultimately argues that these can integrate cosmetic changes while remaining true to core values. Eventually, these new forms are codified into "new orthodoxies."⁴⁵ In examining the Soviet context, it is worth considering how adaptations of traditional practices might have been as "orthodox" to their practitioners as more "authentic" models were for pre-revolutionary Russian Jews. As I argue, the history of postwar Soviet Jewish life is one of both decline and vitality.

⁴³ In observing the postwar American Jewish community, Herbert Gans identified a new form of Jewish life which he termed "symbolic Judaism," in which American Jews began to self-consciously select and intermittently engage in symbolic rituals or activities that allowed them to "feel and express their Jewishness" without subjecting themselves to the all-encompassing way of life represented by traditional Judaism. See Gans, "American Jewry," 427. Gans eventually broadened his concept of symbolic Judaism to a broader notion of "symbolic ethnicity," applicable to any number of assimilable ethnic groups (primarily Jews and Catholics) that were able to gradually blend into the white, Anglo-Saxon American privilege group while retaining a few, symbolic features of ethnic distinctiveness. See Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity."

⁴⁴ Schneider, *History of a Jewish Burial Society*, 211. She continues by suggesting that "Transposition of religious beliefs and institutions, that is, the loss of the divine aspects once attached to the *chevrah's* [activities], does not (necessarily) correlate with members losing the idea of God, other supernatural entities, immortality, eternity and so on." (Ibid, 211-2).

⁴⁵ Ibid, 213, 215-6.

Mourning: Community, Landscape, and Ritual

Alanna Cooper's work on the Soviet Bukharan Jewish community offers a fascinating historical and anthropological analysis of the role that mourning rituals played in sustaining the community's religious and collective identities. Bukharan memorial gatherings, held numerous times in the first year after a death and every year thereafter on the anniversary, are traditionally carried out in the home and include prayer services followed by a communal meal. Since a central feature of the ritual—the recitation of kaddish⁴⁶—requires a minyan of at least ten men, Cooper argues that mourning rituals played a crucial role in reinforcing communal bonds during the Soviet period:

On account of one individual's death, family members and neighborhood friends gathered to pray together some twenty times during the course of one year. Multiply twenty by the number of deaths in a community per year, and add to that sum the annual services held for individuals who had passed away even decades before. The total number of death rites, ironically, yielded a vibrant and active prayer community.⁴⁷

In addition to bringing community members together, the domestic nature of these rituals allowed them to evade the anti-religious authorities' notice since they could be easily disguised as mere commemorative "feasts." While Soviet Ashkenazi Jews did not have an exact equivalent to this Bukharan Jewish practice, Cooper's work emphasizes the potential of mourning to sustain family networks and communities that I seek to highlight in my own work.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ The most famous Jewish prayer for the dead. Recited in Aramaic, it makes no mention of death or the deceased. Instead it is a prayer describing the glory of the divine being.

⁴⁷ Alanna E. Cooper, *Bukharan Jews*, 152.

⁴⁸ In their classic, edited volume of ethnographic studies, *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Perry offer a similar argument. They view funeral rituals as crucial for the construction and maintenance of social organization among the living. In a study of Aboriginal burial culture in Australia, Gaynor Macdonald analyzes funerary rituals as socially constitutive acts that activate kin networks and local communities by placing demands (obligations) on the living. See Macdonald, "'Promise Me You'll Come to My Funeral,'" 121-36.

Writing in the field of psychology, Anna Ornstein highlights the centrality of interpersonal networks in facilitating grief and the importance of ritual in structuring mourning.⁴⁹ While these hold true for both individual and communal bereavement, Ornstein also emphasizes the difference between mourning the loss of an individual versus mourning more widespread, traumatic losses. In massive calamities, there are often no bodies to bury, which deprives individuals and communities of many cathartic ritual possibilities. In the Soviet Jewish case, there were certainly bodies to bury, but only in rare instances could individual bodies be identified. Lastly, Ornstein comments on the potential for mourning to revitalize victimized communities:

In instances of genocide, the communities too are destroyed and everyone who survived the calamity is bereaved. Strangely, this may become a source of solace for the survivors, who develop special bonds and provide each other what at first they most need: not help in mourning and remembering, but help in creating a community that supports their efforts to pick up the threads of their disrupted lives.⁵⁰

Ornstein's insights provide a useful foundation for studying individual and collective mourning in the postwar Soviet Jewish milieu and for understanding the role of mourning in communal life.

A poignant and groundbreaking work on the emergence of a commemorative culture amid widespread mortality is Vincent Brown's book *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*. Brown studies the ways that death shaped and structured society in British colonial Jamaica where the sugar industry mercilessly claimed the lives of slaves, merchants, white laborers, and adventurers. Using the lens of "mortuary politics" and a highly

⁴⁹ Anna Ornstein, "The Missing Tombstone," 642-3. Jennifer Cole's study of ritualized mourning in Madagascar also affirms the importance of ritual in coming to terms and healing from communal traumas. Even though rituals can't eliminate the psychological pain, they can transform it while still offering victims access to their memories. See Jennifer Cole, "Painful Memories," 101.

⁵⁰ Ornstein, 643.

interdisciplinary approach, Brown demonstrates the cultural centrality of death, memory, and commemoration for all levels of Jamaican society during the Atlantic slave trade. Rather than focusing on abstract beliefs about death, he examines concrete political struggles relating to death (e.g. funeral rituals, commemorations of an 1831 rebellion, slave practices engaging the spirit world, etc., all of which connected to deeply rooted social tensions). Brown shapes a narrative in which all Jamaicans were directly impacted by the dead, and death played a central role in shaping and regenerating Jamaican culture amid significant, societal trauma.

In the Soviet context, commemoration began quite rapidly as Soviet Jewish individuals and communities launched makeshift memorial efforts and continued these projects throughout the postwar era. At the same time, “mortuary politics” were deeply contentious. As we have already seen, there was a significant gap between official, state-sanctioned narratives and particular aspects of Soviet Jews’ experience. In *Night of Stone*, a study of Russia’s “culture of death” across the twentieth century, Catherine Merridale examines the impact of successive wars, revolutions, famines, purges, and epidemics on Russian collective and individual mentalities.⁵¹ In part due to her broad temporal focus, Merridale views the Soviet state as an obstacle to memory and commemoration. She starkly juxtaposes the unspeakable violence of the previous century with the secrecy and silence that the Soviet state imposed regarding these traumatic losses. Although Merridale acknowledges that Soviet beliefs and norms regarding death never fully permeated Soviet society or supplanted all alternative mentalities, she suggests that genuine, popular mourning found public expression only in the post-Soviet era, aroused by revelations about the Soviet past.

⁵¹ Merridale firmly rejects the tendency to view such catastrophes as inevitable in Russia or unique to Russia—an approach that tends to suggest that Russians are predisposed to mass violence. Merridale, *Night of Stone*, 10-11.

In contrast, I argue that Soviet Jews were, in fact, able to maintain and reinvent their own commemorative culture as both a companion and alternative to state funerary models. As outlined previously, Jewish mourning offered rituals and commemorative spaces for aspects of the Soviet Jewish experience that had been largely excluded from official memory. However, even as they pursued autonomous commemorations, Soviet Jews also embraced Soviet memorialization and integrated aspects of it into Jewish funerary practice.⁵² Thus, I argue that memory and counter-memory⁵³ can co-exist and even intertwine while remaining distinct entities in the minds of individuals. This sort of layered commemorative culture demands a unique approach.

In a masterful study of everyday practices and ritual life in a Russian village, anthropologist Margaret Paxson reveals the pagan, Orthodox Christian, and Soviet layers that have successively absorbed into Russian village life, despite the efforts of each successor to erase its predecessors. In the context of daily life, these layers do not foster a sense of internal contradiction, but instead, have become co-embedded in social memory, bodily practices, calendrical time, and the public and private landscapes of daily life. As Paxson argues, these

⁵² Sylvie Anne Goldberg's book, *Crossing the Jabbok*, provides a useful model for balancing internalist and externalist readings of Jewish rituals and mentalities. In examining the Prague chevra kadisha [Jewish burial society], which became the model for all Jewish burial societies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Goldberg demonstrates that pre-Emancipation Jewish practices were always part of the general trajectory of European mourning models, and that distinctively Jewish customs persisted well-beyond the supposed "breaking point" of Emancipation. Even though Jewish practices did not exist in a vacuum, their distinctiveness served to define the Jewish community, even in the wake of acculturation and secularization. This insight is particularly important for examining the trajectory of Soviet Jewish practices.

⁵³ A concept introduced by Michel Foucault in the 1970s to designate the subversion of the dominant collective memory. For Foucault, what is remembered or forgotten (and for what purpose) is fundamentally a question of power. Counter-memory disrupts official narratives and gives voice to silenced, "subjugated knowledge." See Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*," 7-9.

landscapes are not only filled with recalled events but also familiar “conceptual pathways” that elicit distinct patterns of belief and behavior.⁵⁴

Similarly, Alain Corbin’s social history, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, considers the “culture of the senses”⁵⁵ and the power of auditory landscape to preserve traditional social patterns. After initially seeking to destroy rural church bells outright, the First Republic and its successors sought to homogenize and desacralize their use by coopting them as voices of authority and as a language of mass communication. Yet, even though social, political, and religious revolution had ostensibly uprooted the pre-revolutionary order and had desacralized rural time and space, Corbin finds that village bells maintained local codes and pre-revolutionary patterns of behavior and belief in everyday life. Although bell use gradually secularized and declined toward the end of the century, this was only after a protracted, circuitous struggle for control over the bells, and by extension, over rural life.

In my project, I consider the potential of mourning landscapes to preserve traditional symbols and rituals despite the ongoing secularization of Soviet society and of Soviet Jews as individuals. Upon entering these spaces, both traditional and secular individuals encountered memories and material objects⁵⁶ that activated an engrained “conceptual pathway”—namely, an enduring, intergenerational obligation to the dead. Whether aided by visceral instinct or conscious sense of duty, these landscapes continued to elicit traditional mourning behaviors. Of course, “traditional” mourning rituals continued to evolve over the Soviet period. However, we

⁵⁴ Margaret Paxon, *Solovyovo*, 20-1.

⁵⁵ His previous, 1982 book, *Le miasme et la jonquille: l'odorat et l'imaginaire social XVIIIe-XIXe siècles*, is a history of odor.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the role of material objects as symbols of loss, see Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, 55-71.

must acknowledge the extent to which modified or misremembered practices were perceived as authentic by their practitioners.

Methodology and Sources

As a study of ritual practices and their evolution, my dissertation addresses the textual, temporal, material, and performative aspects of mourning. Many of the phenomena I examine reflect the atomization of Jewish ritual life in the postwar Soviet context. Admittedly, there was never a body of universal, shared mourning practices within the Eastern European Jewish community, and local specificity has always been an important factor in Jewish ritual life. However, the breakdown of religious leadership and traditional religious institutions of education and worship after 1917 deprived Soviet Jews of access to a shared body of sacred texts that had formerly grounded ritual observance. As a result, variation in local, familial, and individual practice was further heightened. This fragmentation was only accelerated by the upheaval of the Holocaust and the Second World War.

Under conditions of legal restriction, demographic decline, and widespread secularization, rigid observance of traditional religious rites would have led to the swift extinction of Jewish mourning practices. Instead, Soviet Jews displayed resourceful resilience as they moved within (and even beyond) legal constraints and logistical hurdles. A flexible, creative approach permitted the survival of Jewish mourning rituals and produced forms of Jewish observance that were inherently selective. Rather than examining Soviet Jewish ritual life through a prescriptive lens, instead I analyze the choices Soviet Jews made and what conditioned these choices. Individuals' motivations for continued ritual observance varied widely. Some participated as a sign of enduring religious devotion, others out of familial loyalty, still others as

an expression of ethno-national consciousness. As a religion primarily of practice, not of belief, Judaism accommodates ritual participation stemming from a wide range of motivations. Furthermore, the distinction between “folk practice” and “religious ritual” is frequently blurry. I do not attempt to resolve these ambiguities. Instead, I emphasize the various ways that Soviet Jews engaged with Jewish mourning practices, adapted these rituals to changing conditions, and invented new mourning rituals that nonetheless felt authentically Jewish to their practitioners. As I argue, individuals, families, and local communities strategically selected and adapted observances to suit their social, economic, and political circumstances. As we will see, individuals’ age, gender, occupation, and educational background played a decisive role in shaping their choice of mourning rituals and venues. For families and communities, the local funerary landscape and local legal climate determined the ritual possibilities and logistical leeway for mourning.

As outlined above, this dissertation is organized around landscapes of mourning, including cemeteries, private homes, synagogues, *shtiebls*, mass graves, and monuments. Just as Soviet Jews carefully selected the rituals they observed, they also strategically chose the venues in which to perform these rituals. Because the aforementioned spaces held distinct legal statuses in the Soviet Union, they were subject to varying degrees of surveillance and exposure. For example, public religious institutions such as synagogues and *shtiebls* fell under the purview of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults [CARC]—the state body responsible for monitoring religious life in the Soviet Union. While some synagogues enjoyed legal recognition, most did not. Even legally registered synagogues were subject to heavy surveillance, which jeopardized the careers of attendees, especially if they held Party membership or public office.

For these reasons, I treat synagogues and *shtiebls* as public spaces, fully subject to state monitoring and regulation.

Bureaucratic oversight of the other mourning spaces was far more incoherent. In most cities, the local Burial Bureau—a division of the local Department for Communal Property—was responsible for the upkeep and management of cemeteries, both denominational and “international.” In the 27 towns and cities I visited, the records of these burial bureaus had not been preserved. Furthermore, all references to these burial bureaus in CARC’s records suggest that these were disorganized, under-funded collectives, unable to exercise effective control over religious rituals held on cemetery premises. Nevertheless, CARC administrators maintained that cemetery oversight fell beyond their duties and deferred, instead, to local burial bureaus. Because of ineffective oversight and the latitude that individuals and religious communities had to enact their own funerary rituals within Soviet cemeteries, I discuss them as “semi-private” spaces. While technically subject to the demands of Soviet public life, in practice, individual and family grave plots were an extension of the domestic sphere, with significant space for religious symbols and traditional practices.

Oversight of mass graves and monuments proved equally chaotic. The local Departments for Communal Property technically exercised authority over these sites, and any Jewish communal efforts at commemoration were supposed to seek formal approval from them. However, this expectation did not translate into effective monitoring or maintenance of these sites.⁵⁷ As we will see, there was wide variation in local administrative practices and an even wider range of Jewish responses—from cooperation, to avoidance, to defiance. Again, I argue

⁵⁷ Beginning in 1966, local Societies for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments began to appear across the Soviet Union. These volunteer organizations were intended to protect and maintain historical sites; however, they had little involvement at the mass graves where Jews had been murdered. Instead, they focused their efforts on monuments to the Bolshevik Revolution and Great Patriotic War.

that these sites are best understood as semi-private spaces in which Jewish individuals and communities frequently enjoyed a certain latitude to enact their own commemorative priorities. These complex dynamics speak to my larger argument that there was no monolithic Soviet state and no universal Soviet Jewish experience.⁵⁸

The final commemorative space—the home—is no less complex. In the early Soviet period, the private space of the home became increasingly public. Single-family homes were transformed into communal apartments; neighbors informed on the intimate details of each other’s lives; children informed on their own parents. As the Stalinist era came to an end and Khrushchev launched a mass housing project, the privacy of the single-family home was largely restored even as Soviet society maintained a spirit of collective volunteerism.⁵⁹ In this private space, individuals and families enjoyed significant leeway to perform, adapt, and create rituals they found meaningful without fear of public consequences. Nevertheless, intergenerational trust never fully recovered from the upheaval of the early Soviet decades, and many middle-aged and elderly Soviet Jews continued to hide their ritual practices from the young, even within the home.

In studying a wide range of mourning landscapes, my project struggles with the reality that normative Judaism, Soviet state records, and even Soviet Jews’ memories, all privilege

⁵⁸ Instead, local administrators exercised their discretion in decision making and policy enforcement. Some local administrators were themselves Jewish and used their position to facilitate the construction of monuments and maintenance of cemeteries. In other instances, Jewish, decorated war heroes used their status to organize local memorial gatherings in their hometowns. While these individuals’ efforts were not always successful in the long run, for a time, they enjoyed the ability to leverage their Soviet status for Jewish communal purposes. As Amir Weiner notes in “The Making of a Dominant Myth,” wartime exploits endowed decorated veterans with greater latitude to participate in otherwise taboo activities, including religious activities (657-8).

⁵⁹ See Steven E. Harris, “Soviet Mass Housing.”

public spaces and rituals over private spaces and rituals.⁶⁰ This hierarchical conception of space presents a tremendous challenge for researchers of Soviet Jewish life. To locate ritual life in the domestic sphere or even in the semi-private spaces of the cemetery and mass grave, one must read between bureaucratic lines and navigate interviewees' dismissals of their own private rituals as unimportant or "incorrect."⁶¹ In the spirit of scholarly restraint, I have cautiously avoided speculation, but in cases where only one or two sources record a particular mourning ritual, it is reasonable to infer that a far wider number of individuals maintained the same practice or similar practices without leaving a discernable record.

The invisibility of many Soviet Jewish rituals challenges researchers to look beyond traditional historical sources such as state archival records and to integrate additional source bases. To craft a compelling historical narrative that integrates state policy, material culture, and individual experience, my work draws on three major categories of primary sources: archival documents, memorial objects (such as monuments and memorial plaques), and personal accounts (including oral history interviews, memoirs, and *yizkor* books).⁶²

⁶⁰ See Chapter II for a discussion on the gender dynamics of public and private space as they relate to ritual life.

⁶¹ As I conducted interviews, I found the word *obriady* [rituals] particularly problematic. I utilized the word in an academic register, inclusive of formal, religious practices as well as popular, folk practices. However, as a non-native speaker of Russian, I realized rather late in the process of collecting interviews that my interviewees associated the word *obriady* exclusively with formal, halachically-mandated rituals. Thus, they felt they had no "proper" Jewish *obriady* to report. When asked process-oriented questions (e.g. "Did your family host a meal after your grandmother's funeral?", "How did your mother mark her parents' *yortzeit*?", etc), interviewees provided detailed descriptions of mourning practices that they themselves would have considered inconsequential under the rubric of "*obriady*."

⁶² Two additional source groups, which I considered using but ultimately did not have time to explore fully, are literary sources and Soviet Jewish periodicals. As I develop this project into a book manuscript, I hope to integrate these additional sources into my narrative.

Archival Documents

Between 2012 and 2016, I collected Soviet state records at various Union, republic, oblast, and local-level archives in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. I also utilized collections of these state documents at the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People [CAHJP], Yad Vashem [YV], and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum [USHMM]. These latter institutions have photocopied and digitized substantial swaths of archival material from the former Soviet republics. The materials they collected are relevant to their institutional specialties in Jewish history or the Holocaust. Such narrow specialization certainly speeds the process of locating relevant information; however, it also deprives the researcher of valuable comparative information. For example, the CARC reports that I accessed at CAHJP include only the relevant records on Jewish religious life. The original records in East European state archives include substantial data on other religious groups. Explicit comparisons between Jews and other Soviet religious groups are beyond the scope of my project, but I find such comparative data valuable for understanding which challenges were unique to the Soviet Jewish community and which were shared by other ethno-religious minorities.

Regardless of access point, CARC's records provide substantial reports and detailed statistics on religious life, including synagogue attendance and communal activities relating to burial, efforts to construct monuments and conduct memorial services. They also include petitions written by Soviet Jewish individuals and communities along with officials' responses and deliberations regarding these petitions. These petitions include appeals to open more synagogues, pleas for more prayer books, and requests for permission to build memorials. Such documents can provide tremendous insight into the activities of Soviet Jewish communities

during the postwar era, often with great local specificity.⁶³ CARC records also include substantial correspondence between varying levels of the CARC bureaucracy, which illuminates variations in enforcement and tensions between local and republic-level administrators. CARC's records also contain correspondence with other Soviet administrative and legislative bodies such as Oblast Councils, Departments for Communal Property, and the Supreme Soviet. These records highlight the logistical complexity of overseeing ritual life in the private, semi-private, and public spheres.

Because my project is primarily focused on individuals, families, and local communities, state archival materials are somewhat limited in the range of information they can provide. However, when read against their top-down, bureaucratic grain, state archival records can yield valuable insight into individual concerns and communal priorities while also providing essential contextual information for understanding other historical sources.⁶⁴

Material Objects and Site Visits

Over two trips (June-October 2014 and April 2016), I conducted fieldwork across eight oblasts in Belarus and Ukraine that included site visits to 72 cemeteries and freestanding monuments across 27 cities, towns, and villages. Although stones cannot speak, they proved to be one of the richest archives for my project by revealing the textual, material, visual, tactile elements of Soviet Jewish mourning culture. Site visits were particularly valuable for understanding the

⁶³ Thus, even though Belarus and Ukraine encompass a fairly large territory, using CARC sources, I am able to offer focused local case studies that then reveal important regional patterns and variations.

⁶⁴ For more extended reflections on the methodological challenges and rewards of utilizing Soviet state documents on religious life, see Luehrmann, *Religion in the Secular Archive*. She reminds us that these documents are not simply “true or false descriptions of an outside reality but... tools that acted on that reality” (162). She also advocates combining archival sources with other source bases to yield a more comprehensive picture of religious life in the Soviet Union.

Jewish commemorative landscape in the postwar Soviet Union and for comparing it to state-sponsored, “international” cemeteries and monuments as well as to pre-war and pre-revolutionary mourning landscapes. The findings of this fieldwork are featured largely in Chapter V although they inform my entire project.⁶⁵ Yet, even as I documented burial sites with photographs and field notes, I understood that monuments are also evidence of things left unsaid—whether due to financial limitations, legal restrictions, or self-censorship. Furthermore, natural erosion and vandalism, renovations and demolitions⁶⁶ have frequently altered the physical integrity of stones and engravings. While the monuments that I visited generally approximated their original form, I relied on physical evidence of alterations and on photographic collections at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem (as well as photographs in memoirs and *yizkorbikher*), to trace the evolution of grave markers and engravings over the postwar decades. These photographs also allowed me to understand these markers’ historical role as sites of ritual performance and spaces for communal gatherings during the Soviet period.

Personal Accounts

My final group of sources consists of oral history interviews, memoirs, and testimonies collected in *yizkorbikher*. These personal accounts provide insight into individuals’ experiences of

⁶⁵ In the future book manuscript, I intend to include an additional chapter on the visual and textual evolution of Soviet Jewish gravestones over the postwar decades. Although I collected the necessary data during my fieldwork, this sub-project was beyond the scope of the dissertation. I believe it will be a valuable and innovative expansion of the work I have begun here.

⁶⁶ Soviet law allowed for cemeteries of all faiths to be repurposed in as little as 15 years after the last burial, although 25 years was the standard minimum due to soil conditions. TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 402, l. 4-5. CAHJP RU 1934. As a result of this policy and the dislocation caused by the Holocaust, many Jewish cemeteries were demolished in the mid-late 1960s. Since the 1990s, cemeteries in Belarus and Ukraine are no longer being demolished, but they still suffer from a lack of maintenance and funding, whether from the state or from private Jewish organizations.

mourning. They also illuminate intergenerational relationships within families and the transmission of mourning practices from one generation to the next.⁶⁷ Furthermore, they provide valuable information on communal life and mourning—the involvement of Jewish burial societies, the existence of local Jewish cemeteries, the activism of individuals in financing and constructing monuments, etc. These aspects of Soviet Jewish life are essential to my project yet are generally invisible in state-produced documents, and they are difficult to capture even in printed memoirs.⁶⁸

During my fieldwork in Israel, Belarus, and Ukraine, I collected over 75 interviews with individuals born before 1980 who had experienced the death of at least one close relative prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992. Before beginning fieldwork, I formulated a master list of potential questions designed to collect basic biographical information, details on family of origin, and information on all aspects of postwar mourning practices. The questions were open-ended to avoid leading interviewees to a “desirable” response. Follow-up questions, based on initial responses, helped to fill in the details. Although I used the master list as a guide, I also believed it was important to allow interviewees to direct the conversation to the issues that they felt were most important. Working within the broad topic of “mourning,” interviewees’ self-selected themes yielded greater detail and nuance than if they had been compelled to speak about topics which they found less interesting or had little relevance to their life experience.

I identified potential interviewees through local Jewish synagogues and charitable organizations, which provide important social outlets and financial support for elderly Jews in

⁶⁷ For later generations of Soviet Jews, memories of their parents commemorating the *yortzeit* of a family member was often one of the few occasions that they saw their parents engaging in distinctly Jewish, quasi-religious practices.

⁶⁸ The more spontaneous, free-flowing nature of oral histories offers greater space for narrators to free-associate among practices and beliefs, people and places.

the former Soviet Union (FSU). Communal leaders helped me to identify the first few interviewees in each locale. Often, these individuals were “experienced” interviewees who had participated in previous oral history projects.⁶⁹ I then asked these initial interviewees to recommend relatives, friends, and acquaintances who might also be interested in the project. Although I initially hoped to include middle-aged Jews in my interviews, a large number had emigrated to Israel or elsewhere. Of those who remained, most held full-time jobs and were not as involved in Jewish communal organizations. Thus, they were harder to recruit. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of my interviewees were born in the 1960s or earlier. My interviewees were also disproportionately female. This imbalance is largely due to the demographic reality in Eastern Europe that men die much younger than women.

These interviews provided a valuable foundation for my project; however, for several reasons, the final version of my dissertation draws primarily on other, earlier oral history projects. First, in many senses, I began this project two decades too late. The individuals directly involved in early Holocaust commemorations and the construction of Holocaust monuments had passed away by the mid-1990s. Subsequent generations visited these mass gravesites but did not have vivid memories of their construction or of the individuals buried there.⁷⁰ They remained invested in these sites but did not have the same intimate connection with them. Second, each successive generation of Soviet Jews became more secularized and less “fluent” in Jewish traditions. While elements of Jewish practice remained among later generations (and analyzing

⁶⁹ From the communal leaders’ perspectives, these individuals were ideal interviewees because they were reliably cogent and articulate informants. From my perspective, interviewing individuals with a set narrative was a challenge because my questions differed significantly from previous oral history projects they had encountered. Furthermore, my questions did not correspond to the life events that formed the core of my interviewees’ autobiographical narratives. Thus, shifting the conversation away from the Second World War and Holocaust toward the postwar period was frequently impossible.

⁷⁰ Even the oldest of my interviewees were young children during the war.

these adapted or misremembered ritual holdovers was a primary goal of my project), since the end of the Soviet Union, these individuals have received extensive exposure to “normative” Jewish practice⁷¹ through vigorous outreach (*kiruv*) programs in the former Soviet Union. As a result, familial and local practices have become devalued in the eyes of many Jews in the FSU. When I invited individuals to participate in an oral history interview, they frequently responded, “I knew nothing [about Judaism] back then. You should ask someone else,” and directed me to older, more “authoritative” figures in the community who had not necessarily been more religious during the Soviet period but who were often experienced interviewees.⁷² Third, my project’s exclusive focus on death and mourning presented significant emotional and ethical challenges. Because I had no ability to provide post-interview support for my interviewees, I avoided forcing anyone into discussions they were not equipped to handle. To the best of my ability, I assessed my interviewees’ state of mind before, during, and after the interview and responded accordingly.⁷³ Roughly a quarter of interviewees instinctively sympathized with my project, were eager to share their memories of mourning practices, and could do so with relative ease. However, a large percentage of interviewees appeared visibly uncomfortable with the questions and either expressed a distaste for the topic or actively shifted our conversation away from mourning.⁷⁴ In these instances, I first attempted to move the conversation away from personal losses toward a discussion of mourning practices in the local Jewish community. If an

⁷¹ As defined by American and Israeli norms and conveyed by organizations such as Chabad Lubavitch.

⁷² I also suspect that these referrals to the elderly stemmed from fear that the elderly might die soon and a desire to see their stories preserved by one, preferably multiple, oral history projects.

⁷³ I quickly stopped interviewing anyone who had suffered a recent death in the family because conversations about mourning were too distressing.

⁷⁴ Many, instead, preferred to recount their heroic escapades during the war or the destruction of their families during the Holocaust. Painful as these latter memories may be, they are more rehearsed and can be recited without arousing the same level of emotional distress as less rehearsed, postwar memories. This is true of both experienced and inexperienced interviewees.

interviewee continued to exhibit discomfort, I moved to a neutral topic related to Soviet Jewish history and cut the interview short.

To supplement my own interviews, I turned to the oral history collections produced by the USC Shoah Foundation, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the AHEYM project. The former two collections are focused specifically on Holocaust survivors, many of whom have emigrated to the United States and Israel. The latter collection is a linguistic and ethnographic project to document Yiddish language and culture in Ukraine, Moldova, Slovakia, and Hungary; however, it also addresses the Holocaust as well as Jewish life before and after the war. Unlike oral history interviews conducted in the United States and Israel, AHEYM interviewees have remained in their native homes and villages and, thus, provide valuable insight into the evolution of Jewish life in a specific locale without the complicating factors of migration. This knowledge of local landscape was particularly valuable for gaining insight into mourning practices.

Because these three collections are older, the interviewees include individuals who had passed away before I began my fieldwork in 2014.⁷⁵ The interviewees in these older collections were also less experienced and their narratives less rehearsed. For these reasons, I found these three oral history collections extremely valuable. While the thematic foci of these projects did not explicitly align with my topic, a significant percentage of the interviewees addressed questions of mourning in the postwar period, particularly relating to Holocaust

⁷⁵ In preparing the book manuscript, I plan to utilize two additional, older oral history collections: the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University and the New York Public Library's Weiner Oral History Library, which contains interviews conducted with Soviet Jewish émigrés shortly after their arrival in the United States between 1973 and 1980.

commemoration.⁷⁶ Thus, my findings from these collections are primarily featured in the fifth chapter of this dissertation.

I have also utilized testimonies found in published and online *yizkorbikher*. *Yizkorbikher* themselves were one of the earliest forms of Holocaust commemoration. Beginning in the earliest postwar years, survivors around the world began to compile these written tributes to their hometowns, including detailed information on pre-war life, lists of Holocaust victims, and, sometimes, information on the construction of monuments and care of mass graves after the war.⁷⁷ Written primarily in Yiddish and Hebrew, these memorial books include many brief testimonies of survivors regarding their experiences during the war and the loss of their loved ones at the hands of the Nazis. Many of these books also include photographs and maps that helped me to understand the landscape and geography of these towns.⁷⁸ I accessed numerous *yizkorbikher* during my fellowship at the USHMM and have also utilized *yizkorbikher* through the New York Public Library and JewishGen's Yizkor Book Project. More recently, Mishpocha Magazine, the Moe Mestechko Project, and Yad Vashem's Untold Stories Project have also collected photographs, archival documents, and personal accounts of the war and postwar commemoration, making these materials available online. While I have avoided using these sources in isolation, I have found them extremely useful for corroborating and supplementing Soviet state records and oral history interviews.

⁷⁶ Identifying relevant interviewees and interview segments presented a tremendous "needle in the haystack" challenge. At the time of my research, the USC collection was the most thoroughly indexed and, thus, was the easiest to navigate.

⁷⁷ This information is primarily available in later *yizkorbikher*, penned in the 1970s or later, as Soviet Jewish began to emigrate en masse from the Soviet Union. Since the 1990s, *yizkorbikher*-inspired books have begun to be published in the former Soviet Union. Unlike older *yizkorbikher*, these books are often the work of a single individual, generally a lay local historian who is either a survivor or the child of survivors.

⁷⁸ I often corroborated and supplemented *yizkorbikher* with records from the Extraordinary State Commission to Investigate German-Fascist Crimes Committed on Soviet Territory from the USSR [ChGK] and with photographic collections at Yad Vashem and USHMM.

Lastly, I have also utilized published memoirs by Soviet Jewish emigres and by individuals who have remained in the former Soviet Union. These works have helped me to understand the diversity of Soviet Jewish experiences and to avoid overstating the religiosity of the people I study based solely on mourning rituals. Instead, memoirs highlight how many families preserved one or two Jewish mourning activities that were performed openly in front of children (e.g. lighting *yortzeit* candles, visiting the cemetery, etc.). Other, additional rituals (e.g. visiting a mass grave, attending synagogue to say kaddish or yizkor, participating in a memorial service, etc.) were often performed by elderly family members but with varying degrees of secrecy to hide these activities from children. From family to family, the exact rituals and level of secrecy varied widely. None of the memoirs that I read were specifically focused on mourning. Instead, Holocaust survivors tended to focus on their wartime experience. Refuseniks tended to focus on their political activism. To the degree that mourning appeared in these narratives, it was often in passing, as either a link to the Jewish past or a springboard to a reinvigorated Jewish identity.

Together, these three genres of personal accounts have helped me to piece together a history of Jewish mourning rituals and landscapes during the postwar Soviet era. These sources provide insight into individual experiences and familial relationships that remain invisible in state records and are only partially illuminated by material traces in the physical landscape.

In the wake of the Holocaust and the Second World War, Soviet Jewish individuals and communities faced the tremendous dual challenge of commemoration and rebuilding. Despite daunting logistical hurdles and abundant political tensions, Soviet Jews forged an autonomous memorial culture centered on local landscapes, experiences, and networks. The survival and adaptation of traditional Jewish mourning rituals in postwar daily life reminds us that

secularization is neither inevitable nor linear. Furthermore, it suggests the unique potential of funerary culture to preserve religious practices long after the collapse of an institutionalized religious society.

CHAPTER I

Houses of Life: The Vitality and Vulnerability of Soviet Jewish Cemeteries after the Second World War

Introduction

From a historical and anthropological point of view, cemeteries function as dynamic sites of encounter between the past and the present, living and dead, public and private, state and citizen, community and individual. While mourning rituals feature similar interactions, as physical spaces, cemeteries bring many of these encounters into sharper relief than the abstract, endlessly malleable world of ceremony and emotion. Furthermore, as part of the built environment, cemeteries are archaeological sites that remain active in the present. Because they are often guarded by taboos against tampering with graves, cemeteries and the gravestones within them have the potential to preserve traditional systems of ritual and belief long after they have been declared extinct in the world beyond the graveyard.⁷⁹ In this sense, cemeteries exist in an alternate chronology, one which frequently lags behind the surrounding culture.⁸⁰ The ability of cemeteries to repel external intervention makes them crucial to understanding the persistence of Jewish funerary culture after the Second World War. Even after tremendous demographic devastation and the closure

⁷⁹ See Alain Corbin's study, *Village Bells*, which reveals a similar pattern of preservation in the "aural landscape" created by church bells.

⁸⁰ Of course, persistence should not be confused with permanence. The very notion of a "final resting place"—marked as it is by stone and inscriptions—is deeply engrained in the Jewish religious psyche. Any analysis of cemeteries must acknowledge this deep desire for eternity even as it critically reveals the ways in which cemeteries are, in reality, constantly evolving and physically impermanent.

of most public institutions of Jewish religious and cultural life, cemeteries continued to link Soviet Jews to their ancestors, to the languages of the Jewish past, and to traditional Jewish imagery and rituals.

This chapter examines the connection between Soviet Jewish cemeteries and the survival of Jewish communities—fostering their cohesion, visibility, and commitment to traditional practices. Specifically, I analyze the interactions of Jewish individuals, families, and communities as they negotiated their relationships with local cemeteries and with varying levels of the Soviet bureaucracy. In the process, I explore the political status, economic function, religious meaning, cosmetic evolution, and physical survival of Jewish cemeteries in the Soviet landscape.

The Unruly Landscape of Soviet Jewish Cemeteries

Before analyzing the complex interactions of state officials, local Jewish communities, and individual Jewish families, it is helpful first to paint a picture of Soviet Jewish cemeteries themselves. Not only will this highlight the cemetery's place within the larger political and religious landscape, but it will also emphasize the complexity of cemetery management, maintenance, and usage in the postwar Soviet Union.

The very layout of Soviet Jewish cemeteries, many of which pre-dated the Soviet era, was steeped in traditional beliefs and preserved Jewish taboos that would otherwise have faded from memory, not just from practice. Most traditional Jewish cemeteries in Eastern Europe contained several distinct sub-sections. The most striking division was based on gender. While gender segregation was not universal in Jewish cemeteries built in the nineteenth century or earlier, it was extremely widespread. Depending on local custom, men and women were buried either in separate sections of the cemetery or in alternating rows. Despite the obvious division that this imposed within family units, fathers, brothers, and sons tended to be buried together,

while mothers, sisters, and daughters were buried in similar, single-gender family plots in the female rows or sections.⁸¹ In virtually all locales, this gender division became less and less apparent during the postwar decades. In most Soviet-era Jewish cemeteries, men and women continued to be buried in alternating rows through the 1950s, and in some locations, as late as the 1960s. Thereafter, it became increasingly common for married couples to be buried side by side, in a unified family plot. By the 1970s and 1980s, new cemetery rows rarely reflected any designation as a male or female, and as gender segregation became less of a priority, more recently deceased individuals were buried in existing family plots regardless of their original gender designation.

Several additional social categories also influenced the layout of traditional Jewish cemeteries. Young children, suicide victims, and those who died in accidents were buried in separate sections, generally at the outer edges of the cemeteries. In some locales, *kohanim*⁸² were also buried on the edge of the cemetery to minimize the contact that their living relatives would have with the dead. Furthermore, many communities buried rabbis in a separate, prominent “rabbis’ row” that sometimes included the rabbis’ wives as well. In most surviving cemeteries, such social distinctions are either non-existent or difficult to discern. However, a handful of communities did maintain these distinctions. For example, the Jewish cemetery in Mykolaiv (Mykolaiv Oblast, Ukraine) maintained separate sections for men, women, rabbis, and

⁸¹ Even in cemeteries with gendered rows, some families created unified family plots by conjoining graves in adjacent rows, as I saw in the Jewish cemetery in Rechitsa (Gomel’ Oblast, Belarus). Thus, rather than burying spouses next to each other, as we might expect, one can find married couples buried head to toe, with their relationship indicated by a metal fence uniting their grave sites into a single plot.

⁸² Descendants of the Jewish priestly class/caste. For reasons of ritual purity, *kohanim* were traditionally forbidden from having any contact with the dead.

kohanim.⁸³ In Bershad' (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine), a lone, female suicide victim from the postwar era is buried separately from either the men's or the women's section. The Jewish cemetery in Rechitsa (Gomel' Oblast, Belarus) maintained separate, peripheral sections for children, young adults, and suicides.

As the postwar decades passed, Jewish burial practices conformed ever more closely to egalitarian, Soviet standards. Yet, even as most Jewish communities abandoned traditional social distinctions, older sections of their local Jewish cemeteries preserved visitors' awareness of entering a uniquely Jewish space—one technically governed by a distinctive set of norms and taboos. While some burial customs fell out of active practice, the abiding sense of Jewish space preserved the memory of inactive practices and triggered the continued performance of many other, distinctively Jewish rituals.

While rows and sections could gradually lose their once distinctive identity, other features of a cemetery's physical layout provided a more stubborn status quo. Whether literally or symbolically, traditional Jewish cemeteries were oriented toward Jerusalem—in anticipation of the messianic age, the future resurrection of the dead, and the ingathering of the exiles to the Holy Land. Most commonly, graves were oriented with the deceased's feet facing toward the East, following the model of Jewish synagogues, which faced East in a symbolic gesture toward Jerusalem. In other locales, the deceased's feet were positioned to the south, literally pointing toward Jerusalem. In some towns, such as Mohyliv-Podil'skyi (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine), one can find graves oriented in both directions, sometimes side by side, in a single cemetery. In such cases, it seems that burial direction was dictated by family tradition and that there was no

⁸³ IAJGS, "Nikolaev," Jewish Cemetery Project, <http://www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org/ukraine/nikolaev.html> (accessed 12 May 2016). The Third Jewish Cemetery in Odessa also includes a row of famous rabbis in a prominent location.

prevailing local custom.⁸⁴ However, the direction of burial remained a noteworthy marker of Jewish difference, especially in mixed-faith cemeteries. For example, in the Prudkovskoe cemetery in Gomel', Belarus, which is divided into a Russian Orthodox and a Jewish section, as visitors cross the central aisle separating the Christian half of the cemetery from the Jewish half, the direction of the graves suddenly rotates.

Such enduring, distinctive features of the Jewish funerary landscape originated long before the Bolshevik Revolution but persisted into the Soviet era and even beyond. Despite its revolutionary ambitions, the Soviet state was largely powerless to determine the funerary landscape of the territories under its control. Instead, it inherited a burial landscape that had been fundamentally shaped by confessional norms and tsarist policies. In 1947, CARC's legal consultant, N.I. Peshekhonov, penned an extensive internal report on the status of Soviet cemeteries for the deputy head of CARC.⁸⁵ According to the report, under tsarism,

churches or chapels could be built on the grounds of city cemeteries [with special permission]. In rural areas, cemeteries were [routinely] added during the construction of new churches, [as long as they were located] no less than half a *verst* from the closest residential building. In addition to separate confessional cemeteries for the Russian Orthodox, Lutheran, and Catholic denominations, Old Believers and sectarians also had special cemeteries if they did not wish to have a separate section within a general cemetery.

⁸⁴ Across Ukraine and Belarus, there is also dramatic variation in whether the gravestones were situated at the head or foot of the grave, whether the inscription faced inward—toward the grave, or outward—toward the adjacent aisle. Thus, it can be very difficult to tell whether the tradition of pointing the deceased's feet toward the East or South survived, or whether people began to be buried with their heads toward Jerusalem. Even with this potential confusion, the knowledge that Jewish burial should be somehow oriented toward Jerusalem remained ubiquitous.

⁸⁵ The report was largely intended to confirm that local Departments for Communal Property, rather than CARC, held sole responsibility for overseeing cemeteries. However, the report indicates that CARC maintained an interest in confessional cemeteries.

Jews in the former Pale of Settlement also had the right to separate cemeteries, on which the local authorities permitted the construction of special buildings for preparing bodies for burial and for storing necessary items for these rituals.⁸⁶

As the new Soviet government quickly discovered, churches could be demolished or repurposed, but cemeteries and burial rituals were more resistant to change, and their confessional nature was firmly etched into gravestones and the geography of the cemetery. While revolutionary zeal certainly could have led to the demolition of all pre-1917 cemeteries, this would have been politically disastrous and logistically taxing for the new Soviet state to demolish all existing cemeteries and replace them with new, non-confessional cemeteries. Instead, as pre-revolutionary cemeteries gradually reached capacity, the Soviet state opened new, “international” cemeteries that coexisted alongside older, confessional cemeteries. However, even these new cemeteries often included denominational sections for Jews, Catholics, and Muslims, and in most rural areas, such “international” cemeteries never materialized. Thus, as in many other aspects of Soviet life, the Bolshevik cultural revolution remained incomplete with regard to cemeteries, and the pre-revolutionary landscape doggedly resisted efforts to replace ethnic and religious particularism with Soviet secular universalism.

Written three decades into the Soviet experiment, Peshekhonov’s report adopts a tone of resignation and normalizes the confessional nature of cemeteries: “Given the close connection between religious cults and the burial of religious believers, in almost all countries, cemeteries have a religious character to them. That is to say, cemeteries are accessible only to members of a particular religious denomination and are operated by the religious leadership of that

⁸⁶ GARF f. 6991, op. 4, d. 19, l. 214-5. CAHJP RU 1755. Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, the ethno-religious character of cemeteries was reinforced by the fact that the construction and maintenance of these sites was funded by the local population (GARF f. 6991, op. 4, d. 19, l. 214. CAHJP RU 1755).

denomination.”⁸⁷ In the postwar moment though, as the Soviet state endeavored to establish consistent oversight over all aspects of religious life, what impact did the pre-revolutionary funerary landscape have on state oversight efforts, on local religious communities, and on funerary practices?

The location of cemeteries within urban and rural landscapes bore significant implications for their lifespan and usage. Under tsarist law, new cemeteries “were constructed beyond the city limits [in urban areas]... no less than 100 *sakhen*’ (420 meters) from the last urban residence.”⁸⁸ Many cemeteries began their lives on the periphery of population centers, but as urban areas expanded rapidly throughout the Soviet era, many older cemeteries gradually found themselves absorbed into the center of town, surrounded by commercial districts and housing developments.⁸⁹ With nowhere to expand, such cemeteries quickly filled to capacity and were closed to further burials. Because these cemeteries had become such desirable real estate for urban development, they were extremely vulnerable to demolition orders. After the requisite waiting period of 15-30 years after the last burial,⁹⁰ many were plowed over to create new city parks,⁹¹ athletic fields,⁹² or stadiums.⁹³ More rarely, the land was designated for housing

⁸⁷ GARF f. 6991, op. 4, d. 19, l. 215. CAHJP RU 1755.

⁸⁸ GARF f. 6991, op. 4, d. 19, l. 214. CAHJP RU 1755.

⁸⁹ The Soviet state continued the tsarist practice of establishing new cemeteries at the city limits, or even beyond the city limits in the neighboring forests, e.g. Gomel’ (Gomel’ Oblast, Belarus).

⁹⁰ Under Soviet law, 15-20 years was the minimum waiting period for cemeteries with dry, sandy foundations, sandy soil, and weak, clay-like soil. For cemeteries with loamy soil foundations, the waiting period was 25-30 years. TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 402, l. 4-5. CAHJP 1934.

⁹¹ E.g. Shavshchenko Park in Berdychiv (Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine). In Minsk, the Jewish cemetery that used to stand at Sukhaya Street and Kollektornaia Street was turned into a park. The cemetery had been established in 1868 and was the site of a mass shooting of Jews during the Second World War. It was formally closed in 1946. Part of the cemetery was demolished in 1972 and turned into a park. In 1990, the remainder of the cemetery was demolished. See “Minsk Evreiskii,” *Minsk Old-New*. On the site, several monuments have been erected in memory of German Jewish communities that were deported to the Minsk ghetto and were murdered there. The site also

developments.⁹⁴ Because Jewish law generally prohibits the dismantling of Jewish cemeteries, the Soviet state's efforts to demolish and repurpose these sites was widely seen as anti-Semitic by both Soviet Jews and international observers. However, Soviet authorities targeted older cemeteries of all confessions for demolition with little regard for superstition or sentiment. As I argue, utilitarian, pragmatic concerns, not malice, were the driving force behind state demolition efforts. Above all, demographic trends played a major (though hardly the sole or decisive) role in decisions regarding cemetery creation, expansion, closure, or demolition. Demolitions were most common in larger cities that had multiple Jewish cemeteries or that enjoyed a growing Jewish population in the postwar years due to internal migration.⁹⁵ In these cases, the local Jewish population eventually filled one of the existing cemeteries to capacity. In response, the local government would close the facility to further burials, and in as little as 15 years, the site could be legally demolished. In areas with gradually declining Jewish populations, local cemeteries from the tsarist era often survived the Soviet era and remain operational even today. In these instances, enough of a Jewish community survived after the war to defend the local Jewish

includes a collection of Jewish gravestones, perhaps including some from the original cemetery, but most originate from various Jewish cemeteries across Belarus.

⁹² E.g. Gomel' (Gomel' Oblast, Belarus) and Korosten' (Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine).

⁹³ E.g. The Dinamo stadium in Minsk (Minsk Oblast, Belarus). See Veronika Cherkasova, "Gorod mertvykh v gorode zhivyykh." Another example is the Neman Stadium in Grodno (Grodno Oblast, Belarus). The latter stands on the site of the city's former "New Jewish Cemetery," which was established in the nineteenth century and operated for 150 years. It was closed just before the Second World War. During the occupation, the Germans used the gravestones as construction materials, and in the mid-1950s, the Soviet authorities completed the demolition and constructed a stadium. See Igor' Popenia, "'Po domam'. Proekt Offside.by o stadionakh Belarusi. Epizod 5: TsSK 'Neman' (Grodno)." The Lokomotiv stadium in Brest was also built on the site of a Jewish cemetery that was demolished in 1956. However, sandstone gravestones from the cemetery continue to surface in various parts of the city, particularly in the area around the "May First" Alleyway and in construction sites. See Alla Berstova, "V Breste naidena."

⁹⁴ E.g. Bar (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine), Slutsk (Minsk Oblast, Belarus), Voronovo and Lida (Grodno Oblast, Belarus), Pinsk and Lyakhovichi (Brest Oblast, Belarus).

⁹⁵ E.g. Kyiv (Kyiv Oblast, Ukraine). Examined in more detail below.

cemetery from closure and to necessitate leaving the cemetery open.⁹⁶ In areas where the Jewish population disappeared completely due to the Holocaust or suffered dramatic outward migration after the war, Jewish cemeteries became extremely vulnerable to demolition since there was no remaining Jewish community to defend or utilize the site. Thus, the postwar fate of Jewish cemeteries was largely a factor of the local Jewish population's growth, stability, or decline.

Of the new cemeteries constructed during the Soviet era, particularly in the larger cities, most were "international," meaning that they were constructed to accommodate citizens regardless of their ethnic heritage or religious affiliation. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. For example, in the city of Kryvyi Rih (Dnipropetrovs'k Oblast, Ukraine), the Jewish cemetery was destroyed by the Nazis. After the war, the *gorkomkhoz*⁹⁷ designated territory for a new Jewish cemetery outside the city that would be maintained and protected by the *gorkomkhoz*.⁹⁸ However, from the perspective of Soviet administrators, establishing non-denominational cemeteries was far more efficient and ideologically acceptable than establishing new, denominationally specific cemeteries. Invariably, some of the new, "international" cemeteries included small, confessional sections in addition to the much larger general section. For example, in the Minsk Eastern Cemetery, Jewish graves can be found in the general section and in the sections designated specifically for Jews. For the most part, secular Jews chose to be buried in the general section of their local cemetery while those with stronger religious or ethnic leanings preferred to be buried among their fellow Jews. However, this division was not absolute. Logistical obstacles or the desire to be buried in a family plot compelled many Soviet

⁹⁶ E.g. Rechitsa (Gomel', Belarus), Mohyliv-Podil'skyi (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine).

⁹⁷ Municipal Department for Communal Property.

⁹⁸ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 16, l. 64. CAHJP RU 1883.

Jewish individuals to seek burial outside of the setting that otherwise would have aligned most closely with their personal beliefs.

When visiting a cemetery, the most immediately striking feature of the site was its external fence, or, as we will see, the lack thereof. These fences sometimes took the form of a cement or brick wall encircling the perimeter of the cemetery, completely obscuring the territory from outside view. In other locations, cemetery fences were constructed out of metal bars or, in more rural locations, improvised out of wooden stakes and wire. Even before the Bolshevik Revolution, cemeteries were legally required to be fenced off.⁹⁹ At the most basic level, fences served an important symbolic role by providing a psychological division between the domain of the living and the land of the dead. However, cemetery fences also served important practical roles, such as protecting cemeteries from vandals, robbers, and grazing livestock.¹⁰⁰ Fences also protected cemeteries from territorial encroachment by neighboring individuals and institutions.¹⁰¹ Within cemeteries, it was also quite common for individual graves or family plots to be encircled by metal fences, a meter or more in height. In cemeteries where Jews and non-Jews were buried in adjacent sections, fences around individual graves offered a symbolic separation between Jewish and gentiles that the cemetery landscape itself could not provide. Of course, non-Jewish graves also included fences around grave plots, but they did not serve the same symbolic purpose. For both Jews and non-Jews, grave plot fences helped to deter vandalism and to protect gravestones from falling trees. Furthermore, within non-Jewish family plots, it was common to

⁹⁹ GARF f. 6991, op. 4, d. 19, l. 214. CAHJP RU 1755.

¹⁰⁰ In both urban and rural areas, cemeteries frequently became easy grazing ground for livestock, a problem that continues to this day in many areas, as I experienced at the Northern Cemetery in Balta (Odesa Oblast, Ukraine) where there were turkeys and cows grazing.

¹⁰¹ E.g. The rear section of Zhytomyr's Jewish cemetery was gradually swallowed up by the construction of parking garages.

construct small benches and tables where families would enjoy picnics next to their relatives' graves.¹⁰² For the most part, Soviet Jews upheld the Jewish taboo against eating and drinking in cemeteries.¹⁰³ As time went on, some Jewish families added benches to their family plots. However, even in international cemeteries, this practice remained unusual among Jews.

Historically, most Jewish cemeteries contained a building for the ritual preparation of bodies prior to burial. Under Soviet rule, many Jewish communities were forbidden from using these facilities. While some of these buildings began to be used as storage space for groundskeepers or were used as guardhouses, others fell into disrepair and either collapsed or were demolished. In June 1955, Gostev—the Deputy Representative for CARC in Moscow—wrote to Shvaiko—the Deputy CARC Commissioner of the UkSSR—regarding the use of ritual facilities. Gostev notes that these structures are a regular feature of both Muslim and Jewish cemeteries throughout the Soviet Union. Like all other facilities used by religious groups, they should be rented out to local religious communities by local state officials. For example, Gostev notes that Moscow's Jewish community rents a facility for the washing of bodies in the city's Jewish cemetery. The standard rate is five rubles per square meter per month, totaling 60 rubles per month for the 20-square foot facility. The cost of water service to the building is an additional 50 rubles per month, plus 50 rubles a month in maintenance fees. Thus, the total cost to the Jewish community for utilizing the facility is around 3,000 rubles per year, regardless of the number of individuals buried. In contrast, Gostev criticizes the Chernivtsi (Chernivtsi Oblast,

¹⁰² Symbolically dining with the dead is an important feature of East Slavic burial culture. It's customary to leave a shot of vodka next to the gravestone. Of course, this attracts alcoholics to cemeteries.

¹⁰³ According to Talmud Megillah 29a, one may not act frivolously in a cemetery, which is commonly understood to include eating and drinking. The same passage also prohibits grazing livestock in a cemetery or otherwise showing disrespect for the dead by deriving benefit from the cemetery.

Ukraine) *gorsovet*¹⁰⁴ for charging 50 rubles per burial from the local Jewish community. Even though CARC generally sought to absent itself from questions of cemetery management, in this instance, Gostev clarifies CARC's position on the matter: usage fees should be based exclusively on the square footage of the rental facility and not on usage.¹⁰⁵ Such questions of rental policy are just one example of the way cemeteries brought local and Union-level administrators into contact with each other and with local Jewish communities. Each of these actors brought competing priorities and concerns to their interactions, and for this reason, cemetery management is an ideal setting to analyze the complex, postwar fate of Jewish ritual and communal life.

In addition to the fences, layout, and architectural features of these cemeteries, their very topography and natural history conveys many stories. Soviet cemeteries generally did not utilize underground concrete or metal vaults to prevent graves from sinking. Thus, the telltale sign of a current or former cemetery is its distinctively dimpled terrain—a trait that remained apparent even after gravestones had collapsed, disappeared, or been demolished. When visiting public parks in former Soviet cities, the best indicator that the area was once a cemetery is uneven ground underfoot. In places where cemeteries evaded demolition, sinking graves nevertheless inflicted significant damage on gravestones and sped their deterioration. Wind and rain also took a toll on gravestones, particularly those made of harder materials such as granite. While these materials were more resistant to breakage, the harder stone prevented engravers from carving more deeply into the stone, allowing the surface to erode rapidly.¹⁰⁶ For example, in Berdychiv

¹⁰⁴ City council.

¹⁰⁵ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 1, d. 194, l. 88. CAHUP RU 1879. According to Altshuler, the local authorities eventually agreed to surrender the building to the local Jewish community without charging any rental fees. However, as the anti-religious efforts of the late 1950s intensified, rental charges were reinstated (*Religion and Jewish Identity*, 226).

¹⁰⁶ After the war, this traditional “boot” gravestone design fell out of use.

(Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine), as in many other towns prior to the Second World War, the traditional gravestone design was a granite “boot”—foot facing toward Jerusalem—with the epitaph carved on the “sole.” Because the engravings were quite shallow, even the gravestones erected immediately before the Second World War are now illegible. In contrast, softer materials such as sandstone allowed for more dramatic relief techniques that withstood the ravages of weather more successfully. For example, in the old Jewish cemetery in Bar (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine), elaborate gravestones from the eighteenth century have survived and are still clearly legible. Generally speaking, softer stones were more readily available in Ukraine than in Belarus; although, in the northern regions of Ukraine, granite was the most widely available material and, thus, the most affordable option.¹⁰⁷

In combination with demographic changes, botanical factors also played an important role in the postwar fate of Jewish cemeteries. Despite the comparatively short growing season in Eastern Europe, natural overgrowth resulting from a lack of regular, thorough maintenance took a dramatic toll on cemeteries—destroying gravestones and rendering cemeteries inaccessible to visitors. For example, in Bershad’ (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine), as of 2014, the entire pre-war section of the cemetery had become completely overgrown with vines and shrubs that now resemble small trees. The local community has successfully raised enough money to mow the postwar section on a regular basis; however, not enough visitors inquire about pre-war graves to justify clearing the older sections of the cemetery. Such questions of maintenance and survival were just as pressing during the Soviet era, complicating these sites’ function as active burial grounds. Widespread traditional taboos against visiting Jewish cemeteries frequently had long contributed to natural overgrowth. However, in the wake of the Holocaust, many Jewish

¹⁰⁷ For a study of the rich visual culture of traditional Jewish gravestones in Southwestern Ukraine, see David Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones*.

cemeteries were left with very few potential caretakers in the local Jewish community, and as we will see, the Soviet state generally had more pressing concerns than maintaining Jewish cemeteries.

The Holocaust shaped the Jewish cemetery landscape in many other physical and symbolic ways. In towns across the occupied Soviet Union, the Nazis demolished pre-war Jewish cemeteries, famously repurposing gravestones as construction materials for roads and other building projects. For example, during the German and Romanian occupation in Iampil' (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine), the occupiers destroyed the Jewish cemetery on Tisha b'Av and used the gravestones to pave the sidewalk in front of the local District Council. After the war, the local Jewish community had no way to identify the graves of their relatives.¹⁰⁸

In the Jewish cemetery in Khmel'nytskyi¹⁰⁹ (Kamianets-Podil'skyi Oblast, Ukraine), all the prewar gravestones were damaged during the German occupation, and after the war, neither the local Jewish population nor the *gorkomkhoz* stepped forward to care for the cemetery. In a November 1946 report, Popov, the CARC Commissioner for the Kamianets-Podil'skyi Oblast, claims, "according to Jewish religious traditions, Jews virtually never visit the graves of their relatives."¹¹⁰ Given traditional Jewish taboos against visiting cemeteries more than a few times a year, Jews, indeed, visited the graves of their relatives far less frequently than their non-Jewish neighbors. While this taboo did not in any way diminish the sacredness of the Jewish cemetery, Jews' perceived indifference toward cemeteries made it easier for Soviet officials to pass demolition orders for "unused" cemeteries based on the assumption that the local Jewish

¹⁰⁸ GAVO f. R-2700, op. 7, d. 404, l. 193. CAHJP RU 1981.

¹⁰⁹ Known as Proskurov until in 1954.

¹¹⁰ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 14, l. 20. CAHJP RU 1882.

community was indifferent toward the cemetery or no longer had any use for it, either for continued burials or for visiting existing graves.

In addition to the wartime destruction of Jewish cemeteries, the Nazi occupation also contributed to the postwar vulnerability of Jewish cemeteries under Soviet administration. Even though CARC officials acknowledged the damage inflicted on Jewish cemeteries by the war,¹¹¹ they did little to ameliorate these conditions or to prevent further decay of these sites. For example, in Kropyvnytskyi¹¹² (Kirovohrad Oblast, Ukraine), the Jewish cemetery was destroyed during the war, leaving no trace behind. Following the city's liberation in 1944, city officials repurposed the original area of the cemetery, and burials resumed in a previously unused portion of the cemetery's territory. Although these arrangements were made relatively quickly, a CARC report from December 1946 notes that Kropyvnytskyi *gorsovet* had neglected to assign a guard to the cemetery or to construct a fence around the new cemetery territory. As a result, a side road had been constructed through the middle of the cemetery.¹¹³ Similarly, in Mykolaiv, Ukraine, the Jewish cemetery had also been destroyed during the war, leaving it with no markers to demarcate its territory. As of October 1946, a car storage facility had encroached on the territory of the Mykolaiv Jewish cemetery, complicating access to the site since car storage units now littered the access road.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ For example, a 1947 report from Vil'khovyi to Polianskii acknowledged that the "German occupiers damaged many cemeteries in Ukraine, especially Jewish and Roman Catholic cemeteries" (TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 28, l. 8. CAHJP RU 1886).

¹¹² Known as Kirovohrad until 2016.

¹¹³ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 17, l. 26. CAHJP RU 1884.

¹¹⁴ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 17, l. 43. CAHJP RU 1884. This cemetery seems to have been "lost" since the only remaining cemetery in Mykolaiv is in an agricultural area. See IAJGS, "Nikolaev," Jewish Cemetery Project, <http://www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org/ukraine/nikolaev.html> (accessed 12 May 2016). In Bar (and in many other Soviet cities), postwar housing projects encroached on the territory of existing cemeteries, reducing their size but allowing them to continue to function. See IAJGS, "Bar," Jewish Cemetery Project, <http://www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org/ukraine/bar.html> (accessed 18 May 2016).

In other towns and cities, *Einsatzgruppen* left the local Jewish cemeteries intact but utilized them as sites for conducting shootings, adding mass graves to the local map of death.¹¹⁵ As we will see in the final chapter, after the war, many Jewish communities gathered the remains of Jews from smaller shooting sites and transferred them to the local Jewish cemetery—a step that greatly simplified both the commemoration and upkeep of mass graves.¹¹⁶ For families and individuals, cemeteries offered other ways to commemorate relatives who had died in the war even if there were no physical remains to bury. It became common practice for Soviet Jewish families to add the names of relatives who had died in the war and the Holocaust to the graves of those who died after the war, either on the gravestone itself or on a small plaque attached to the burial plot’s fence.¹¹⁷

The final chapter of my dissertation will address the Soviet Jewish memorial landscape as it relates specifically to the Holocaust. In this chapter, however, I focus on the survival and evolution of Soviet Jewish cemeteries themselves; the interactions of state, community, family, and individuals within these sites; and the ways these local sites highlight the disappearance, persistence, and hybridization of traditional Jewish mourning practices. Precisely because cemeteries fell beyond CARC’s direct oversight, they were not subject to the same degree of anti-religious surveillance and harassment as public religious institutions such as synagogues.

¹¹⁵ For example, in Dyatlovo (Grodno Oblast, Belarus), on 6 August 1942, the Nazis led 2,000-3,000 Jews to one of the two local Jewish cemeteries, forced them to dig three large pits, and executed them on the spot. For photographs of the site and the surrounding gravestones, see: Wikimedia Commons, “Jewish cemetery in Dyatlovo,” https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Jewish_cemetery_in_Dyatlovo (accessed 10 Dec 2015). For more on the Jewish history of Dyatlovo, see: Virtual Shtetl, “Istoriia- Evreiskoe soobschestvo – Zdzięcioł.”

¹¹⁶ E.g. Bobruisk (Mogilev Oblast, Belarus).

¹¹⁷ At times, it is difficult to tell if these “additional” individuals are physically buried in the plot, especially if no year of death is given. However, in cases where dates are included, anyone whose date of death fell between 1941 and 1944 was likely buried elsewhere or simply disappeared. This assumption is not reliable in areas that fell under Romanian occupation, since Romanians did not conduct mass shootings and allowed Jews who died in the ghettos to be buried in the local Jewish cemetery. E.g. Mohyliv-Podil’skyi (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine), Balta (Odesa Oblast, Ukraine), Bershad’ (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine), etc.

This made them more accessible to secular Jews and Jews who could not run the risk of participating in public religious life. Instead, family grave plots served as a semi-private extension of the domestic sphere that permitted the expression of traditional rituals and beliefs; reminded secular Jews of abandoned Jewish practices and “outdated” taboos; and encouraged the continued performance of many other traditional cemetery rituals.¹¹⁸ Because many Soviet Jewish cemeteries often pre-dated the Bolshevik Revolution, their very landscape resisted the imposition of new organizational philosophies and sustained older patterns of behavior.

Cemetery Policy: Controversies in Proper Use and Management

While Soviet Jewish individuals and families enjoyed substantial leeway to utilize relatives’ gravesites as an extension of their homes, this did not mean that Jewish communities had free reign over cemeteries. Instead, as CARC records reveal, Jewish families and communities entered a complex relationship with CARC officials and municipal authorities as they negotiated the proper care and use of cemeteries.

Pragmatism and The Limits of Religious Accommodation

While an ideological commitment to internationalism and universalism governed Soviet policies toward the living, a pragmatic, even respectful, tolerance generally shaped Soviet policies toward burial. As we have already seen, the Soviet state generally left the pre-revolutionary burial landscape intact, threatening these sites only when demographic pressures and developmental priorities impelled demolition. Although there are many instances of

¹¹⁸ Among the most enduring was the custom of placing stones on graves as a sort of “calling card” to the dead. Secular Soviet Jews retained a sense that “Jews don’t bring flowers” to the cemetery.

bureaucratic insensitivity and neglect, administrative improvisation and pragmatism encouraged moderate policies that accommodated the maintenance of denominational identities and religious practices.

CARC records rarely mention funeral services, presumably because they could be completed quickly and did not leave any visible traces, aside from a fresh grave covered in flowers and a non-descript, temporary grave marker. Furthermore, CARC viewed the conduct of religious burial services in cemeteries as fully legitimate. For example, in response to a 1973 letter from a private citizen requesting permission to perform a religious funeral service for his mother, Logvinenko—the CARC Commissioner for the Minsk Oblast—replied that such services could be freely held in both houses of worship and in cemeteries without requiring special permission.¹¹⁹

CARC also displayed some sensitivity to the desire of citizens to be buried in confessional cemeteries. In 1945, a bereaved Jewish father from the Chernivtsi Oblast in Ukraine appealed to the CARC Commissioner in Kyiv asking for permission to rebury his only son—twenty-two-year-old Beni Moishkovich Taicher—to a Jewish cemetery. Due to a misunderstanding, his son had been buried in a Christian cemetery and his grave marked with a cross. A handwritten comment in the margins of the letter, made by a CARC official, grants permission for reburial provided that local Chernivtsi administrators could verify that the son's body was indeed buried in a Christian cemetery, as opposed to a Jewish or an “international” cemetery. While this response does not guarantee the Jewish burial that the father had requested and certainly asserts the values of Soviet internationalism above ethno-religious loyalties, the

¹¹⁹ GAMnO f. 812, op. 1, d. 50, l. 2-3. As we will see in a later chapter, other religious ceremonies were generally not permitted on cemetery territory.

CARC representative also displays sensitivity to the undesirability of seeing one's child buried under the banner of a different religious confession.¹²⁰

The tendency to tolerate religious expressions in the funerary realm extended not just toward Jews, but toward a wide range of religious denominations. For example, in the multinational port city of Odessa, smaller ethno-religious groups such as Tatars, Karaites, and Roma did not have sufficient numbers to justify the creation of separate cemeteries. As non-Christian minorities, these groups strongly objected to burial in the presence of crosses. Thus, Odessa's Second International Cemetery, which offered numerous separate burial sections for various Christian denominations, could not accommodate these non-Christian minorities. Instead, these groups were allocated improvised sub-sections on the periphery of the city's Third Jewish Cemetery, a location where Christian symbols and imagery were entirely absent.

This is not to suggest that CARC and local officials adopted a laissez-faire approach to burial policy. Accommodation existed within firm limits. Ever on guard against the expansion of the religious influence beyond the walls of the synagogue, CARC saw any effort by Jewish religious communities to engage secular Jews—often around mourning and burial—as opportunistic at best, exploitative at worst. In November 1949, Birman—the central CARC inspector for the Jewish religion¹²¹—issued a secret memorandum regarding the activities of unregistered minyans, paying particular attention to the undesirability of their involvement in burial activities,¹²² which Birman saw as tools for drawing secular Jews into the religious community's sphere of influence. Although CARC was willing to accommodate traditional

¹²⁰ GACHO f. 623, op. 2, d. 4, l. 14. CAHJP 1960.

¹²¹ From Birman's reports, his complete ignorance of Jewish religious life is woefully apparent. It seems that he was appointed Inspector for the Jewish Religious Community simply because of his Jewish background.

¹²² GARF f. 6991, op. 3, d. 61, l. 153. CAHJP RU 1801.

burials for practicing Jews, it saw religious burials for secular Jews as evidence of nationalistic tendencies—expanding the religious community’s influence based on “outmoded” tribal loyalties.

In 1946, Birman had complained that Jewish burial societies, in addition to conducting burial rituals, were seizing control over cemeteries, which legally belonged to the local Departments for Communal Property, and were brazenly selling burial plots and forcing the families of non-religious Jews to accept religious burial in these sites.¹²³ In his 1949 report, Birman again complained that Jewish religious communities in major Soviet cities maintained control over the local Jewish cemeteries, ignoring the supervision of the local departments for Communal Property. In Birman’s view, the communities were using the cemetery as a convenient site for stirring up Jewish nationalistic-religious sentiments for a profit. Birman repeats the same claim that Jewish communities were pressuring secular families to bury their relatives according to religious rituals to which the deceased would never have agreed.¹²⁴

Birman’s complaints were not limited to the recently deceased. For example, Birman criticizes Rabbi Shlifer—the rabbi of the Moscow Choral Synagogue and de facto Chief Rabbi of the Soviet Union—for seeking CARC’s permission to transfer the remains of Grigorii Borisovich Iollos (1859-1907)—a member of the pre-revolutionary Duma—from the Dorogomilovskoe Orthodox cemetery to the Vostriakovskoe Jewish cemetery.¹²⁵ When CARC inquired as to why Moscow’s Jewish religious community had taken an interest in Iollos’ grave and asked for

¹²³ RGASPI f. 17, op. 125, d. 405, l. 100. CAHJP RU 1816.3.

¹²⁴ GARF f. 6991, op. 3, d. 61, l. 159-60. CAHJP RU 1801.

¹²⁵ The cemetery had been founded in 1770 as a Russian Orthodox Cemetery with a Jewish section that was added in 1788. The entire cemetery was demolished in the late 1930s, though some famous graves were left and gradually transferred to other cemeteries, including the Vostriakovskoe Jewish cemetery, which had been opened in the early 1930s. See A.T. Saladin, “Dorogomilovskoe Nekropol’.”

clarification on whether or not Iollos was in fact religious, Rabbi Shlifer argued that since Iollos was a Jew and had been murdered by the Black Hundreds, the synagogue should clearly be involved in his burial, regardless of whether or not he had been religious. Drawing on Christian language of sainthood, Shlifer asserted that “all Jews killed in war or at the hands of enemies of the people are considered canonized by the synagogue, regardless of their religious convictions.”¹²⁶ Such claims were anathema to the Soviet state, which endeavored to suppress Jews’ national status and was willing only to acknowledge Jews as a religious community—albeit, one destined to die out along with all other religious denominations. From CARC’s perspective, Shlifer’s efforts to interfere in Iollos’ burial evinced religious overreach and nationalistic ambitions.

Even as it sought to articulate clear limits on the involvement of Jewish religious communities in burials, CARC also sought to limit the influence of religious communities in cemetery usage and management. In 1947, the Jewish community in Mogilev (Mogilev Oblast, Belarus) applied to the local *gorkomkhoz*¹²⁷ for permission to conduct burials in accordance with Jewish religious practices. The *gorispolkom*¹²⁸ approved this request. Additionally, it ordered the construction of a fence around the local Jewish cemetery to remedy the cemetery’s “chaotic” state.¹²⁹ Considering the shortage of raw materials in the Soviet Union at the time, this was a generous gesture that demonstrated the *gorispolkom*’s commitment to the preservation of the Jewish cemetery. Nevertheless, there were limits to what even the most sympathetic local

¹²⁶ GARF f. 6991, op. 3, d. 61, l. 160. CAHJP RU 1801.

¹²⁷ City Department for Communal Property

¹²⁸ City Executive Committee.

¹²⁹ NARB f. 952, op. 2, d. 11, l. 7. CAHJP RU 1827. Unfortunately, I have no other archival sources on the Mogilev Jewish community in the 1940s. The State Archive for the Mogilev Oblast [GAMogO] has not preserved any CARC records prior to 1954.

administrators would accommodate. In the summer of 1947, a group of Mogilev Jews petitioned the *gorispolkom* to open an explicitly religious Jewish cemetery with a prayer house inside of it. Only two synagogues in Mogilev had survived the Second World War, and despite the city's sizeable population of 8,000 Jews (35-40% of whom were religious), the Soviet authorities refused to return the synagogues to the Jewish community after the war. Instead, the synagogues were assigned to other uses. The Mogilev Jewish community's petition to open a house of prayer within a cemetery was likely an effort to offset the loss of the pre-war synagogues. However, as the community discovered, expanding formal religious life into the cemetery was clearly not something the *gorispolkom* was prepared to condone, and it rejected the community's petition.¹³⁰ In Mogilev and many other locales, Jewish communities received significant accommodations from CARC as well as local and regional administrators to continue individual burials in accordance with religious traditions. However, efforts to expand the role of Jewish cemeteries into general-purpose religious institutions met with swift resistance.

Efforts by Jewish communities to renovate cemeteries or launch construction projects on cemetery property also drew harsh censure, likely because these efforts asserted a sort of private "ownership" over land that was legally public. Between August and early September, 1946, Novikov—the CARC Commissioner for the Poltava Oblast in Ukraine—visited the Jewish cemeteries in Poltava, Kremenchuk, and Lubny. During the German occupation, these cemeteries had fallen into "barbaric condition," the gravestones and markers had been overturned and had become commodities on the black market. Three years after liberation, local Soviet and Party organizations had done little to remedy the situation and, in fact, had only exacerbated it. Although the *gorkomkhoz* in each of these cities had been given a budget of

¹³⁰ NARB F. 952, op. 2, d. 16, l. 6. CAHJP RU 1830.

20,000 rubles for cemetery upkeep, none of them had utilized the funds. Instead, roads had been constructed through cemeteries. Furthermore, the guard of the Jewish cemetery in Lubny had dug up part of the cemetery, presumably in search of gold teeth and other valuables.¹³¹ In Kremenchuk and Poltava, the guards allowed their animals and those of their friends to graze there.¹³² Considering *gorkomkhoz* indifference,¹³² religious Jews in these three cities had appealed to Novikov, asking that the oblast's Jewish cemeteries be handed over to their care. Novikov rejected their request since cemeteries were city property and accused the community of pursuing "a political and nationalistic agenda regarding the matter." To stave off future appeals and to resolve the question permanently, Novikov wrote to the head of the *oblispolkom* asking that it take appropriate measures to ensure that the cemeteries would be properly maintained.¹³³

By mid-1948, the Kremenchuk *gorsovet* had repaired the Jewish graves vandalized by Nazis, and the city's Jewish community wrote to the *gorsovet* to express gratitude for these improvements. However, the community made an additional request that all the cemetery's graves be fenced off, especially those with more elaborate gravestones. Appealing to local officials' sense of frugality, the community stated that its members did not wish to burden the *gorispolkom* with the expense of this project, and therefore, requested permission to collect funds from the local Jewish population to fund the effort.¹³⁴ In response, the Deputy CARC Commissioner of the UkSSR, Sazonov, ordered the new CARC Commissioner of the Poltava

¹³¹ This practice, known as "black archaeology" is still practiced today in cemeteries, and in particular, at the sites of mass shootings (e.g. in the villages of Liubomirka and Radians'ke, just outside of Bershad'). With the exception of gold teeth, what the individuals involved find remains a mystery. Most Jewish communities provided very simple burials, sometimes without even a coffin. However, in some towns, such as Chechersk (Gomel' Oblast, Belarus), there is a local custom to bury individuals' objects that they used in daily life, such as eyeglasses.

¹³² TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 14, l. 16. CAHJP RU 1882.

¹³³ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 14, l. 16-17. CAHJP RU 1882.

¹³⁴ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 50, l. 73. CAHJP RU 1893.

Oblast, Alekseev, to meet with three to five members of the Jewish community and to remind them that all cemeteries fell under the authority of the *gorkomkhoz*. Consequently, all cemetery improvements were to be handled by that office, not by the local Jewish community.¹³⁵

Other Jewish communities launched even more elaborate construction projects in the local Jewish cemetery and elicited stronger responses from CARC. In 1946, without first consulting CARC, the *raispolkom* had permitted the Jewish religious community in Vinnytsia to construct a building for the washing and preparation of bodies for burial at the cemetery. The project was carried out with the cooperation of the local Department of Communal Property and the burial bureau. Despite the rigidity of central policy on cemetery ownership and management, enforcement at the regional and local level remained uneven, especially since Jewish communal involvement in cemetery affairs often relieved local officials of the fiscal burdens associated with cemetery management and development. Some oblast and city-level CARC officials responded to the failings of the *gorkomkhoz*y by vocally advocating for citizen involvement in cemetery upkeep.¹³⁶ However, senior CARC officials generally intervened to reaffirm the boundaries of appropriate behavior by a religious community. Writing to the Secretary of Agitprop for the Vinnytsia *obkom*,¹³⁷ the CARC Commissioner for the Vinnytsia Oblast, Shumkov, complained, “Religious communities do not have the right to own property, and the

¹³⁵ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 50, l. 74. CAHJP RU 1893.

¹³⁶ E.g. Voloshkevich, the CARC Commissioner for the Rivne oblast, wrote to Vil’khovyi in September 1946 recommending that both the *gorkomkhoz*y and *raikomkhoz*y needed to devote more attention to cemetery issues. At the same time, he recommended the involvement of citizens’ participation in the care of cemeteries (TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 17, l. 72. CAHJP RU 1884). Writing in 1946, Brachev and Uzkov observed that “local CARC commissioners have actually cooperated with [Jewish burial] societies in renovating cemeteries” precisely because “CARC has still not determined its policy toward these societies.” RGASPI f. 17, op. 125, d. 405, l. 101. CAHJP RU 1816.3.

¹³⁷ Oblast Committee.

structure which was erected in the [Vinnytsia] cemetery cost 35,000 rubles. The building must be confiscated immediately and be registered in the state trust.”¹³⁸

That same year, both the Kharkiv Jewish community and another, unspecified Jewish community in the Zhytomyr Oblast built small structures at their own expense in the local Jewish cemeteries for preparing bodies for burial.¹³⁹ In February 1948, Vil’khovyi wrote to the CARC Commissioner for the Kharkiv Oblast, M.A. Pereslavskii, regarding the Kharkiv Jewish community’s complaint that the Kharkiv *gorispolkom* had confiscated its new cemetery structure. Rather than restoring the building to the community, Vil’khovyi reprimanded Pereslavskii for granting the community permission to construct the structure in the first place:

In accordance with the secret instructions of the *sovnarkom*¹⁴⁰ of the USSR from 28 Jan 1946 (No 232, p. 101), absolutely no construction of prayer houses or other ritual structures is permitted without the permission of CARC USSR. The Jewish religious community has absolutely no connection to the cemetery since cemetery care is under the exclusive domain of the Burial Bureau of the *gorispolkom*. Furthermore, the religious community should recognize that not only religious people are buried in the cemetery, and the relatives of the non-religious don’t need ritual ceremonies.¹⁴¹

Vil’khovyi instructed Pereslavskii to schedule a meeting with the local rabbi to explain “the correctness of the *gorispolkom*’s actions.”¹⁴² To the degree that CARC officials were willing to tolerate *chevra kadishas* as competitors to the local burial bureau, they demanded that Jewish communities formally rent the necessary facilities from the local authorities.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ GAVO f. R-2700, op. 19, d. 35, l. 26-7. CAHJP RU 1987.

¹³⁹ TsDAGOU f. 1, op. 23, d. 4555, l. 61. CAHJP 1996.

¹⁴⁰ Council of People’s Commissars.

¹⁴¹ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 33, l. 233. CAHJP RU 1888.

¹⁴² TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 33, l. 233. CAHJP RU 1888.

¹⁴³ For example, in March 1959, Urychev (the CARC Commissioner of the Chernivtsi oblast) insisted that the city administration should accommodate all citizens who request to use facilities in the cemetery for the ritual preparation of corpses. However, he notes that use of the facility should be for a price (TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 278, l. 47-8. RU 1923).

In January 1947, Shevchenko—the CARC Commissioner for the Zhytomyr Oblast—wrote to CARC USSR to inform senior leadership that the Jewish community in Zhytomyr was constructing a guardhouse in the city’s Jewish cemetery. Although the construction was being financed at the community’s own expense and using its own labor, the project had not received permission from either local officials or CARC representatives. In his reply, the Deputy Representative of CARC USSR, Sadovskii, cited NKVD UkSSR instructions from 15 October 1924 stipulating:

religious communities and private individuals do not have the right to take charge of burials, or to profit from them, or to interfere in the running of cemeteries. [...] Even if the cemetery is located on the same property as a house of prayer, it does not belong to the religious community. [And] Even if the religious community unofficially runs the cemeteries or uses the cemetery structures, it does not mean that the community has legal rights over the cemetery or [the right] to build structures therein without official permission [from local officials].

Accordingly, Sadovskii suggested that the Zhytomyr *gorkomkhoz* should demand that the local Jewish community transfer ownership of the guardhouse to the municipal communal fund. Barring that, he recommended that the structure be moved to a different site or, with judicial approval, simply be demolished.¹⁴⁴

Fundraising activities for cemetery upkeep also aroused intense suspicion and condemnation. As early as 1946, CARC officials across the Soviet Union began to voice concerns about fundraising as a form of speculation and profiteering in Jewish religious communities. For example, a 1950 CARC report on religious life in the Odesa and Izmail¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 26, l. 3-3a. CAHJP RU 1885. The question is whether the construction falls under the *Postanovleniia of the SNK SSSR* from 28 Jan 1946. The fact that the Zhytomyr Jewish community chose to intervene in cemetery management by constructing a guardhouse indicates that the cemetery itself was in relatively decent repair at the time. In many communities, the construction of a guardhouse would have been a frivolous, superfluous expenditure relative to the need for basic upkeep of cemetery grounds.

¹⁴⁵ In 1954, the Izmail’ Oblast was incorporated into the Odesa Oblast.

Oblasts, describes an unemployed individual by the name of Bershatskii. Apparently, he had taken responsibility for the protection of the Jewish cemetery in Kiliia (Odesa Oblast, Ukraine). “With the goal of profitmaking,” he went door-to-door visiting Jewish families to solicit donations for the Kiliia Jewish cemetery. With the proceeds, he hired a guard for the cemetery, paying him 150 rubles.¹⁴⁶ In this report, the unemployed Bershatskii fits the model of a “parasitic” individual who doubtlessly pocketed a percentage of his fundraising proceeds. Furthermore, he brazenly hired a private employee to care for publicly owned land. From CARC’s perspective, Bershatskii was simply one eccentric individual. However, when entire Jewish communities undertook similar fundraising projects, fears of private enterprise were soon conflated with fears of nationalism and “proselyting.”

In 1947, the CARC Commissioner of the Polesia Oblast¹⁴⁷ reported that the Jewish community of Mozyr’ (Gomel’ Oblast, Belarus) had been actively soliciting charitable donations for various communal projects. Between Mozyr’ and nearby Kalinkovichi, the local Jewish community consisted of 550 Jewish families. With this sizeable base, the Jewish community of Mozyr’ was able to expend 7,000 rubles on cemetery renovations in 1946. Other suspicious activities included the occasional gift of 200-250 rubles to Jewish families in need and the community’s collection of 9,000 rubles to aid war orphans. Similarly, in a November 1946 report, two CARC employees, Brachev and Uzkov acknowledged that the Jewish cemetery of Berdychiv (Zhytomyr Oblast, UkSSR) had fallen under the control of the local Jewish community, which had built a gatehouse and fenced off the cemetery. Brachev and Uzkov also note the community’s involvement in cemetery management, efforts to construct a monument on

¹⁴⁶ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 88, l. 45-6. CAHJP RU 1900.

¹⁴⁷ Mozyr’ was the administrative center of the Polesia Oblast until January 1954, when the oblast was incorporated into the Gomel’ Oblast.

the site of mass shootings, and fundraising campaigns to assist families returning from wartime evacuation. Such activities fell well beyond of activities deemed appropriate for a religious community, and Brachev and Uzkov claimed that such activism was “typical of almost every Jewish community” at the time.¹⁴⁸ From CARC’s perspective, such activities constituted shameless bribes to ingratiate secular Jews to the religious community.¹⁴⁹ Religious and secular Jews constituted two distinct communities according to CARC, and the former should have no jurisdiction or influence over the latter.

Fundraising that extended to the international Jewish community aroused even sharper condemnation. Turning to the Jewish community in Boryslav (L’viv Oblast, Ukraine), Brachev and Uzkov report that it had recently renovated the local Jewish cemetery, spending approximately 100,000 rubles in the process.¹⁵⁰ Funds for the project had been donated by Jewish communities around the world after an appeal by a Jewish member of the Boryslav community: “I ask your help to erect a memorial on the grave of my murdered family,” who were presumably victims of the Nazis during the war. The international donations in response to this appeal had been transferred into Ukraine via Poland.¹⁵¹ The fact that the Boryslav community diverted these funds to a full cemetery renovation only confirmed CARC’s suspicions that the community’s fundraising was a nationalistic project rather than a contained, appropriate response to familial

¹⁴⁸ RGASPI f. 17, op. 125, d. 405, l. 99. CAHJP RU 1816.3. While quite common, these activities were not universal and depended on the size and nature of the remaining Jewish community after the war. For example, a November 1946 report on religious life in the Rivne Oblast notes that there had not been any efforts by religious groups to establish maintenance groups or commissions, despite the fact that the region’s *gorkhomkhozy* and *raikomkhozy* were all but ignoring the preservation and maintenance of cemeteries. See TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 17, l. 72. CAHJP RU 1884.

¹⁴⁹ NARB f. 952, op. 2, d. 10, l. 133. CAHJP RU 1826.

¹⁵⁰ The report also notes that the organizers of the renovation project had pocketed a hefty sum from the project funds.

¹⁵¹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 125, d. 405, l. 101. CAHJP RU 1816.3 1946.

tragedy. Not surprisingly, CARC viewed such fundraising campaigns as gratuitous exploitation of the war and as an inflammatory effort to stir up Jewish nationalism both within the Soviet Union and beyond its borders.

Brachev and Uzkov's reveals a deep uncertainty within CARC as to the "true" nature of Judaism, which fed confusion as to which elements of Jewish ritual were "historical" and "religious" (i.e. authentic) and which were "nationalistic" (i.e. politically-motivated innovations).¹⁵² In the late 1940s, there was a flurry of bureaucratic correspondence as CARC struggled to determine whether the sale of kosher meat, matzah, synagogue honors, and other material or ritual aspects of Jewish life were legitimate expressions of Jewish tradition or simply ploys by the Jewish religious community to broaden its influence and income. Even the idea that Jewish law viewed boys thirteen years of age or older as "adults" was, in CARC's eyes, an effort to expand the reach of the religious community by "proselyting" to minors.¹⁵³

In reality, many religious denominations in the Soviet Union participated in monetary exchanges. For example, in the Russian Orthodox Church, the sale of candles and icons was an essential component of religious life. Traditional Jewish religious life in Eastern Europe involved many monetary transactions in exchange for religious privileges, rituals, and services. In some instances, the exchange of money was treated as a donation in gratitude for having received an honor; in other cases, it was simply a means of coping with demand that exceeded supply. In yet other cases, these costs were clearly related to the labor involved in producing a good or providing a service. This was certainly the case with regard to burial preparations and

¹⁵² For example, see the "Secret Informational report on the work of the CARC Commission for the UkSSR, Oct-Dec 1950," dated 15 Feb 1951, which notes the difficulty of studying the characteristics of Jewish religious holidays, and in particular, of determining which have purely "historical" and "religious" purposes (TsDAGOU f. 1, op. 24, d. 783, l. 56-8, 89-93, 93).

¹⁵³ RGASPI f. 17, op. 125, d. 405, l. 102-3. CAHJP RU 1816.3.

commemorative rituals. Despite these longstanding norms of religious monetary exchange, CARC officials frequently condemned Jewish communal leaders for profiting from the religious services they provided. However, rather than viewing all of Judaism as inherently intolerable, Soviet officials expended considerable effort attempting, and generally, failing, to define an acceptable sphere of influence and range of rituals for Jewish religious life. Furthermore, in the early postwar years, CARC's policies toward local communal leaders were ambiguous at best, and the degree of oversight by oblast and republic-level CARC commissioners varied widely. Thus, the latitude that communal leaders enjoyed depended heavily on the disposition of city and regional officials.

As time went on, CARC's objections to profiteering grew more adamant. For example, in 1949, Vil'khovyi—the CARC Commissioner for the UkSSR—wrote to the CARC Commissioner for the Vinnytsia Oblast, Shumkov, claiming that every Jewish cemetery had a building for the washing and preparation of bodies for burial, and in this building, visitors were expected to leave donations in small boxes [*pushkes*] that were engraved with the traditional admonition, “*tzedoke tatsil memoves*” [charity saves from death]. Shumkov noted that, using these *pushkes*, the Moscow Jewish cemetery was collecting 15-20 thousand rubles per month. Similarly, the Odesa Jewish cemetery was collecting 3,000-5,000 per month, and the Korosten' (Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine) Jewish cemetery, 1,000-2,000 per month. According to Vil'khovyi, Jewish rabbis, communal representatives, and community members would take the money, which had supposedly been gathered for distribution to the needy, and instead, take a “portion” to cover synagogue expenses. In Moscow, for example, the community gave some of the *pushke* funds to the poor but used up to 18,000 rubles per month for synagogue expenditures. Vil'khovyi concluded that these “*pushkes* and the ritual washing facilities are a major source of income,

which are being used by nationalists as an instrument for stirring up a nationalist frenzy.”

Vil’khovyi demanded that *pushkes* be removed from Jewish cemeteries immediately and, should they reappear, be treated as a gross violation of Soviet laws on religion.¹⁵⁴

CARC’s concern with profiteering was especially vehement when Jewish communal activists performed for-profit services that were, in theory, supposed to devolve to secular, state agencies. Such was the case with burial preparations. On 14 October 1946, Kaporin—the CARC Commissioner for the Mykolaiv Oblast—penned a report to the CARC Commissioner of the UkSSR regarding the four cemeteries under his jurisdiction, including one Old Believer cemetery and one Jewish cemetery. He reports that a Jewish man by the name of Levin had taken charge of burying religious Jews in Mykolaiv rather than leaving this task to the local *gorkomkhoz*. Acting as the “self-appointed representative of the unregistered Jewish community” in Mykoaliv, Kaporin explains that, Levin “registers the death with the local authorities [ZAGS], selects a plot for the burial, and then buries the body in accordance with Jewish religious law.” Most suspiciously of all, the revenue from these burials went directly to Levin, making his activities a form of profiteering under Soviet law.¹⁵⁵ Given the severe shortage of rabbis in the Soviet Union after the revolution, and particularly after the Second World War, lay communal leaders such as Levin filled essential roles in local Jewish communities. In many respects, these individuals were crucial for the survival of Jewish life in the postwar era and remain so to this day. Some posed as rabbis to advance their own social status and to extort money from the local Jewish community. For the most part though, these individuals stepped forward under politically

¹⁵⁴ GAVO f. R-2700, op. 19, d. 26, l. 50. CAHJP RU 1987.

¹⁵⁵ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 17, l. 43. CAHJP RU 1884. Birman’s report also expressed strong concerns over “self-appointed representatives of the Jewish people” who exploit Judaism’s “complex dogma,” its unique rituals and traditions for personal gain. See GARF f. 6991, op. 3, d. 61, l. 154. CAHJP RU 1801.

and economically trying circumstances to provide traditional Jewish services and rituals for their communities, particularly in the realm of mourning. However, because of the monetary exchanges involved in many of these rituals, Jewish communal representatives attracted strong suspicion from CARC and other branches of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Over the 1940s and 1950s, the management of Soviet cemeteries increasingly shifted into the hands of local officials, and Jewish communities found their direct control over these sites limited. While this shift often brought improved resources and maintenance to the cemeteries, many of the same questions of jurisdiction and profiteering continued to re-appear in subsequent decades. In July 1960, in Novohrad-Volyns'kyi (Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine), the city's Sanitation Doctor, the head of the *gorkomkhoz*, and the guard of the Jewish cemetery conducted a "sanitary inspection" of the cemetery, which was located at the edge of the city, on the Korosten' Highway. During the inspection, they noted that the cemetery had been fenced, the gates were kept locked, and the *gorkomkhoz* had hired the guard, Rybalkin, to protect the cemetery and to conduct all burials. Nevertheless, the representative of the local Jewish community—Avrum Ivankovitser—had taken charge of deciding where graves would be dug. This continued despite repeated warnings from the *gorkomkhoz* not to interfere in burial logistics. Residents of Korosten' Street, adjacent to the cemetery, complained of graves being placed next to residential homes. During the sanitary inspection, the inspection party found that sixteen graves, including one mass grave, were located only five meters away from residential homes. Rybalkin and the other inspectors placed the blame for these improper burials on Ivankovitser even though Rybalkin was ostensibly in charge of conducting the actual burials.¹⁵⁶ Regardless of who was responsible for this sanitary violation, the story of Novohrad-

¹⁵⁶ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 300, l. 83. CAHJP.

Volyns'kyi's Jewish cemetery illustrates the continued involvement of Jewish communal leaders in cemetery affairs, the persistent lack of steady oversight, and the ongoing efforts by CARC and local officials to maintain order.¹⁵⁷ Throughout, Soviet officials walked a delicate tightrope as they granted religious communities permission to maintain many aspects of traditional burial ritual while simultaneously restricting the same communities' influence.

The Protection and Maintenance of Soviet Jewish Cemeteries

Beyond the performance of burial rituals, CARC officers, city officials, and local Jewish communities also became embroiled in turf battles over the protection and maintenance of cemeteries. In an effort to absolve itself of responsibility for the management of confessional cemeteries, CARC records frequently cite a SNK RSFSR directive from 7 December 1918, which ordered that the care and protection of cemeteries be assigned to the *gorkomkhozy* in urban areas and to the *sel'sovety*¹⁵⁸ in rural areas.¹⁵⁹ According to Peshekhonov's 1947 report:

¹⁵⁷ Such concerns were not unique to the Jewish community. A 1960 letter from Labus, the CARC Representative of the BSSR to Ponamarev, the CARC Representative for the Minsk Oblast, noted that a number of Catholic religious groups had violated Soviet laws regarding cemeteries by illegally building structures, erecting crosses, assigning burial plots in the cemeteries (sometimes even preventing people that the community didn't approve of from being buried), and conducting unauthorized religious ceremonies. Labus expresses concern that the aforementioned activities will strengthen religious sentiments among workers and profit religious leaders who receive payment for their services. He demanded that religious leaders be warned against conducting religious services, and the visitation of graves on religious holidays (GAMnO f. 3651, op. 1, d. 6, l. 165-166). Although this memo shares some similarities with documents about Jewish communities and their use of cemeteries, CARC does seem to have placed a particular emphasis on monitoring Jewish activities in cemeteries because of the dual concern with profiteering and nationalism.

¹⁵⁸ Village councils.

¹⁵⁹ E.g. TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 28, l. 98. CAHJP RU 1886. In the mid-1940s *gorkomkhozy* in Soviet cities began to establish burial bureau [*pokhoronnoe biuro*] subunits to manage cemeteries. Unfortunately, every city archive that I visited reported that these bureaus' files had been destroyed, presumably because the archivists assumed they would not be of interest. Sifting through the entire record base of the *gorkomkhozy* in search of correspondence with the burial bureaus was impractical. So I was left with scattered references in CARC materials. Mozyr is the only exception. Its burial bureau was established in 1944. Sadly, the Poleskaia Oblast was liquidated in 1954 and conjoined with the Gomel Oblast (whose burial bureau records have not survived).

local *gorkomkhozy* and the *sel'sovety* bear responsibility... for the opening of new cemeteries, the closure of old cemeteries, and maintaining them under proper conditions. Local organs of power are responsible for ensuring that cemeteries are fenced, for properly planning these sites, for landscaping, for upholding sanitary regulations regarding the method and means of conducting burials, for the external appearance of cemeteries, etc. They must also maintain the gravestones of distinguished public figures from the realm of social or political work, the revolutionary movement, science, art, and those gravestones that in and of themselves are of significant historical-artistic value. Lastly, *gorkomkhozy* and the *sel'sovety* should observe and prevent the conduct of events and behaviors that might damage the wellbeing of cemeteries or lead to their defilement. [Furthermore,] In accordance with instructions, the cemetery administrations have the right charge fees [for their services, as long as they do], not exceeding the cost of burying the dead (i.e. digging and preparing graves).¹⁶⁰

Yet, despite CARC's eager insistence that the *gorkomkhozy* were legally responsible for cemetery upkeep, local officials' resources were frequently stretched quite thin. As a result, many Soviet cemeteries in the early postwar decades were in a desperate state of disrepair. Furthermore, despite CARC efforts to distance itself from cemetery management, because many of these sites bore a confessional affiliation, CARC was routinely drawn into questions of cemetery management as a liaison between religious communities and local *gorkomkhozy*. A June 1955 report to Vil'khovyi captures many CARC officials' frustration with their role as middlemen in cemetery affairs. In it, the CARC Commissioner for the Kyiv Oblast, Oleinikov, insists that he does not handle questions regarding cemeteries' condition. Nevertheless, representatives of various religious communities in the oblast had regularly broached the issue with him in meetings, voicing their discontent with cemetery management. With mixed success, he had reminded these representatives that all such appeals should be addressed to local authorities, not to CARC. Nevertheless, in the rest of his report, Oleinikov demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the oblast's cemeteries and even recommends the opening of a new

¹⁶⁰ GARF f. 6991, op. 4, d. 19, l. 216-7. CAHJP RU 1755.

cemetery.¹⁶¹ While cemetery affairs fell outside its formal jurisdiction, CARC continually mediated between religious communities and other branches of the Soviet state apparatus. In this capacity, regional CARC officials interacted quite vigorously with religious communities, local officials, and Union-level CARC offices, producing an extensive paper trail that can tell us much about Jewish communities and their relationship to their cemeteries.

By far, the most common topic of discussion was the deplorable state of disrepair in many cemeteries. Not surprisingly, CARC officials eagerly rested full blame on local officials. For example, a 1947 report from Vil'khovyi to Polianskii—the CARC Representative for Soviet Council of Ministers—blames endemic disrepair on the “complete indifference on the part of the Departments of Communal Property to the issue of maintaining of cemeteries. The *gorkomkhozy* have been given funds to care for cemeteries, yet completely ignore them.”¹⁶² According to Peshekhonov's 1947 report on cemeteries in the RSFSR and UkSSR, the condition of cemetery properties in the ten oblasts under study, “clearly demonstrates that this area of work has been neglected by local organs of power.” In the subsequent pages, vivid phrases describe the level of disrepair. For example, he records that a cemetery in the Kalinin Oblast,¹⁶³ Russia left a “depressing impression” and another cemetery in the Molotov Oblast,¹⁶⁴ Russia was in “a completely abandoned state.”¹⁶⁵

Even in Moscow, which had 22 cemeteries at the time, including a Muslim, a Jewish, and an Armenian cemetery, and devoted significant resources to their operation and upkeep, was not

¹⁶¹ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 199, l. 41-2. CAHJP RU 1911.

¹⁶² TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 28, l. 9. CAHJP RU 1886.

¹⁶³ Renamed the Tver' Oblast after 1990.

¹⁶⁴ Renamed the Perm' Oblast after 1957.

¹⁶⁵ GARF f. 6991, op. 4, d. 19, l. 217. CAHJP RU 1755.

immune. Despite ample staffing and relatively abundant resources, there were still significant issues with the guarding and maintenance of the cemeteries. For example, the Vostriakovskoe Cemetery in Moscow occupied 95-100 hectares, 25-30 hectares of which were dedicated to a Jewish cemetery. The cemetery had a staff of 20 workers, including the director, commandant, registrar, cashier, four gravediggers, six guards, and two groundskeepers. Despite this sizeable staff, the cemetery was poorly guarded, ribbons and flowers frequently disappeared (presumably they were stolen for resale), and the territory of the cemetery appeared abandoned. Because the cemetery was unfenced, goats grazed freely through the cemetery, and their teenage herders socialized while lounging on the many discarded gravestones that had been brought to the cemetery from other, demolished cemeteries such as the Dorogomilovskoe cemetery.¹⁶⁶

The problems evident in Moscow's Vostriakovskoe cemetery were endemic to Soviet cemeteries in the early postwar decades, most of which were far less lavishly staffed. The most common complaints to appear in CARC reports and communal petitions in the mid-late 1940s (and continuing into the 1950s) addressed broken gravestones, the widespread repurposing of gravestones and monuments as building materials, the lack of proper guarding, the presence of grazing livestock in cemeteries due to the lack of proper fencing, the use of cemeteries as garbage dumps, and unauthorized construction projects encroaching on cemetery property.¹⁶⁷ For example, several reports mention that the Jewish cemetery in Cherkasy, Ukraine was used as dumping ground for trash and the remains of farm animals.¹⁶⁸ The animal corpses were buried sloppily, with only a thin layer of dirt to cover them, which attracted packs of stray dogs to the

¹⁶⁶ GARF f. 6991, op. 4, d. 19, l. 217-8. CAHJP RU 1755.

¹⁶⁷ NARB f. 952, op. 1, d. 7, l. 4. CAHJP RU 1853. TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 17, l. 71. CAHJP RU 1884.

¹⁶⁸ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 28, l. 8. CAHJP RU 1886.

area.¹⁶⁹ According to a November 1946 report, the fence of the Jewish cemetery in Rivne (Rivne Oblast, Ukraine) had been completely destroyed, livestock grazed freely in the cemetery, the gravestones were falling apart. The guard of the cemetery didn't live in the cemetery guardhouse since the structure had started to fall apart and the *gorkomkhoz* hadn't repaired it.¹⁷⁰ Between 1949-1954, religious Jews in Bila Tserkva and Chornobyl' (Kyiv Oblast, Ukraine) repeatedly complained that the Jewish cemeteries in these towns were in poor condition due to the lack of fences and guards. In Chornobyl', the absence of a fence permitted livestock to graze freely through the cemetery in the summer.¹⁷¹ The cemeteries in Nehina, Pryluky, Chernihiv, and numerous others towns also became grazing ground for livestock due to the absence of fences and negligence of their caretakers.¹⁷² In November 1946, Shumkov—the CARC Commissioner for the Vinnytsia Oblast—noted that he personally had not received any complaints regarding the presence of livestock in the oblast's cemeteries, but the *raispolkom*¹⁷³ had received many. He recommended the construction of fences around urban cemeteries and the creation of large ditches around rural cemeteries to prevent animals from entering cemeteries.¹⁷⁴

Local officials frequently facilitated the pillaging of local cemeteries, either by turning a blind eye to local vandals or by explicitly encouraging the repurposing of cemetery grounds, fences, and grave markers. In Kyiv, the old Jewish cemetery was repurposed as a training ground

¹⁶⁹ NARB f. 952, op. 1, d. 7, l. 5. CAHJP RU 1853; TsDAGOU f. 1, op. 23, d. 4555, l. 62.

¹⁷⁰ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 17, l. 71. CAHJP RU 1884.

¹⁷¹ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 199, l. 41. CAHJP RU 1911.

¹⁷² TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 28, l. 8. CAHJP RU 1886.

¹⁷³ District/county executive committee.

¹⁷⁴ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 16, l. 28. CAHJP RU 1883.

for military exercises,¹⁷⁵ and a road was paved through the middle of the cemetery.¹⁷⁶ Even though city officials were technically responsible for the upkeep and protection of cemeteries, in 1945 and 1946, the burial directorate [*upravleniie*] of the Kyiv *gorkomkhoz* had designated the territory of the cemetery as a vegetable garden for its employees. As a result, all the grave markers had been torn down and left in disarray.¹⁷⁷ By 1947, the stone fence around the cemetery had been dismantled by the local population for use as construction material.¹⁷⁸ In Uman' (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine), monuments and gravestones from the Jewish cemetery were dismantled and used to build a stone-breaking plant and a storage facility.¹⁷⁹

This state of affairs may have stemmed from the indifference of local officials toward cemeteries in general (as CARC records suggest), or from a lack of funds (as local administrators tended to claim), or from genuine antipathy toward the Jewish community. Does the dismantling of Jewish gravestones and cemetery walls reflect the overwhelming poverty and chaos of the early postwar years? Or does it reflect anti-Semitism on the part of the citizens and officials? Or some combination of the two? Based on available sources, it's often difficult to determine. In Bila Tserkva and Chornobyl', several suspects, including the former rabbi of the Jewish community of Bila Tserkva, Moisei Bentsionovich Fel'dman, were found guilty of stealing gravestones from the local Jewish cemeteries.¹⁸⁰ In other instances, anti-Jewish prejudice seems

¹⁷⁵ TsDAGOU f. 1, op. 23, d. 4555, l. 62. CAHJP RU 1996.

¹⁷⁶ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 28, l. 98. CAHJP RU 1886.

¹⁷⁷ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 28, l. 8. CAHJP RU 1886.

¹⁷⁸ At a time when building materials were at a premium and housing shortages were widespread, gravestones made appealing construction materials, and the prospect of uncovering valuables attracted grave robbers.

¹⁷⁹ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 28, l. 8. CAHJP RU 1886.

¹⁸⁰ See TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 196-199. d. 199, l. 41. CAHJP RU 1911.

to have played direct role in the destruction of cemetery property. In 1961 in Vitebsk, Belarus, twelve members of the local Jewish religious community submitted a petition to the CARC BSSR regarding the local Jewish cemetery. The author of the petition, Z.Z. Kikinzon, notes that Vitebsk had one Jewish cemetery, which, by the early 1960s, had already been in operation for several decades. Following the Second World War, the city had opened a cemetery for ethnic Russians adjacent to the Jewish cemetery and assigned two guards to protect the territory. Despite this municipal attention to burial issues, Kikinzon reports that the *gorkomkhoz* had left the Jewish cemetery in Vitebsk unguarded. As a result, Jewish gravestones were periodically pillaged. Appeals to the *gorispolkom* for a guard had no effect, and the *gorispolkom*'s repeated promises to construct a fence had not come to fruition.¹⁸¹ While we do not know the outcome of Kikinzon's appeal, a 1947 report from Vil'khovyi to Polianskii had acknowledged that certain *gorkomkhoz* heads were hostile toward the cemeteries of other religious faiths and deliberately neglected their upkeep. Vil'khovyi specifically mentions that certain directors guaranteed the maintenance of Russian cemeteries but neglected Jewish cemeteries.¹⁸² While such prejudices are rarely acknowledged in CARC records, it is worth bearing in mind the impact that lingering prejudices and individual personalities had on the fate of Jewish cemeteries both before and after the war.

¹⁸¹ NARB f. 952, op. 3, d. 28, l. 111. CAHJP RU 1859. In response to the petition, CARC BSSR asked the CARC Commissioner for the Vitebsk oblast, Konchatov, to investigate. His subsequent report claims that all cemeteries in Vitebsk did in fact have a guard. He acknowledges that neither the Jewish nor the Old Believer cemeteries in the city had been fenced off, due to a lack of building materials. However, he reassured CARC BSSR that there were plans to fence off the Jewish cemetery in 1962. See NARB f. 952, op. 3, d. 28, l. 193. CAHJP RU 1859.

¹⁸² TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 28, l. 8. CAHJP RU 1886.

Cemetery Closure and Demolitions

In the postwar years, particularly in the 1960s, cemetery closures and demolitions became increasingly common even though they had long been a feature of Soviet life. Neglect, rapid urban expansion, and the enduring impact of the Holocaust all took their toll on the viability of Jewish cemeteries and left a growing number of them vulnerable to closure and demolition orders. Through their persistent engagement with multiple levels of religious and property management, Jewish communities had gained de facto recognition by the Soviet state as cemetery stakeholders. However, as CARC and local city officials increased their efforts to monitor and maintain cemeteries, local Jewish communities found themselves with less latitude for autonomous action, whether through fundraising and construction, or simple advocacy and upkeep. As cemetery closures and demolitions became increasingly common in the postwar years, Jewish communities were frequently helpless to influence state policy decisions and to defend the gravesites that held such a central place in the Jewish funerary landscape.

Cemetery demolitions were enshrined in Soviet law thanks to the 7 December 1918 directive from the Council of People's Commissars for the RSFSR (S.U. 1918, No. 90) and instructions enacted by Comrade Smidovich on 16 October 1932 through the Permanent Commission of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee for Religious Affairs, "Procedures for the Closure and Demolition of Cemeteries and Procedures for the Demolition of Gravestones." Even before the Second World war, these directives had led to the demolition of many pre-revolutionary cemeteries. For example, in Belarus, demolitions of Jewish cemeteries began in the 1930s. Minsk's oldest Jewish cemetery had been closed to further burial in 1883. In 1934, the Soviet state authorized its demolition and the construction of the Dinamo Stadium atop

of the former cemetery.¹⁸³ Soviet policies condoned the demolition of cemeteries, regardless of religious denomination.¹⁸⁴ For example, in June 1962, the Kyiv *gorsovet* [resolution no. 988] decided to “liquidate” the Russian Orthodox Kopilovskii cemetery, which had been closed in 1927. In its place, the *gorsovet* planned to open a park.¹⁸⁵ While in theory, Soviet demolition policies were not anti-Semitic and were not intended to target Jewish cemeteries unfairly, demolition laws had a disproportionate effect on Jewish cemeteries for several reasons.

First, while many Christian denominations preferred to place cemeteries next to their churches, Jews sought to maintain a separation between the living and the dead.¹⁸⁶ Jewish cemeteries were generally not attached to desirable architectural structures (such as churches) that could be repurposed without necessitating major changes to the surrounding plot of land.

After the war, as small towns and cities rapidly expanded and even merged into each other, many

¹⁸³ “Stadion ‘Dinamo,’” *Minsk Old-New*.

¹⁸⁴ While the closure of cemeteries due to space limitations seems logical enough, the demolition of cemeteries is far more difficult to comprehend. While CARC claimed to respect the sensibilities of religious believers, cemetery demolitions were in clear violation of both Jewish and Christian burial practices. Undeniably, Soviet administrators held a very utilitarian view of land and its purpose. Perhaps the demolition of cemeteries served as a flourish of anti-religious fervor, to show that old superstitions could not halt modern, Soviet progress. Less cynically, the dramatic housing shortages caused by the war meant that land and materials could either be used to house the dead or the living, and quite frequently, the living won out.

¹⁸⁵ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 407, l. 26. CAHJP RU 1935.

¹⁸⁶ As Jewish liturgy proclaims, “The dead cannot praise the Lord, or any who go down into silence. But we [the living] will bless the Lord, now and forever.” (Ps 115, Part of the Hallel prayer that is recited on festivals and at the beginning of each new month). In a very self-conscious manner, Judaism values the living human body as a necessary instrument for the performance of *mitzvot* [commandments]. In dressing a body for burial, one of the final acts the *chevra kadisha* performs is to cut off the fringes from the deceased’s prayer shawl, symbolizing the end to his [or her] obligation in the performance of Jewish rituals. Thus, many religious Jewish men tuck in the fringes of their prayer shawls when visiting a cemetery in order to avoid “taunting” the dead for their inability to perform the *mitzvot*. Presumably, this gesture should also heighten the gratitude of the living for the ability to fulfill their obligations. This mentality toward the dead certainly explains why Jewish cemeteries do not appear next to synagogues—the heart of ritual life in a community. Nevertheless, the delicate egos of the dead are only one of the rationales for separating cemeteries from the realm of the living. For *kohanim*, the priestly caste, contact with the dead is strictly prohibited, so it would be impractical to place cemeteries in a location where people would encounter graves in the course of their daily lives. Even for non-priestly Jews, contact with the dead still imparts ritual impurity, which cannot be fully expunged in the absence of a Temple [*parah adumah* ritual]. Even though full purification is impossible, traditional Jews still wash their hands as soon as possible after leaving a cemetery and certainly before partaking of food.

older Jewish cemeteries that had once stood at the outskirts of town found themselves absorbed into the center of town. Surrounded by commercial districts and housing developments, and with no space to expand, these cemeteries lost their functionality as active burial sites and became increasingly desirable plots for development. Second, as previously mentioned, the demographic impact of the Holocaust also left many cemeteries without a sizeable Jewish community to either utilize or defend them. Since Soviet law prohibited cemetery demolition until at least 15 years had elapsed since the last burial, this meant that the risk of demolition peaked for many Jewish cemeteries in the 1960s.¹⁸⁷ Third, the material ravages inflicted by the Holocaust contributed to the continued destruction of Jewish cemeteries after the war, whether through complete demolition or the repurposing of cemetery territory that had been irreparably damaged. For example, in May 1947, Vil'khovyi wrote to Shevchenko—the CARC Commissioner for the Zhytomyr Oblast—regarding a petition to construct a railroad route through the old Jewish cemetery in Zhytomyr. The proposed tracks would run through the portion of the cemetery that had been destroyed during the Nazi occupation.¹⁸⁸ According to Vil'khovyi, the local religious Jewish community had “not protested particularly vigorously,” though they did confide that “according to their religious laws, the territory of a cemetery can’t be used for other purposes.” Overpowered, they eventually acquiesced, saying, “If the government wants to build a railroad there, what can we do?” In his letter to Shevchenko, Vil'khovyi commented that the upkeep of the cemetery would demand significant resources. Considering the desirability of the railroad

¹⁸⁷ The demolition of cemeteries that had already ceased to function prior to the war was already well under way.

¹⁸⁸ Its gravestones had been removed, and the territory had been sown with grain.

line, he encouraged Shevchenko to approve the closure of the relevant portion of the old Jewish cemetery, leaving the remainder of the cemetery open for continued burials.¹⁸⁹

As Vil'khovyi points out, cemeteries that had been damaged in the war were often easier to demolish than to repair. In the early postwar years of material shortages, the considerable expense that repairs and continued maintenance of these sites would have demanded was a significant consideration for local officials. For example, in November 1946, Pavlov—the CARC Commissioner of the Dnipropetrovs'k Oblast—reported that just outside the city of Dnipropetrovs'k, there had been a Jewish cemetery prior to the German occupation. The cemetery had already been filled to capacity and closed before the war, after approximately 90,000 burials. Before the war, the cemetery had been protected by a high brick wall and had all the necessary amenities. During the German occupation, though, the wall and all the gravestones had been destroyed, and all the cemetery's trees had been chopped down. According to Pavlov, the cemetery was beyond repair. In preparation for the cemetery's demolition, local officials permitted the surviving relatives of those buried in the cemetery to transfer the bodies to the new cemetery, which was protected and well-maintained by the local *gorkomkhoz*.¹⁹⁰ In the smaller, nearby cities of Nikopol' and Dniprodzerzhyns'k, the local authorities decided to undertake repairs on their local, smaller Jewish cemeteries.¹⁹¹ However given the tremendous financial and logistical burden that renovating Dnipropetrovs'k's large, prewar cemetery would have presented, Soviet authorities decided to pursue demolition. While demolition contravened Jewish religious law, the Soviet government made provisions for the transfer and reburial of individual

¹⁸⁹ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 33, l. 48. CAHJP RU 1888.

¹⁹⁰ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 16, l. 64. CAHJP RU 1883.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

graves if surviving family members expressed an interest. As in many other spheres, Soviet policy was formulated in the logic of rational efficiency. Sentiment and religious superstition were secondary priorities.

Of course, the first step toward the demolition of any cemetery was closure. By far, the most common threat to Soviet cemeteries was simply running out of space for fresh graves to be dug. As we have already seen in Novohrad-Volyns'kyi, by the 1960s, graves were being dug as little as five meters away from the residential buildings adjacent to the cemetery territory—a far cry from the tsarist regulations that had required cemeteries to be located no less than 420 meters from the nearest residential structure.¹⁹² While CARC blamed this shortcoming on the interference of the local Jewish community,¹⁹³ it did not admit that this unorthodox placement of graves likely resulted from a shortage of available burial plots in the cemetery. In such cases, closure was a logical step to take.

In rare instances, there was available territory adjacent to older Jewish cemeteries, allowing them to expand rather than face closure. For example, in 1948, the Vinnytsia *raisovet*¹⁹⁴ decided to expand the Vinnytsia Jewish cemetery by annexing a plot of land adjacent to the cemetery to the burial territory. Furthermore, the *raisovet* specifically ordered the local *gorkomkhoz* not to permit the construction of residential homes on the newly expanded territory of the Jewish cemetery.¹⁹⁵ Even if district or regional authorities approved cemetery expansions, this was no guarantee that the plans wouldn't be overturned. While Shumkov—the CARC

¹⁹² Bear in mind that many of these cemeteries had been constructed prior to the revolution. GARF f. 6991, op. 4, d. 19, l. 214. CAHJP RU 1755.

¹⁹³ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 300, l. 83. CAHJP.

¹⁹⁴ District/county Council.

¹⁹⁵ GAVO f. R-2700, op. 19, d. 35, l. 26-7. CAHJP RU 1987.

Commissioner for the Vinnytsia Oblast—permitted the expansion of the Vinnytsia cemetery to proceed, perplexingly, he blocked the expansion of the Sharhorod Jewish cemetery in the same oblast. In 1948, the Sharhorod *raispolkom* had decided to expand the territory of the town’s Jewish cemetery. In response, Shumkov wrote to the Secretary for Agitation and Propaganda for the Vinnytsia *obkom* to demand that this decision be overturned.¹⁹⁶ While we can only conjecture as to Shumkov’s reasons for permitting one cemetery expansion while overturning another, it seems likely that Vinnytsia’s status as a large city and oblast center, with a larger Jewish population, played a role.

Questions of space management frequently involved a complex mixture of developmental ambition and demographic realities. The demographic weakness and political powerlessness of Soviet Jewish communities, combined with the physically precarious position of Jewish cemeteries in the postwar era made the closure and demolition of Jewish burial sites a rational, politically low-cost move. To illustrate the legal and logistical processes behind cemetery demolitions, I will discuss the story of Jewish cemeteries in Kyiv and in Radun’ as representative case studies that highlight common issues in cemetery closures and demolitions during the postwar era.

Kyiv, Ukraine

In June 1955, Oleinikov—the CARC Commissioner for the Kyiv Oblast—wrote to Vil’khovyi regarding the Old Jewish Cemetery in Kyiv. In a meeting with Oleinikov, a representative of the city’s Jewish religious community had indicated that the Kurenevskoe Cemetery (the “old Jewish Cemetery”) was slated for closure since it was filled to capacity, but the *gorispolkom* had not

¹⁹⁶ GAVO f. R-2700, op. 19, d. 35, l. 25. CAHJP RU 1987.

allotted space for a new Jewish cemetery to take its place. The director of the Kurenevskoe Cemetery confirmed that the cemetery was indeed overflowing, and complained that new burials were still being conducted in between and on top of old graves.¹⁹⁷ He also criticized the *gorispolkom*'s failure to assign territory for the creation of a new Jewish cemetery.

By 1955, a 152-hectare plot of land approximately 20 kilometers outside of Kyiv had already been identified for the future Berkivtsi Cemetery.¹⁹⁸ Yet, at the time of these complaints, there was still no access road to the new site, and the cost of building a road and fencing the territory was expected to cost at least 10-15 million rubles. It was unclear when such funds would become available, and Oleinikov estimated that the opening of the new cemetery would be delayed by 10-15 years. In the meantime, it seemed that the Jewish community would be left without a working cemetery.

In response, the Jewish community of Kyiv had requested that a section of land be annexed to the existing Jewish cemetery. The Kyiv *gorsovet* explored several annexation options but ultimately rejected all of them. Instead, CARC and the *gorsovet* considered expanding the Russian cemetery in Sviatoshino with a temporary Jewish cemetery that could remain open for 10-15 years until the Berkivtsi Cemetery could be completed. Since Sviatoshino was a vacation spot for workers, Oleinikov was skeptical that the *gorsovet* would approve this plan. Instead, he proposed opening a cemetery off the Zhytomyr Highway.¹⁹⁹ In the meantime, the Old Jewish cemetery continued to function under unsanitary conditions. In 1957, the Kyiv *gorsovet* finally decided to proceed with construction on the new Berkivtsi Cemetery that would include a Jewish

¹⁹⁷ Such burials were commonly permitted in “closed cemeteries.” As long as the deceased had a close relative buried in the cemetery, their grave could be added to an existing family plot.

¹⁹⁸ Located off of the Hostomel' Highway.

¹⁹⁹ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 199, l. 41-2. CAHJP RU 1911.

section along with other denominational subsections. Citing “sanitary” conditions,²⁰⁰ the *gorsovet* closed the Kurenevskoe Cemetery at the same time.²⁰¹

In this moment of transition, the representative of the Jewish religious community in Kyiv approached Oleinikov with a request to transfer the building for preparing bodies from Kyiv’s Lukianovskoe Cemetery (established in 1892; closed in 1939) to the new Berkivtsi Cemetery. Oleinikov directed him to the *gorsovet*, which ruled that the transfer was not possible. Instead, surprisingly, the community was permitted to collect funds within the synagogue to fund the construction of a new ritual structure at the Berkivtsi Cemetery. After its construction, the building would be legally transferred to the ownership of the *gorsovet* and designated as a municipal building. The *gorsovet* assigned a patch of land for the new building, and the Kyiv synagogue community collected over 100,000 rubles for the construction. However, after construction was completed and the community attempted to transfer the building to the local authorities, the latter refused to accept it. Instead, the head of *gorsovet*, Davydov, ordered the building’s demolition.²⁰²

By this point, the new Berkivtsi cemetery was under construction, the Kurenevskoe cemetery was technically closed, and the Lukianovskoe cemetery awaited news of its fate. In light of rapid population growth in Kyiv, on 26 June 1962, the Kyiv *gorispolkom* voted to

²⁰⁰ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 273, l. 5-6. CAHJP RU 1922.

²⁰¹ The Kurenevskoe Cemetery remains in active use today (despite the temporary closure in 1957). According to Lo Tishkach: “[The] Kurenivske Orthodox Christian cemetery was established in 1825 and closed in 1957. In 1939, shortly before the closure of the Lukianivske Jewish cemetery, a Jewish section was opened in Kurenivsk. The majority of the graves date from the postwar period, between the years 1945 and 1957. [However, some of the graves, dating from the 1910s and 1920s, were transferred from the Lukianovsk cemetery] The oldest original burials in the [Jewish section of the] cemetery date back to 1939. The cemetery was filled from east to west; the most recent plots – dating from 1957 – are located in the western and southern areas of the cemetery. The cemetery was closed in 1957, but was re-opened for additional burials in 2005.” See Lo Tishkach, “Jewish Burial Ground of Ukraine: Kyiv Region,” 43.

²⁰² TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 273, l. 5-6. CAHJP RU 1922.

demolish the Lukianovskoe cemetery, twenty-three years after its official closure.²⁰³ At the same time, the *gorispolkom* also voted to demolish the Christian Kopylov cemetery and the Karaite cemetery,²⁰⁴ and to transform their territories into “green space” for municipal parks.²⁰⁵ On 19 September 1962, the *gorispolkom* issued an additional resolution permitting relatives of those buried in the Lukianovskoe Cemetery to transfer their remains to the new Berkivtsi cemetery or to other active cemeteries in Kyiv.²⁰⁶ The population was informed of demolition plans via local newspapers, and all interested parties were provided with the necessary manpower and equipment to transfer their relatives’ graves.²⁰⁷ The grave exhumations and transfer of the bodies was conducted in the presence of the relatives, and as of 29 November 1962, approximately 1500 graves had been relocated by relatives after receiving permission from the Municipal Burial Services office. Polonnik personally visited the new cemetery to inspect the reburial process and reported that none of the relatives had complained about the process.²⁰⁸

The only difficulty was the presence of several famous rabbis’ graves in the Lukianovskoe cemetery. Writing in late November 1962, Polonnik noted that the date of burial for the several famous “rabbis from Tver” was unknown and that no one had appealed to the

²⁰³ Although the cemetery had been closed before the war, it had suffered extensive damage during the Nazi occupation, destroying the majority of the graves, including the crypts of the famous Tver’ rabbis. TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 402, l. 4-5. CAHJP RU 1934.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. All three of these cemeteries had been filled to capacity by the 1930s. At the same time as it ordered the demolition of these cemeteries, the Kyiv *gorispolkom* seven additional cemeteries, which had also been filled to capacity, be closed to future burials.

²⁰⁵ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 407, l. 26. CAHJP RU 1935.

²⁰⁶ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 371, l. 17-18. CAHJP RU 1931; TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 402, l. 4-5. CAHJP RU 1934.

²⁰⁷ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 402, l. 4-5. CAHJP RU 1934.

²⁰⁸ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 371, l. 17-18. CAHJP RU 1931.

Office of Burial Services to transfer their remains to a different cemetery.²⁰⁹ It seems that Polonnik spoke too soon. In January 1963, he received a letter from the Deputy Minister for International Affairs for the UkSSR, S. Slipchenko with a 6 November 1962 petition from the Belgian Member of Parliament, Camille Giusman, requesting that the Lukianovskoe Jewish cemetery be preserved. Giusman, although himself a secular non-Jew, had been asked by a Jewish delegation that he petition the Soviet government to preserve the Lukianovskoe cemetery, located near Babyn Yar. Giusman's letter reads:

It is in this cemetery that the great rabbis of the Tver' dynasty, who played a historical role in the life of the Jews, are buried. Their graves have become a shrine and monument for all Jews. In all corners of the world, Jews remember the names of these great rabbis and ask that their graves be preserved. And now they have learned that these graves will be demolished in order to free up space for other construction.²¹⁰

Although Polonnik did not directly respond to Giusman's request regarding the Tver' rabbis', the graves of many rabbis were ultimately transferred out of the Lukianovskoe Cemetery to the Kurenevskoe Cemetery, which was technically closed but continued to function since it had not been slated for demolition. Among those reburied to the Kurenevskoe Cemetery were Rabbi Elimelech Twersky, Rabbi Itzik Gershovich Shechtman, Rabbi Leib Yakovlevich Vinnitsky, Rabbi Shlomo Benzion Twersky, and Wolf Rabinovich, brother of Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem. Monuments in memory of Holocaust victims and Jewish soldiers were also transferred to the Kurenevskoe cemetery from the Lukianovskoe Cemetery.²¹¹ Additional monuments were also transferred from the Lukianovskoe Cemetery to the new Berkivtsi Cemetery:

²⁰⁹ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 371, l. 18. CAHJP RU 1931.

²¹⁰ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 402, l. 2-3. CAHJP RU 1934.

²¹¹ Lo Tishkach, "Jewish Burial Ground of Ukraine: Kyiv Region," 43.

the oldest tombstone in [the] cemetery was moved from [the] Lukianivske cemetery and dates from 1924. [...] There are many memorial monuments in the cemetery of those killed during the war, erected close to the graves of their families. [Furthermore,] There is an *ohel* at the cemetery dedicated to three prominent rabbis of the Chernobyl *Hasidic* dynasty, Rabbi Twersky of Kyiv, Rabbi Yeshaya Twersky of Makarov, and Rabbi Moshe Dan Twersky of Skver), in addition to a caretaker's house and a cemetery office.²¹²

Today, the Berkivtsi and Kurenevskoe cemeteries are both officially closed, although burials continue for those with relatives already buried there.²¹³

The story of the Lukianovskoe, Kurenevskoe, and Berkivtsi cemeteries illustrates the lengthy, complex process of closing older cemeteries in the Soviet Union and the challenges that the Soviet authorities faced as they endeavored to open new cemeteries. Because these cemeteries had a confessional affiliation, the Kyiv Jewish community and international Jewish community was able to exercise a degree of influence over these processes through their interactions with CARC and the Minister for International Affairs. While the Jewish community was unable to prevent the closure and demolition of cemeteries, it was able to secure the transfer of gravestones and remains for a significant number of graves.

Radun', Belarus

As in the case of Kyiv, while it was virtually impossible to forestall the demolition of an entire cemetery, in certain cases, Jewish communities and individual Jewish families were able to salvage or transfer the graves of their relatives and famous rabbis. In 1958, discussions began regarding the demolition of the Jewish cemetery in Radun' (Grodno Oblast, Belarus). The cemetery, located at the edge of the town, was on the Grodno-Vilnius highway. No burials had

²¹² Ibid, 45.

²¹³ In Lukianovskoe, a tablet and a few "boot" shaped graves remain on the site, which is part of the Babyn Yar Memorial Complex. Despite the fact that the cemetery was established in 1892, the oldest surviving stones are from 1935. Ibid, 42.

taken place there since the end of the Second World War and the cemetery was in abandoned, unsanitary condition. The local sanitary superintendent recommended that the cemetery be demolished, and after extended deliberations over several years, the Voronovo *raispolkom* approved a demolition order on 15 May 1974. The *raispolkom* established a “liquidation committee” consisting of five members, including two Jews—I.I. Dubinskii, and M.Kh. Kotliar. As in Kyiv, the demolition was announced publicly via a billboard and an article in the district newspaper. Following these announcements, no immediate objections were raised before the village *ispolkom* or any other governmental body.²¹⁴

By 1958, word of the cemetery’s pending demolition had traveled beyond Soviet borders and aroused a firestorm of international interest and indignation. In a letter dated 27 May 1958, the Chief Rabbi of London wrote to the London Soviet Consulate noting that the Radun’ cemetery contained the graves of many famous Jewish rabbis. He requested that the remains of these rabbis be transferred to the Jewish cemeteries in Minsk or Vilnius, with full honor. As an alternative, the Chief Rabbi offered his assistance in transferring the rabbis’ remains to Israel.²¹⁵ Although he does not specifically identify the rabbis in question, undoubtedly, among the rabbis he was referring to was Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1838-1933), popularly known as the Chofetz Chaim.

In a reply dated 18 October 1958, P. Labus—CARC Commissioner for the BSSR—confirmed that the cemetery in Radun’ had not been used for new burials in eighteen years and was indeed slated for demolition. In response to the Chief Rabbi’s concerns, Labus indicates that in early 1958, relatives the Chofetz Chaim had requested permission to transfer the rabbi’s grave

²¹⁴ NARB f. 136, op. 1, d. 36, l. 66-7.

²¹⁵ NARB f. 952, op. 3, d. 11, l. 116-7. Accessed at the CAHJP 1856.

to Vilnius and had received authorization from the relevant Soviet authorities (though it seems the actual transfer was not carried out). With the exception of the Chofetz Chaim's family though, no other transfer requests had been made by relatives of other individuals interred in the cemetery. Thus, Labus concludes his letter by reassuring the Chief Rabbi that his concerns were superfluous since the local authorities had cooperated fully with the sole reburial request it had received.²¹⁶

The actual demolition of Radun's Jewish cemetery did not take place until 12 June 1974. Prior to the demolition, on 3-4 June 1974, the gravestones of three deceased rabbis, including the Chofetz Chaim, were removed from the cemetery and transported by car to Vilnius. The remains of the rabbis were left in place, and the demolition proceeded in accordance with Soviet law and did not arouse any complaints among the local population. First, the headstones were removed, then the ground was leveled so that a public park could be built on the site. Lastly, the elaborate monument, which stood adjacent to the cemetery and was dedicated to the memory of the 1137 Jews who had been murdered by the Germans during the war, was preserved.²¹⁷

On 21 August 1974, over two months after the demolition, the representative of the Vilnius Jewish community, M.Kh. Glubokin, appealed to the Radun' Village Council for permission to transfer the actual remains of the Chofetz Chaim, claiming that the Moscow Choral Synagogue had requested that he make such an appeal. Osnenko, the CARC Commissioner for the Grodno Oblast, replied that permitting the transfer of remains at that point would be undesirable. First and foremost, it might "arouse religious fanaticism and nationalistic

²¹⁶ NARB f. 952, op. 3, d. 11, l. 118. Accessed at the CAHJP 1856.

²¹⁷ NARB f. 136, op. 1, d. 36, l. 67.

feelings.” Furthermore, since the cemetery had already been plowed over, determining the location of the rabbi’s grave would be virtually impossible.²¹⁸

Today, several gravestones from the Radun’ Jewish cemetery have been restored or recreated on the original cemetery territory. These include an elaborate gravestone for the Chofetz Chaim’s grave. In all likelihood, the gravestones do not stand on their original graves,²¹⁹ however, this does not decrease their symbolic value for visitors. In fact, the Radun’ Jewish cemetery and mass grave have become a site for Jewish tourism and pilgrimage. To my knowledge, this is the only demolished Jewish cemetery that has been “reborn” in the post-Soviet era—a likely consequence of the Chofetz Chaim’s assumed presence.

Conclusion

Over the postwar decades, Soviet Jewish cemeteries formed the bedrock of the local mourning landscape. Not only did they connect postwar Soviet Jews with prewar and even pre-revolutionary life, they also represented the confluence of private and public space. Through persistent and complex negotiations, Soviet Jewish individuals, families, and communities could continue religious burial practices and obtain significant concessions from the Soviet state. At the same time, the Soviet bureaucracy pursued its modernizing development goals, which occasionally endangered older cemeteries. However, overall, Soviet authorities endeavored to provide reasonable accommodation for religious burial while preventing religious communities from gaining undue influence in the management and maintenance of confessional cemeteries. Interactions between Jewish communities and state officials were highly contingent on the

²¹⁸ NARB f. 136, op. 1, d. 36, l. 68.

²¹⁹ Jewish Heritage Research Group in Belarus, “Cemeteries - Radun’.”

disposition of local and regional administrators. Yet, despite significant variations in policy and enforcement, Soviet Jews navigated significant legal and logistical hurdles to sustain their traditional burial culture and were largely successful in preserving distinctively Jewish burial grounds across the Soviet Union.

CHAPTER II

Domestic Mourning and the Perpetuation of Soviet Jewish Identity

Introduction

The early postwar years in the Soviet Union were a time of cautious optimism and crushing disappointment. On the one hand, many Soviet citizens hoped for greater political freedom after heroically defending the Soviet homeland in the Great Patriotic War. Their hopes were largely smothered during the late Stalinist years (1945-1953) but revived during the Khrushchev Thaw (mid-1950s to early 1960s). At the same time, catastrophic material shortages continued to affect daily life long after the war's end. The famine of 1946-1947 forced many to migrate in search of food. Housing shortages, caused by uncontrolled population movement and a severe lack of building materials, yielded even greater levels of migration, primarily into large regional cities and to republic capitals.²²⁰

Although these social and economic issues affected Jews and non-Jews alike, they bore unique implications for mourning the Holocaust and the restoration of Jewish life after the war. For both ideological and practical reasons, synagogues fell low on the Soviet state's list of priorities for reconstruction and for assigning the limited, surviving building space. Furthermore, housing shortages compelled young Jewish survivors and their children to leave their hometowns, their elderly relatives, and the sites of memory connected to their family history.

²²⁰ Elena Zubkova's *Russia after the War* provides a valuable overview of this crucial period in Soviet history. See also Steven Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, 92.

These socio-economic realities had dramatic implications for communal continuity and the transmission of Jewish memory, and they only exacerbated the demographic toll that the Holocaust had already exacted on *shtetl* Jewish communities.²²¹ Although some younger survivors and their children did return to their ancestral hometowns to participate in memorial gatherings (see Chapter V), geographic distance inevitably decreased the frequency of such participation and removed the possibility of impromptu visits or passive, daily encounters with family graves and other memorial landmarks.

Geographic separation was not the only factor that could deprive Soviet Jews of gravesite access. Of course, compared with Holocaust survivors who settled in Western Europe, Israel, and the United States, Soviet Jews had much greater access to the individual and mass graves of their relatives. Nevertheless, countless families lost relatives at the front or under occupation and had no way of tracing the whereabouts of their graves. In the absence of a known resting place, families were unable to implement many traditional Jewish funerary practices and were forced to improvise alternatives. The widespread lack of synagogues and fear of participating in public religious life also deprived families of many traditional mourning rituals. Under these circumstances, domestic mourning rituals assumed an increasingly central role in Jewish mourning culture and in Jewish religious life more generally. Many of these domestic practices had been part of East European Jewish mourning culture for centuries. However, in the wake of the dramatic demographic decline and social dislocation caused by the Second World War, Soviet Jews found novel ways to preserve and adapt traditional practices to accommodate the postwar Soviet reality and to reflect wartime experiences. At times, these shifts may seem to take

²²¹ For example, in Nova Ushytsia (Khmel'nyts'kyi Oblast, Ukraine)—a settlement on the Kalius River in Western Ukraine—no Jews were born after the war. See Anatoliï Shtarkman, *Novaïa Ushitsa*, 166. By 1998, only two Jews, both over 80, remained in Nova Ushytsia (Ibid, 12). This demographic pattern is typical of Jewish communities in small cities and towns across Belarus and Ukraine.

Jewish practice further from traditional customs. Indeed, both external observers and Soviet Jews themselves have dismissed their evolving practices as distressing evidence of assimilation. However, these practices are hardly evidence of assimilation in the traditional sense of disappearance. Instead, I argue that we should view these changes as evidence of evolution and, therefore, of survival.

In his 1956 monograph, *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization*, Robert Redfield first introduced the terms “great tradition” and “little tradition” to distinguish between textual, institutional religious practice versus folk, popular practice. The “little tradition” has been associated with rural, illiterate cultures which then evolve into “great traditions” under conditions of modernization and urbanization. The Soviet context, however, throws this geographic map and presumed progression into question. In a time of rapid urbanization and industrialization, Soviet anti-religious efforts constrained access to public religious institutions and to the textual, intellectual aspects of religious life. The ravages of the war merely exacerbated the lack of religious institutions and leadership. In response, Jews, Christians, and other religious confessions sought refuge in the private sphere, often, in the home. There, in the absence of normative religious authority, practices evolved freely in response to regional, local, and even individual needs and conditions. This “domestication” of religion, not only permitted ordinary people to assume ownership over their ritual life, it also blurred the boundary between “sacred” and “profane,” effectively expanding the potential sphere of influence for the sacred.²²²

In the evolution of the Soviet Jewish “little tradition,” mourning played a particularly central role. First, a sense of obligation to the dead prompted even secular Jews to adopt (and

²²² See Dragadze, 150-1.

adapt) traditional mourning rituals in honor of more observant, deceased relatives. Second, in the wake of the Holocaust, mourning was a pressing need that cut across all social and economic strata of the Soviet Jewish community.²²³ With frequently limited access to synagogues and graves, the centripetal power of mourning led many Soviet Jews to the commemorative oral, material, and ritual culture of the private sphere, which, in turn, facilitated the transmission of Jewish tradition and identity. As Ahad Ha'am famously observed, "More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." I argue that, in the wake of the Second World War, acts of individual, familial, and communal memorialization replaced the Sabbath as Soviet Jewry's "sustaining ritual," strengthening intergenerational and communal bonds, as well as sustaining Jewish identity and engagement.

The Domestic Sphere and Private Commemoration

To understand the centrality of domestic rituals in Soviet Jewish mourning and the maintenance of Jewish identity, we must first ponder the relationship between private and public space in the Soviet Union and the ways that these spaces shaped behavior and practice in daily life. In *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Anna Shternshis discusses the dissimilar relationship toward space held by Jews born prior to the Bolshevik Revolution versus those who were born into the Soviet system:

Because traditional public institutions such as synagogues and Jewish religious schools were closed, the family became the center of Jewish tradition and education. At times [children and young people's] families may have seemed 'backward' to [them], but their homes were still a place for holidays such as Passover, a celebration that fascinated children. At the same time the Soviet school and the new Soviet holidays were associated with a modern, exciting life. [These young people] celebrated parades on May Day, the

²²³ My focus in this chapter and the next is primarily on the commemoration of individual lives (including those who died in mass shootings during the Holocaust) by immediate relatives. In the final chapter, I will emphasize collective commemoration of communal losses during the Holocaust.

anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution, International Women's Day, and so on. Children lived in two parallel worlds that rarely touched each other directly: the world of the family and the world of the school. [...] The children often did not see any contradiction between their religious upbringing at home and antireligious propaganda in school. They thought that the family followed certain rules, and society followed others.²²⁴

It is precisely this separation of the private sphere from the state-driven public sphere that allowed a proportion of these children to sustain Jewish traditions as adults in the postwar era, raising children of their own. Of course, this does not mean that the two spheres maintained their “purity.” Instead, individuals intertwined elements of the two spheres while maintaining parallel sets of behaviors and attitudes. For example:

The coexistence of Soviet and Jewish holidays created mutual influences on the rituals associated with these celebrations. Many of the traditional Jewish holiday ceremonies changed in the Soviet Union because they received an infusion of new elements of Soviet culture. Sometimes traditional Jewish rituals were mixed with Russian Orthodox traditions. This occurred frequently in larger cities, and, as a result of large migrations in the 1920s [...] religious customs and traditions were... molded, combined, and reshaped.²²⁵

Patterns of hybridity and adaptation, as well as their role as mechanisms of survival, were already a well-established in the decades before the Holocaust. In the postwar era, given the heightened realities of demographic decline, mass migration, and political vulnerability, Soviet Jews continued to hybridize and adapt their domestic practices in response to novel, challenging circumstances. During this time, the home remained a separate, parallel space for autonomous behaviors and beliefs, especially the commemoration of losses that did not complement public, triumphalist narratives of the Second World War. In the domestic sphere, individuals were free to choose between (or even combine) religious symbols and prayers and secular rituals—some borrowed from non-Jewish neighbors, some simply born of personal improvisation. The general

²²⁴ Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*, 39-40.

²²⁵ *Ibid*, 42.

invisibility and adaptability of domestic commemorative practices made them some of the most resilient and enduring features of Soviet Jewish life.

Rather than idealizing the domestic sphere as a space for emotional catharsis, we must recognize that, many elderly Soviet Jews mourned as quietly and surreptitiously as they could, even in the privacy of the home. Emil Draitser was born in 1937 and grew up in Odessa. As in many families, his parents and grandmother sheltered him from any explicit awareness of the Holocaust, but their muffled grief conveyed far greater messages regarding the nature of mourning and Jewishness itself. Draitser recalls:

Grandma could not hold back her tears no matter how hard she tried to or how often she bit her lips.²²⁶ She tried to weep furtively. She turned away from me, covered her face with a handkerchief, and mumbled some prayer. Perhaps, from my early childhood, her suppressed sobbing contributed to my perception that, if you're a Jew, you have no right even to grieve openly for your kin. Once and for all, I came to accept as an axiom that to be persecuted is part of my gene pool, part of what it truly means to be Jewish....²²⁷

As with funerals, some families felt that mourning and even memory were not for the young. Holocaust survivors, in particular, often hid their grief and mourning rituals from their children and grandchildren. Perhaps this was an effort to protect subsequent generations from the tragedy and grief of Jewish history—a conscious decision not to bequeath traumatic memories of

²²⁶ Her husband, Draitser's grandfather, had been stabbed to death by the Germans in Minsk. One of her children had died in the Minsk ghetto, and another in the battle of Kursk.

²²⁷ Emil Draitser, *Shush! Growing up Jewish under Stalin*, 222. For Draister and many of his contemporaries, the publication of Yevtushenko's poem, "Babyn Yar" in 1961 was the first revelation of specifically Jewish losses during the Second World War, which they had become so accustomed to seeing subsumed into the general narrative of the Great Patriotic War (See Gal Beckerman, *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry*, 30-1). Draitser admits that it is only as he sat down to write his memoirs that he finally learned the full scope of the Holocaust's devastation (222-3).

humiliation and loss. Or, perhaps, the burden of verbalizing their stories was simply too painful.²²⁸ Whatever the reason, in these families, the home may have been a place of mourning, but mourning did not perpetuate Jewish memory and identity from one generation to the next, at least not in the explicit ways that we might expect. Many other families, however, utilized domestic commemorative practices as opportunities to convey family history and ritual to the next generation, whether implicitly or explicitly.

Naming Practices

Of the Jewish commemorative practices that survived the Soviet period, the Ashkenazi custom of naming children in honor of deceased relatives remained one of the most prevalent. Generally, the names were Russified to a greater or lesser degree, e.g. Arkadii instead of Abram, Boris instead of Barukh, Lev instead of Leib. Other names, such as Bronya and Faina, remained recognizably Jewish even though they served as replacements for more obviously Jewish names of Yiddish origin such as Brokhe or Brayne, Fayne or Feygele.²²⁹

Traditionally, East European Jewish children were raised with an awareness of the legacy left by the relatives in whose honor they had been named. In the Soviet context, this transmission of family lore was not as direct since having a recognizably Jewish name was a source of embarrassment for many. Emil Draitser amusingly recounts his childhood quest to discover his parents' true, Jewish names:

...Mama introduces herself to everybody with her first name and patronymic; both of them Russian—Sofia Vladimirovna. Her looks aren't much different from those of the

²²⁸ Such secrecy and evasiveness was quite common among Holocaust survivors around the world, not just in the Soviet Union. See Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust*.

²²⁹ Jews in the United States adopted similar adaptations to make their Jewish names less distinguishable. See Kirsten Fermaglich, “‘Too long, too foreign ... too Jewish,’” and “‘What's Uncle Sam's Last Name?’”

mothers of my Russian and Ukrainian classmates. She has a small nose and light brown hair a slightly darker shade than theirs. I was very sure that she was a normal woman, that is, a Russian woman. [...] I seize the moment to get into the top drawer of our sideboard, where Mama keeps our documents, and peep at her passport. My heart rolls downward. My worst fears are justified. It turns out that she is Soybel Wolfovna! And in the 'nationality' category, 'a Jew' is written, in black and white. I didn't expect this treachery from her! But there's more to come. Everyone calls my mother's sister Clara, a Russian name, but her name is actually the Jewish Khaya. My mother's cousin Dunya is sometimes called by the affectionate variant of the Russian name Dariya, but, in fact, her true name, that is, her Jewish name, is Dvoira. This means that I'm not the only one who's ashamed of his name!²³⁰

In upwardly mobile, urban Jewish families, this sense of secrecy and shame around Jewish names was widespread. However, in other families, parents were less hesitant to acknowledge the Jewish lineage of their own names and their children's names. In these instances, the transmission of Jewish names served several important functions. First, they brought comfort and a sense of continuity to those who had known the deceased. Furthermore, the children who grew up with these names gained an early awareness of their families' history and the accomplishments of the deceased relative in whose honor they had been named. At a time when Jews faced widespread stigmatization as passive victims or parasitic cowards, this knowledge offered children a meaningful connection to previous generations and a positive Jewish identity, regardless of how they experienced their Jewishness outside the home, particularly at school.

In the wake of the Holocaust, the burden of preserving the memory of those who died weighed heavily on survivors. Dora Meerovna Fel'd, who was born in 1920 and grew up in Baranovichi (Brest Oblast, Belarus), named her children Girsh, Galia, and Yakov in honor of her relatives who had been murdered during the war. She specifically emphasizes that she made this decision "in keeping with custom,"²³¹ acknowledging it as a deliberately Jewish form of

²³⁰ Draitser, 50.

²³¹ B. P. Sherman, *Baranovichskoe getto*, 29.

commemoration. In some cases, the preservation of Holocaust victims' names even contributed to the preservation of other Jewish practices and markers of identity. For example, when Emma Krymskaia (b. 1923 in Bar, Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine) gave birth to her son in 1947, she named him Chaim, in memory of her father. However, she felt that she could not give her son her father's name without first circumcising him. Despite her husband's objections and the risk to her job as a school teacher, when her son was a month old, Emma secretly took him to Khmel'nyts'kyi (Khmel'nyts'kyi Oblast, Ukraine) to have a rabbi perform the operation.²³²

In some families, the tradition of naming children in honor of their grandparents continued for many generations. Galina Rochko's parents, Grigorii Gel'tman and Nina Gil'zova, were from Vitebsk (Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus) and married in 1947. When Galina was born in 1948, they named her in honor of her grandmother, Ginda. When her father's third grandson was born, he was named Grigorii in honor of Galina's father. Galina's own grandchild, was named Milana in memory of her grandmother, Mina.²³³

Some parents openly expressed a wish that their grandchildren be given their names after their deaths. Arkadii L'vovich Shul'man remembers his father's request, "If you have a son, name him Lev [in my memory]." Arkadii, who was born just after Stalin's death in 1953, knows that he was named in memory of his grandfather—Abram—who died in the war.²³⁴ In their family, the names Abram and Leib had alternated for generations, passed from grandfather to grandson, yielding a string of Abram Leibovichs and Leib Abramovichs. In the 1920s, when Shul'man's father was born, the family decided to name him Lev instead of Leib.²³⁵ Similarly,

²³² Emma Krymskaia, USC Shoah Foundation, VHA #25316.

²³³ Arkadii Shul'man, *Voskresshaia pamiat'*, 63-4.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, 15.

²³⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

when Shul'man was a child, his parents explained that they had named him Arkadii instead of Abram so that children wouldn't tease him at school. Despite his parents' efforts to preserve their family heritage and to shelter their child from anti-Semitism, Shul'man's classmates still teased him and called him Abram, easily deciphering the open secret of Soviet Jewish naming practices.

Shul'man himself downplays the importance of his family naming traditions, and instead, describes the Russification of Jewish names as a tragic break in the "golden chain" of Jewish memory and cultural transmission.²³⁶ If we seek out exact replicas of pre-war (or pre-revolutionary) Jewish commemorative practices, it is only natural to view Soviet Jewish memory in terms of crisis and decline. However, if we abandon the idea of a fixed, primordial set of commemorative rituals, a very different picture emerges. After all, in some families, the custom of passing on names continued despite intermarriage and despite several generations of Russified legal names. Daniil Davydovich Klovsii, was born to a religious family in Grodno (Grodno Oblast, Belarus) in 1928. After the war, he became completely secular and married a Russian woman. In 1956, his wife, Alina, gave birth to their first son. Klovsii had desperately hoped that their first child would be a girl so that they could name her Masha, in honor of his mother, Masha Davydovna.²³⁷ With extremely low fertility rates among Soviet Jews (and the Soviet population as a whole) after the war, the imperative to name children in honor of deceased relatives had to adapt to the reality that parents might have only one or two chances to pass on a family name.²³⁸ Thus, names were forced to cross gender lines as freely as they crossed generational and linguistic lines. Klovsii, for example, resigned himself to the caprices of

²³⁶ Ibid, 15.

²³⁷ Daniil Davydovich Klovsii, *Doroga iz Grodno*, 341.

²³⁸ This was particularly challenging for Holocaust survivors who had lost far more than one or two relatives in the war.

biology and named his son Mark—the closest male equivalent to Masha.²³⁹ Klovskii’s story challenges Shul’man’s perception of a tragic break in the “golden chain” of Jewish memory. Instead, Jewish commemorative traditions proved resilient in the face of acculturation and growing intermarriage rates. As Marita Sturken argues,

Throughout history, the most prominent characterization of memory has been the idea that it is in crisis. [...] Rather than steep concepts of memory in a nostalgic longing for its wholeness, I would like to consider how its role as a changeable script is crucial to its cultural function. Indeed, memory often takes the form not of recollection but of cultural reenactment that serves important needs for catharsis and healing. [...] It is precisely the instability of memory that allows for renewal and redemption without letting the tension of the past in the present fade away.²⁴⁰

Soviet Jews were often painfully aware of the disparities between their practices and those of previous generations. Yet, despite dramatically altered social, economic, and political circumstances, they found dynamic and creative ways to sustain Jewish memory and identity, including the perpetuation of family names and lore.

Material, Culinary, and Ritual Memory in the Home

In cultures around the world, material objects frequently serve as traces and signs of former lives. Not only do they serve as transitional objects in moments of acute bereavement,²⁴¹ they also serve long-term commemorative functions for individuals and families. To the extent that Soviet Jewish family effects survived wartime devastation, photographs, books, and other domestic objects could provide silent reminders of the deceased and create subtle, daily opportunities to commemorate the dead. Simply dusting a picture frame or rearranging a

²³⁹ Klovskii, 342.

²⁴⁰ See Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 17.

²⁴¹ See D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*.

bookcase offered opportunities to recall the dead and to tell children about their ancestors' history. These domestic, material possibilities were particularly important for those who could not access synagogues, cemeteries, or mass graves due to ill health, geographic distance, or any number of other logistical and political barriers. For secular families that felt distant from both synagogue rites and impersonal state-sponsored ceremonies, these mementos and their accompanying rituals offered vital opportunities to mourn and remember without reference to religious theology or political ideology. Yet, despite the importance of their role, material objects were generally taken for granted by both their owners and by traditional historical sources. Consequently, their role in commemorating the dead rarely has been acknowledged.

Not only did domestic heirlooms transmit an awareness of previous generations, they also had the potential to arouse curiosity about Jewish traditions and even to encourage Jewish observance. For example, Olga D., a participant in an oral history project of Soviet Jewish emigres who arrived in the United States between 1973 and 1980, explains, "I have seen a photograph of my grandfather and know he was very religious. My parents were the first generation of irreligious Jews, but they kept the traditions within themselves, so it's not too difficult for me and my generation to return to the ways of our grandfathers. It's not so far from us in time."²⁴² Here, Olga narrates a sense of continuity between the generations, despite external appearances to the contrary. While her parents' intermediate generation may not have manifested its Jewish identity externally, domestic objects such as photographs could preserve the legacy and lifestyle of previous generations for subsequent generations to revive.²⁴³ This was true even for family heirlooms that lay neglected within the home, awaiting an external trigger to spark

²⁴² Sylvia Rothchild, *A Special Legacy*, 108.

²⁴³ For a discussion on the potential of photographs and their accompanying rituals to keep the deceased a vital presence among the living, see Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory, and Material Culture*.

their owners' curiosity. For example, Igor and Lena Levin, who lived in Moscow in the 1970s, inherited a Jewish encyclopedia from Lena's grandparents. For years, "It sat, unread, on a living room shelf." That is, until Igor accepted an invitation to design sets for a Chanukah play. He quickly abandoned the project after receiving a threatening phone call from the KGB, but after this incident, he and his wife felt a persistent sense of curiosity to learn more about Judaism:

The Levins cautiously opened their encyclopedia. Igor read the entry on the Sabbath. Every seventh day, it appeared, Jews had traditionally ceased working, in accordance with G-d's fourth commandment. Strange words and concepts these: Sabbath, commandment, G-d. Strange, yet compelling.²⁴⁴

Inspired by the encyclopedia, the Levins gradually moved toward Sabbath observance. In Olga, Igor, and Lena's narratives, rather than serving a purely sentimental purpose, books, photographs, and other domestic mementos sustained family memory and could even revitalize traditional Jewish identity and practice. The connection between material objects—bequeathed by (and kept in memory of) the dead—and the notion of returning to religious observance suggests that religious observance itself came to serve as a way of honoring and remembering the dead.

Domestic mementos also provided invaluable solace for families that did not know where their relatives were buried. This situation was all too common for those who had lost loved ones on the battlefield or in concentration camps, or whose pre-war family plot in the local cemetery had been demolished during or after the war. Tal (then known as Tolia) recalls visiting his ancestral hometown of Nova Ushytsia (Khmel'nyts'kyi Oblast, Ukraine) with his mother in the early 1950s. She had returned to search for the graves of her mother, Yenta, and her grandfather, Leibush. Together, mother and son climbed through the steep hills of the Jewish cemetery but were unable to locate the two graves. Tal vividly describes his mother's anguish as it became

²⁴⁴ Miriam Stark Zakon, *Silent Revolution: A Torah Network in the Soviet Union*, 83-4.

apparent that their search was futile, “She lost control of herself: she threw herself on the overgrown grass of one grave after the next, sobbing and calling out the names of the dead....” As years passed, his mother’s grief became less acute, but Tal remembers that family photos of the dead, collected by relatives and friends, remained a permanent presence on his mother’s bedside table.²⁴⁵ Tal’s testimony suggests that these photographs served as substitute graves for his mother’s relatives. Denied the sense of finality and comfort of knowing exactly where her loved ones were buried, her sense of loss was overwhelmingly visceral, almost violent. However, with time, and with the installation of a makeshift memorial at home, the wounds began to heal.

The destruction of the Holocaust devastated Jewish property every bit as viciously as it destroyed Jewish lives. As a result, many families did not even have photographs by which to remember their murdered loved ones. Hersch Altman, a young boy from Berezhany (Ternopil’ Oblast, Ukraine), lost both of his parents and his siblings during the war. During his time in a partisan unit, he had kept photographs of his family until they were destroyed in a raid. After liberation, he lamented,

If only the photographs of my family had not been lost when the Germans burned them with everything else the Little Partisans had left behind in the forest. I realized in these first moments of freedom that much of me went up in flames along with the photographs. I desperately wanted to cry but there were no more tears left inside me. [...] Once, I had planned to search for the remains of my father, my mother and of my sister Shancia, but I was a little boy then. Now, on the day of freedom, I knew better. I knew it would not bring any of them back.²⁴⁶

For many, the devastation of the Holocaust was total and irreversible, leaving no possibility for restoring the lives that had been lost or recovering any material traces of their prewar lives. In these instances, individuals and families invented creative and meaningful commemorative

²⁴⁵ Anatoliĭ Shtarkman, *Novaĭa Ushĭsa: (Litnĕvĭsy); kniga napisana so slov korennykh ushichan*, 107-8.

²⁴⁶ Hersch Altman, *On the Fields of Loneliness*, 171.

rituals that were then integrated into the rhythms of domestic daily life. Quite often, these rituals revolved around symbolic foods.

Prosaic though food may seem, as Margaret Gibson comments, “Through death, the most mundane objects can rise in symbolic, emotional and mnemonic value[,] sometimes outweighing all other measures of value....”²⁴⁷ Even the humblest loaf of bread could attain commemorative significance. Mikhail (Moyshe) Aronovich Vanshelboim was born in 1927 in Berdychiv (Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine). After the war, he adopted the practice of baking bread every Friday in memory of his mother:

In the early days of the war... there was nowhere to buy bread, so his mother would gather flour and bake it herself. One early morning in September, as his mother was baking the bread, there was a knock on the windowpane. The police had come to take his mother ‘to work.’ She turned to Moyshe, and told him to watch the bread and take it out in an hour. He never saw her again.²⁴⁸

While the practice of baking bread every Friday certainly echoes traditional preparations for the Sabbath, for Moyshe, the primary significance of this ritual was its ability to recall his mother and to honor her effort to reassure and provide for her child even as her own life was imperiled.

While Moyshe’s breadmaking was purely commemorative, in other Soviet Jewish families, food simultaneously commemorated loved ones and recalled religious rituals that could no longer be practiced in their entirety. Zinaida T, “an art historian from Moscow, attributed her Jewish awareness to her grandmother. The grandmother was a doctor, a woman who was emancipated from the time of the Revolution, but who had mysteriously retained what her granddaughter called ‘the old Jewish mentality.’ She taught Zinaida to speak Yiddish. She ordered matzah for Passover and cooked in the traditional Jewish style, evoking memories of

²⁴⁷ Margaret Gibson, “Melancholy Objects,” 292.

²⁴⁸ Jeffrey Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 265. See AHEYM, MDV 357.

holidays that could not be celebrated openly.²⁴⁹ Through the narratives and practices of daily lives, elderly individuals such as Zinaida's grandmother conveyed their identity to their grandchildren within the relative freedom of the domestic sphere and nurtured attachments to Jewish traditions that contravened secular, Soviet education.

Lazar A. was born in 1921 in Odesa (Odesa Oblast, Ukraine) and worked as a veterinarian until his emigration from the Soviet Union. Like many Soviet Jews, he nostalgically recalls his parents' observance of Jewish rituals, both in the synagogue and in the home.²⁵⁰ By the time Lazar became a parent, the possibilities for Jewish life had narrowed significantly:

I tried to pass on Jewish traditions and Jewish religion to my son Anatoly [b. 1954], but there were no Jewish books, no Torah, and I didn't read Hebrew. Instead of teaching him through books, we talked to him about his grandparents and the traditions they upheld. We celebrated the Jewish holidays as well as we could in Russia. We celebrated Purim and some general holidays. Every year on Pesach we got matzah. There was a time when it was forbidden to have matzah, and we tried to get it from underground. Sometimes I took Anatoly to synagogue, but it was dangerous because you could lose your job if you went to synagogue.²⁵¹

Lazar seems acutely aware of the fragmentary nature of these observances. Yet, much in the rabbinic spirit of substituting the *afikomen* for the paschal lamb and prayer for daily animal sacrifices following the destruction of the Second Temple, Lazar and many other Soviet Jews creatively used distinctive foods, partial observance, and narratives of past generations' Jewish lives to substitute for a traditional Jewish lifestyle that was no longer possible²⁵². At the same

²⁴⁹ Rothchild, *A Special Legacy*, 44.

²⁵⁰ Elaine Snyderman and Margaret Witkovsky, eds., *Line Five, the Internal Passport*, 74.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 77.

²⁵² In interviews and memoirs, fond memories of holiday foods are very common: latkes for Chanukah, *hamentaschen* for Purim, gefilte fish and matzah for Passover, honey cake for Rosh Hashanah. As religious life became increasingly confined to the home and younger generations of Soviet Jews grew up without exposure to the synagogue, Jewish time came to be marked primarily by food, and these foods were strongly associated with the female relatives who prepared them.

time, much like photographs and family heirlooms, these practices and stories honored the memory of past generations and conveyed a sense of familial continuity.

For both secular and religiously-inclined Soviet Jews, even the most prosaic domestic mementos, foods, and ritual practices provided crucial, cyclical opportunities to commemorate the dead and to transmit family lore from one generation to the next. In turn, the commemoration of the dead also helped to sustain a knowledge of traditional Jewish life, if not necessarily full religious observance. In this way, memories of past generations and memories of observant Jewish life became intertwined and mutually sustaining, even as they both attained ritual significance.

Yortzeit Practices in the Home and Beyond

In traditional Jewish practice, the anniversary of a death is an important component of the calendrical cycle and is marked in three distinct spaces: the synagogue, the cemetery, and the home. The highlight of public, synagogue *yortzeit* rituals is the recitation of mourner's kaddish: "Whereas the *Kaddish* said during the twelve months of mourning is recited to alleviate the potential suffering of the soul of the deceased in Gehenna, the annual recitation of *Kaddish* on the *yahrtzeit* serves to elevate the soul to ever higher levels of *Gan Eden*."²⁵³ In addition to reciting kaddish, it is also customary for surviving relatives to make donations to charity and to complete additional Torah and Mishnah study in the deceased's merit. Within the cemetery, relatives traditionally visit the deceased's grave on their *yortzeit*, assuming they live within a reasonable distance. The first anniversary is the occasion for unveiling the tombstone, but on all

²⁵³ Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), *From This World to the Next*, n.p.

yortzeits, family members recite specific psalms²⁵⁴ and say the personal memorial prayer, *el moleh rachamim*. In the private and domestic sphere, it is customary to fast on a parent's *yortzeit*. By far the most commonly observed *yortzeit* custom is lighting a *yortzeit* candle in the home that burns for 25 hours.²⁵⁵

In the postwar Soviet Union, a surprising number of these traditional *yortzeit* practices persisted, albeit in altered form or reduced frequency. Because the Hebrew calendar differs from the Gregorian civil calendar, one of the biggest barriers to *yortzeit* observance in the Soviet context was calculating the appropriate *yortzeit* date each year. From 1930 on, it was extremely difficult to obtain Jewish calendars in the Soviet Union, and most communities had to rely on local individuals who could conduct the necessary calculations and distribute handwritten calendars each year. As decades passed and these individuals passed away, access to Hebrew calendars diminished drastically.²⁵⁶ Consequently, fewer families were able to engrave their relatives' Hebrew dates of death on gravestones or observe *yortzeits* according to the Hebrew calendar. However, rather than discarding *yortzeit* observances altogether, many families chose to mark *yortzeits* according to the secular calendar. With or without the Hebrew dates, families maintained lists of deceased relatives, their Hebrew names, and their dates of death. These sorts of familial records played a crucial role in enabling and encouraging the continued observance of traditional *yortzeit* practices in the synagogue, the cemetery, and the home.

²⁵⁴ Psalms 33, 16, 17, 72, 91, 104, and 130.

²⁵⁵ This custom is based on the verse, "The soul of man is the lamp of the Lord" (Proverbs 20:27). See JTS, *From This World to the Next*, 102. Although the custom of lighting a candle in memory of the dead was initially performed in the synagogue, over time it shifted to the home. Many communities maintain the custom of lighting a bulb or lamp on a former member's *yortzeit*.

²⁵⁶ See Smilovitsky, *Jewish Life in Belarus*, 157.

The fate of synagogue *yortzeit* rituals, including the recitation of kaddish and the study of Mishnah in memory of the deceased, is discussed in Chapter IV. Given the limited availability of synagogues, the professional risks inherent in synagogue attendance, and widespread ignorance of Hebrew and Aramaic, the continued observance of public, religious mourning rituals required significant creativity. *Yortzeit* cemetery visits were far more accessible, at least for Soviet Jews who remained in their hometowns after the war (see Chapter III). Along with cemetery visits, lighting a *yortzeit* candle at home remained one of the most accessible and popular ways of commemorating the anniversary of a loved one's death. Of course, it was difficult to find candles that could burn reliably for 24 hours. Instead, many families began using a kerosene lamp or leaving an electric light on to mark *yortzeits*. Frida Moiseevna Pustilnik (nee Vaysberg) was born in 1941 in Iampil' (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine) and lived much of her life in the village of Iaruha (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine) and Boryslav (L'viv Oblast, Ukraine). Her father was listed as "missing in action" during the war, and she doesn't know where he is buried. Instead of visiting his grave, she adopted the practice of leaving an electric lamp lit for one full day in his memory and in memory of other relatives who died, including her grandparents.²⁵⁷ Another interviewee, Eva, like many children in the Soviet Union, lived with her grandmother, grandfather, and great-grandmother as a child. She recalls how her grandmother, who was quite traditional, would mark several *yortzeits* throughout the year, including the anniversary of two of her children's deaths during the Second World War. On these occasions, her grandmother would light a kerosene lamp. Later, her grandmother switched to using an electric lamp for the same purpose. In addition to these individual *yortzeits*, on Yom Kippur Eva's grandmother would fast and would light the kerosene lamp. Despite the consistency of her *yortzeit* observances, Eva's grandmother

²⁵⁷ AHEYM, MDV 390.

never explicitly explained these practices to her grandchild.²⁵⁸ They were simply visible within the familial home, to be understood through inference.

Yortzeit commemoration remained a widespread priority for both secular and religious Soviet Jews, and traditional *yortzeit* practices remained surprisingly prevalent. I argue that this persistence was due to the distribution of *yortzeit* rituals across three spheres—the synagogue, the cemetery, and the home. Based on individual circumstances and knowledge, Soviet Jews could select the sites and rituals that were most suitable. For those who could not attend synagogue to say kaddish, visiting relatives' graves on *yortzeits* remained very popular. While Soviet Jews gradually adopted Slavic practices of frequent cemetery visits and bringing flowers to gravesites, the knowledge that Jews shouldn't visit cemeteries overly often and that stones were more appropriate than flowers remained widespread. For those who lived far from the cemeteries where their relatives were buried, synagogue rituals and domestic practices such as kindling a *yortzeit* lamp, remained appealing alternatives.

The Domestic Sphere and the Fate of Jewish Memory

The aforementioned commemorative rituals raise several important questions regarding the role of domestic space in postwar Soviet Jewish life. First, what did domestic practices offer that more obvious, public sites of commemoration could not? Second, what can the popularity of domestic commemoration tell us about postwar memorialization and the very nature of Jewish practice and identity in this period?

²⁵⁸ Mariia Elenevskaiia and L. L. Fialkova, *Russkaia ulitsa*, vol. 1, 96-7. See also Dymshitz, "Evreiskoe kladbische."

While synagogues offered ample space for Jewish memories, they were few in number, and attendees faced heavy state surveillance—a reality that discouraged young and middle-aged Jews from attending for fear of jeopardizing their careers. Women, who traditionally played an ancillary role in synagogue life, had limited access to synagogue rituals such as kaddish.²⁵⁹ For secular Jews, the rituals and prayers of the religious community were unfamiliar and intimidating—too distant and clumsy for expressing grief and seeking consolation. Monuments to the Great Patriotic War and Soviet Victory Day parades offered regular, highly accessible opportunities for collective commemoration. Yet they made little reference to the individual, familial, or uniquely Jewish losses of the Holocaust. Jewish public gatherings at monuments and unmarked mass graves were primarily secular in tone, but they also attracted the attention of local authorities, particularly during the Anti-Cosmopolitan Campaign and as the movement for Soviet Jewish emigration gained visibility. Beyond these concerns of familiarity and exposure, there were significant geographic and logistical constraints on public commemoration. Those who migrated away from their ancestral hometowns, leaving behind the graves of their ancestors and close relatives, also found it difficult to make pilgrimages to these sites. These dilemmas were compounded for the elderly who often had great difficulty visiting synagogues, cemeteries, and monuments, even in the immediate vicinity of their homes.

While the public sphere offered many opportunities for commemoration, a very large percentage of Soviet Jews could not, or chose not to, participate in them. Instead, the very accessibility, invisibility, and adaptability of the domestic sphere made it the most natural, and often the only, site for remembering deceased relatives and for perpetuating Jewish identity, history, and practice. Through the oral, material, and ritual components of daily life, the home

²⁵⁹ The next chapter examines how women participated in male-dominated rituals such as kaddish, albeit secondhandedly.

offered unparalleled opportunities to reconstruct a Jewish memorial landscape, sometimes as a supplement to public sites of commemoration and, more frequently, as a substitute for public spaces and rituals. In the domestic space, individuals and their immediate families were free to establish their own balance between the narrativization and enacting of memory—reflecting their creativity, comfort, and familiarity in adapting traditional Jewish commemorative practices. It is precisely the unscripted nature of the domestic sphere that fed its dynamism and enabled Soviet Jews to sustain and transmit their family heritage despite the challenging social, political, and economic realities of the postwar period.

The difficulty in studying the domestic sphere is that it is rarely documented in historical sources, and it is frequently viewed as an insignificant, or even a bastardized cousin, of more public traditions, both by contemporaries and subsequent spectators. Of course, in reality, the boundaries between public and private space are porous and should not be reified, particularly in the Soviet Jewish context. Private apartments served as ad hoc synagogues; family burial plots were situated in the public space of the cemetery; and individual memories inevitably intersected with much broader communal and national histories. As Alexander Manuylov argues, “Privacy (or conversely, publicness) [is] a matter of social practice, rather than of social institutions or ingrained social structures.”²⁶⁰ Yet, despite the complex relationship between public and private, the “private” domain of the home has often been designated as a feminine space. This classification is closely related to the denigration of domestic practices as insignificant and inferior to public, male practices. For Jews, the contrast between the masculine, public, official space of the synagogue and the feminine, private, and informal space of the home has often been particularly stark. While both spaces are acknowledged as crucial to communal continuity, the

²⁶⁰ Alexander Manuylov, “The Practices of ‘Privacy,’” 130.

synagogue has generally held primacy as the center of communal power, the adjudicative seat of Jewish law and practice.

In an anthropological study of elderly, Kurdish Jewish women in Jerusalem in the late 1980s, Susan Starr Sered highlights the relationship between the public/masculine and private/feminine systems of Judaism while challenging the notion of women's domestic religion as a distorted or inferior copy of the public "original." Instead, as a parallel, partner institution to public Judaism, "Domestic religion...preserves Judaism by binding the new generation with bonds of love and relationship, it maintains boundaries between Jew and non-Jew, transmits traditional values, makes the individual really feel Jewish and is passed on informally from mother to daughter."²⁶¹ While acknowledging the social dominance of male-driven Judaism, Sered reveals the degree to which women can serve as ritual experts in their homes and in their communities, thereby broadening our understanding of religion, spirituality, and holiness. Even within public religious institutions, women "domesticate" religion, transforming these spaces and their accompanying rituals into opportunities for expressing familial needs and concerns. For example, the women in Sered's study use the public spaces of the synagogue and cemetery to petition on behalf of their loved ones—practices quite distant from the male rituals that are conducted simultaneously in these spaces and dominate popular imaginings of these sites.

In the East European context, rather than normativizing public, "male" Judaism, the Bolshevik Revolution led to steady weakening of the male "great tradition," rapidly curtailing access to its language, beliefs, and rituals. While organized religion was viewed as a pernicious conspiracy to desensitize workers to their own oppression, Soviet understandings of religious life were largely informed by androcentric models. Bolshevik ideology saw the "little tradition" of

²⁶¹ Susan Starr Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts*, 92.

folk practices and domestic religion as backward superstition, but Soviet authorities were confident that pagan customs, domestic rituals, and old wives' tales would eventually die out with sufficient education and the creation of alternative, socialist rituals. In the meantime, the offenses of domestic religion were seen as less severe, largely because of their non-institutional nature. Furthermore, the Soviet authorities quickly discovered that regulating folk rituals was futile. Thus, in practice, domestic religiosity enjoyed a certain degree of tolerance in the Soviet context. As the Jewish "great tradition" languished under Bolshevism, domestic rituals became the bedrock of Jewish belief and practice. As Sered suggests, the foundational triad of women's ritual life includes food, fertility, and death rituals.²⁶² In the Soviet context, food and mourning seem to have remained the primary substance of Jewish identity and practice.

Although Sered's work alters the gendered hierarchy of religious life, it does not consider the involvement of men in domestic religion. While it might be tempting to assume that domestic space and ritual is universally the exclusive domain of women, this is hardly the case. In fact, the story of Soviet Jewry demands that this spatial-gender division be discarded. In the Soviet context, the legal and logistical obstacles to public religious life meant that Jewish men increasingly abandoned the public life of the synagogue. This left them with the option either to Sovietize themselves, as many did, or to domesticate their Jewish identity and practice. In other words, as the site of their religious life shifted from the public to the private sphere, Soviet Jewish men joined "women's Judaism." Increasingly, both men and women lacked formal Jewish educations and were unable to access Hebrew, Aramaic, and even Yiddish texts. Thereby divorced from the theological and legal aspects of Jewish tradition, their Judaism came to be primarily based on folk customs and the knowledge available to them in their new vernacular

²⁶² Ibid, 133-4.

language of Russian. At the same time, their sense of Jewishness became rooted primarily in the personal and familial, thereby becoming “feminized.”

Rather than representing the total loss of Jewish practice and identity, instead, these shifts transferred the bedrock of Jewish life from the public to the private realm, from the synagogue into the home. In the absence of Jewish religious authority, local communities, families, and even individuals were both compelled and empowered to decide for themselves which practices to maintain and in which spaces to perform these selected rituals. While the exile of Jewish religious practices from the synagogue made them more susceptible to being “cross-fertilized with a host of adjacent beliefs and practices,”²⁶³ this anarchic new system established a flexible, adaptable vehicle for the survival of Jewish practices and sensibilities.

The domestic transformation of Jewish life was deeply enmeshed in larger social transformations during the Soviet period, in particular, the evolving role of the home. In many senses, the home functioned as a refuge, an escape hatch from the models and expectations of public life in the Soviet Union. This became increasingly true during the Khrushchev era as greater and greater numbers of Soviet citizens moved out of dormitories and communal apartments. Following a massive campaign of housing construction, multigenerational single-family apartments rapidly became the accepted standard in Soviet housing. For the first time, the communally-focused state tacitly sanctioned the existence of a private sphere,²⁶⁴ a development that had dramatic implications for social relations and individual autonomy.

Like their fellow Soviet citizens, Soviet Jews were increasingly able to focus personal expression within the home, a space in which only the immediate family and a small, close-knit

²⁶³ Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 155.

²⁶⁴ See Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, 61, 82-3.

circle of friends were granted access to each other's daily lives. In part, this intimate social configuration and circumscribed venue of performance reflected enduring fears of political repression ingrained by the Stalinist Purges—a time when hostile neighbors and communal apartment-mates freely denounced each other for ideological deviations.²⁶⁵ However, as new residential configurations offered greater privacy, the Soviet Jewish home became a refuge for opinions, beliefs, and practices that were taboo in the larger society. The postwar evolution of Soviet Jewish commemorative practices both reflected and participated in the ongoing social, political, and economic transformation of Soviet society. Regardless of their hybridity or “purity” in the religious sense, the domestic commemorative practices we have seen in this chapter are both quintessentially Jewish and Soviet, illustrating the vitality of domestic Judaism—its ability to withstand catastrophe and adapt to changing realities.

Denied many opportunities for public mourning, Soviet Jews found creative ways to commemorate their deceased relatives and neighbors in the private, domestic sphere. The home was the space that most acutely sparked memories of missing family members; it also offered a wide range of material objects and practices that preserved the memory of the deceased and reinforced the Jewish identity of the living. In large part, the personal and familial stories we have explored center around substitution—names in place of deceased relatives, pictures in place of gravestones, private words in place of public actions. From one perspective, these would seem to be impoverished substitutes, reflecting the ongoing deterioration of Jewish life in the Soviet Union. Yet, they fall in a long tradition of Jewish adaptation to changing historical circumstances—a practice that has sustained Jewish life for millennia. However ironically, the

²⁶⁵ See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* and Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*.

very substitutions that have challenged normative Judaism, have, at times, served as the only hope for Jewish survival.

CHAPTER III

Seasons of Individual and Collective Remembrance in the Jewish Cemetery

Introduction

Jewish cemeteries in Eastern Europe served as powerful repositories of family heritage and local history. These are spaces to which the living returned year after year, generation after generation, to honor with the familial and communal past. Cemeteries were also endowed with a vibrant body of commemorative rituals, which proved remarkably resilient despite the geographic dislocation, demographic decline, and social upheaval of the twentieth century. The durability of cemetery memorial rituals was largely due to their accessibility and embeddedness in everyday life. For Soviet Jews who remained in their ancestral hometowns or made regular visits to these towns after the war, cemeteries were firmly embedded in the visual, temporal, and material landscape of daily life. Furthermore, while cemeteries were technically situated on public property and were subject to state oversight, grave plots were an extension of the familial, domestic sphere. As a result, Jewish individuals and communities enjoyed significant latitude to conduct individual and communal mourning rituals at these sites.²⁶⁶

As Chava Weissler argues, cemetery rituals transcend accepted dichotomies between the public and the private sphere:

²⁶⁶ Neither CARC nor local burial bureaus made significant efforts to discourage religious ceremonies at cemeteries. Religious funerals were recognized as legal, and other commemorative rituals regularly occurred without state intervention.

Why is it that cemeteries, which are, after all, public places, seem to be so important in women's religious lives? Some possible answers seem to point us back toward the private domain; many women's cemetery prayers were addressed to their dead relatives. These prayers are still, in a way, trying to keep the family together. And although the cemetery *was* public, it was only rarely—for example, during funerals—the scene of public rituals. It may be that considering cemetery devotions destabilizes the distinction between the public and private domains.²⁶⁷

In the Soviet context, how did the cemetery create or proscribe certain commemorative possibilities, and how did these differ from the private space of the home or the more public space of synagogue?

Individual Visits to Graves

Visiting the graves of deceased relatives, especially parents, was deeply ingrained in East European Jewish culture prior to the Holocaust. After the war, it remained quite prevalent and has survived to the present day. The attachment that individuals retained toward local Jewish cemeteries and the graves of their loved ones should not be underestimated. As Anna Gonn Gekhter (b. 1954 in Bobruisk, Mogilev Oblast, Belarus) comments: “My grandmother is religious and follows Jewish traditions. She would never leave Russia; she doesn't want to abandon the graves of her husband and children.”²⁶⁸ While the ability to visit relatives' graves discouraged some from migrating within the Soviet Union or emigrating to Israel, younger Soviet Jews who chose to migrate within the Soviet Union retained an attachment to their families' graves and returned to visit.

Traditionally, Jewish custom discourages frequent visits to cemeteries. Instead, there are specific occasions throughout the year (which vary, depending on local custom) during which

²⁶⁷ Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs*, 45-6.

²⁶⁸ Snyderman and Witkovsky, 263.

cemetery visitation is encouraged and even seen as obligatory. These include the days leading up to major holidays such as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, and Shavuot. In certain communities, Tisha b'Av and Erev Rosh Chodesh are also seen as important occasions for visiting the cemetery. Visiting relatives' graves on their *yortzeits* is also common, but it is generally seen as non-obligatory, especially for children who have moved away from their hometowns.²⁶⁹

In the Soviet Union, the choice of which dates in the annual cycle of Jewish holidays were most appropriate for grave visitations varied by region but remained limited to no more than two or three times per year. For example, in Liuboml' (Volyn Oblast, Ukraine), the local custom was to visit the town's two Jewish cemeteries twice a year: during the first half of Nisan until Passover, during the month of Elul, and on *yortzeits*.²⁷⁰ In Belarus and parts of Ukraine, Tisha b'Av remained the primary day for cemetery visits. Personal as these visits were, the timing of these pilgrimages was determined communally by local custom. In the postwar era, the preservation of these communal periods of remembrance sustained local ritual and social coherence while simultaneously reinforcing the connection between living Jewish communities and the local burial landscape.

Valery Dymshitz's post-Soviet ethnographic work reveals that in west-central and southwestern Ukraine²⁷¹ the month of Elul leading up to Rosh Hashanah remained the most popular time of year to visit cemeteries and tend to relatives' graves, even taking precedence over

²⁶⁹ Dymshitz, "Evreiskoe kladbische."

²⁷⁰ Moyshe Lifshitz, "Life, Reconstruction, and Creativity: Organization of the Jewish Community [Kehila], The Last Chapter of the History of the Jews of Luboml, 1918-1942," 99-110, in Nathan Sobel, *Luboml*, 106.

²⁷¹ Historically known as the Podoliia region.

yortzeit visits.²⁷² In Soviet cities that still had a functioning synagogue after the war, Elul also remained the designated time for conducting synagogue repairs.²⁷³ Both maintenance projects seem to have been in the larger spirit of preparing for a new year. In the case of cemeteries, this timing was a logistically opportune moment to tidy family burial plots at the end of the summer growing season before winter set in. The practicality of this custom-made cemetery visitation during Elul a desirable and natural practice to maintain, even for secular Soviet Jews.

For the religiously or spiritually inclined, Elul visits held deep significance. As Moyshe Lifshitz explains, "...people went to the cemetery to spend private moments with the souls of the departed. It was a kind of personal religious observance full of emotion, mysticism, and holiness."²⁷⁴ Visits during Elul were an important opportunity to make requests in preparation for the new year. Unlike the recitation of kaddish, which confers merit on the deceased through the piety of the living, traditional grave visitation practices are largely concerned with leveraging the merit of the deceased to aid the living. As Chava Weissler explains, "The Zohar recounts that when human beings in trouble weep at the graves of the righteous... the dead become concerned and rouse 'those who sleep in Hebron,' that is, the patriarchs and matriarchs and Adam and Eve, to plead for mercy for them."²⁷⁵ This idea of the dead interceding on behalf of the living has remained controversial in rabbinic law, but it became firmly embedded in the lived religion of East European Jewry, particularly in women's cemetery rituals and *tkhines* [vernacular, supplicatory prayers].²⁷⁶ Visiting the cemetery to share one's fears and petitions with deceased

²⁷² Dymshitz, "Evreiskoe kladbische."

²⁷³ See Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity*, 92.

²⁷⁴ Lifshitz, "Life, Reconstruction, and Creativity," in Sobel, *Luboml*, 106.

²⁷⁵ Weissler, 139. See the *Zohar* III, 70b-71a.

²⁷⁶ See Weissler, 145-6.

relatives remains common to this day, particularly among elderly Yiddish speakers who still employ the traditional imperatives “*loyf*” [run] and “*bel*” [plead] as they entreat their deceased relatives to intercede on their behalf.²⁷⁷ During visits to a relative’s grave, the most universal ritual is leaving a stone as a “calling card.” When Raisa Boriosovna Turovskaia (nee Feldman), born in 1924 to a Chassidic family in Novi Velidnyky (Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine), visits her relatives’ graves to request their assistance, she always leaves a stone at their graves as a “sign.”²⁷⁸ Dymshitz also notes the survival of leaving small stones rather than flowers at a grave. Even though many Soviet Jews eventually adopted the practice of bringing bouquets and wreaths to their relatives’ graves in addition to, or in place of, the traditional stone, they maintained a sense that flowers were not ideal and that placing a stone was more appropriate, more “Jewish.”²⁷⁹

Despite the importance of these periodic, pre-holiday cemetery visits, making regular visits to the cemetery has traditionally been seen as superfluous, even undesirable. Furthermore, entire groups within the Jewish community—including *kohanim* [priests], pregnant women, and anyone whose parents are still alive—are practically forbidden from entering cemeteries.²⁸⁰ These taboos hinge on a variety of factors, from concerns about ritual purity to fears of inviting death. In some Soviet Jewish families, this tradition of avoiding the cemetery was forgotten as successive generations secularized. Slavic influence introduced the custom of visiting cemeteries

²⁷⁷ Dymshitz, “Evreiskoe kladbische.”

²⁷⁸ AHEYM, MDV 629.

²⁷⁹ Dymshitz, “Evreiskoe kladbische.”

²⁸⁰ See Aleksandra Polian and Ol’ga Belova, “Delo bylo v Bel’tsakh.”

on the birthday of the deceased.²⁸¹ Furthermore, the popularity of cemetery visits among Soviet non-Jews prompted Jews to visit cemeteries more frequently than Jewish custom encouraged. Other individuals and families made a more conscious decision to abandon superstitions surrounding the dead. Nevertheless, into the postwar era, most Soviet Jewish children were not taken to funerals, even for their own grandparents, in sharp contrast to the surrounding Slavic cultures for whom cemeteries were the site of regular family gatherings and picnics. Additionally, many Soviet Jews retained a traditional reticence toward frequent graveside visits.²⁸²

Periodic, individual gravesite visits, with their accompanying ritual practices and taboos, are rooted in East European Jewish culture and in the landscape of local Jewish cemeteries. In the postwar Soviet context, they remained an important opportunity for individuals to connect with their family heritage, the Jewish burial landscape, traditional rituals, and the communal calendar.

Calendrical Memory and Communal Tragedy

While the practice of visiting cemeteries on specific occasions throughout the year was deeply embedded in Jewish communal life, it was not a collective ritual per se and was not designed to address communal tragedies such as the mass shootings that had occurred during the Second World War. Many mass shootings were conducted within Jewish cemeteries, but many more transpired in remote fields and forests. These sites were physically removed from prewar Jewish graves and held no intrinsic connection to the rituals surrounding them. For these reasons,

²⁸¹ Dymshitz, “Evreiskoe kladbische.” This phenomenon reflects the influence of Russian Orthodox namedays and subsequently, in Soviet times, birthdays, as a focal point for celebration, even posthumously.

²⁸² Ibid.

it was not inevitable or necessarily natural for Holocaust commemoration to be integrated into existing models of commemoration. Could the unprecedented tragedies of the Holocaust be woven into the existing local calendar for gravesite visits? Would cemetery rituals and taboos evolve in response to the Holocaust? Or would Soviet Jews develop entirely novel modes of collective mourning and remembrance? Across the formerly occupied Soviet territories, the answers to these questions varied greatly, and the focus of Soviet Jews' postwar collective commemoration remained deeply centered on local history, local sites of memory, and local rituals.²⁸³

Some Soviet Jewish communities integrated local Holocaust sites into the prewar calendar of commemoration and, by implication, into the local Jewish landscape. In some instances, this approach even wove the story of the Holocaust into the larger trajectory of Jewish history. As with most postwar Jewish practices, no single model emerged that encompassed all of Soviet Jewry. With no central body to speak for Soviet Jewry and no overarching narrative of the "Holocaust" to draw upon, these sites could not be drawn into a single, universal historical framework.²⁸⁴ While there was a well-developed narrative of the "Great Patriotic War," mass shooting sites stood in an ambivalent relationship to this mythology, which was reluctant to acknowledge unheroic civilian victims, especially Jews. Thus, with few exceptions, the

²⁸³ The remainder of this chapter focuses on postwar mourning in the context of the cemetery and the integration of Holocaust mourning into pre-existing days of mourning. The next chapter emphasizes mourning practices in the synagogues, including kaddish and yizkor, and their relationship to major Jewish holidays. The final chapter focuses on mass graves and novel commemorative practices that emerged around them.

²⁸⁴ Elsewhere, the emergence of a Holocaust narrative is also a fairly recent development. However, the Soviet case is unique because these Jewish communities remained living among the sites of Nazi atrocity and, as a result, were faced with much more visible reminders of this history.

commemoration of these sites remained the purview of localized communal memory to be commemorated by drawing on local landmarks, traditions, resources, and knowledge.²⁸⁵

During the war, the region of Ukraine between the Dniester and Bug rivers was transferred to Romanian administration. Under the “Transnistria Governorate,” a tuberculosis sanatorium in Pechera served as a labor and death camp for Ukrainian, Bessarabian, and Bukovinian Jews.²⁸⁶ Although the Romanian occupation was significantly less brutal than the Nazi occupation in other parts of the Soviet Union, there are several mass graves in the forests surrounding the camp. Almost immediately after the war, survivors living in nearby Tul’ chyn (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine) began to travel to these shooting sites and to the Jewish cemetery in Pechera each year during the month of Elul.²⁸⁷ Denied the opportunity to bury their relatives in the same Jewish cemetery where generations of their family trees lay buried, these survivors extended their traditional cemetery rituals to include new, mass graves. While the tradition of visiting graves during Elul survived particularly well in the southwestern regions of Ukraine, in most towns and cities, it seems to have remained primarily a period for individual visits to familial graves, not for the commemoration of mass graves. In part, I suspect that this was because Elul did not bear any intrinsic connection to traumatic or catastrophic events in Jewish history. In other regions, the traditional fast days of Tisha b’Av and the Twentieth of Sivan survived as commemorative focal points in the local calendar and, to varying degrees, came to play important roles in commemorating the Holocaust.

²⁸⁵ Notable exceptions to this pattern include Babyn Yar in Kyiv, Ukraine and the Yama site in Minsk, Belarus.

²⁸⁶ For more information, see Rebecca L. Golbert, “Holocaust Sites in Ukraine.”

²⁸⁷ Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 259.

Tisha b'Av and the Local Jewish Cemetery

After the war, in towns across Belarus, western Russia, and parts of Ukraine, Tisha b'Av remained the predominant day for visiting relatives' gravesites. After the war, Raisa Borisovna Turovskaia (b. 1924 in Novi Velidnyky, Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine) moved to the larger city of Ovruch, thirty-one kilometers to the east. After her parents' and in-laws' deaths, she visited the cemetery, which she refers to as a *heylike ort* [holy place], each year on Tisha b'Av. With her, she would bring a bag of garlic cloves to lay at the foot of their gravestones. In Yiddish, she explains that the garlic was a symbolic message to her relatives so that they “should know of our sorrow [*biternish*].” On other occasions throughout the year, she would leave small stones as “calling cards” and make requests for her relatives' assistance. On Tisha b'Av however, she silently placed garlic cloves around the graves, allowing the garlic to speak solely of her grief rather than her hopes.²⁸⁸ In Nevel' (Pskov Oblast, Russia), Dymshitz's post-Soviet interviewees also identified Tisha b'Av as the most important, indeed, obligatory, day in the year for cemetery visitation.²⁸⁹

As a fast day in memory of the destruction of the Jewish Temple, Tisha b'Av, focuses on loss rather than on hope for the future, unlike the anticipatory season of Elul. While Raisa Turovskaia and Dymshitz's interviewees make no explicit reference to the destruction of the Temple in their description of Tisha b'Av observances, their practices are in keeping with the mournful history of the day. These interviewees indicate that cemetery visits on Tisha b'Av were normative practice in their local communities, but they do not mention interacting with other Jews at the cemetery on Tisha b'Av. Thus, in some locales, Tisha b'Av observances remained

²⁸⁸ AHEYM, MDV 629.

²⁸⁹ Dymshitz, “Evreiskoe kladbische.”

exclusively focused on immediate family members and not on Holocaust commemoration at large.

In the late 1940s and especially in the 1950s, CARC seems to have suddenly become aware of Tisha b'Av as a Jewish holiday. Not surprisingly, its attention was particularly fixed on communities in which Tisha b'Av observances assumed a collective character. While CARC officials knew of major Jewish holidays such as Rosh Hashanah and Passover from its inception, they were often unsure whether Judaism's more minor holidays were indeed traditional components of the Jewish calendar or whether these were holidays recently-invented, Zionist ploys to arouse Jewish national sentiments. Like Chanukah, the historical narrative of Tisha b'Av is strongly rooted in the Land of Israel and the loss of Jewish sovereignty. As Soviet officials learned of the holiday's historical significance, they voiced concerns about the fast day's potential to inflame Jewish nationalism.²⁹⁰ Despite these concerns, in the early postwar decades, Tisha b'Av services across Belarus and Ukraine remained intently focused on the commemoration of deceased family members, without explicit reference to the Temples' destruction.²⁹¹

In a September 1955 report, Shumkov—the CARC Commissioner for the Vinnytsia Oblast—describes the observance of Tisha b'Av on 27-28 July in the Jewish communities of Zhmerynka, Chernivtsi,²⁹² Bershad', and Iampil'. In Zhmerynka, the Jewish community had as

²⁹⁰ See Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity*, 64. CARC also sought to stamp out the traditional phrase “Next year in Jerusalem” in Yom Kippur and Passover observances. Again, this was seen as an expression of Zionism rather than as a longstanding component of Jewish life.

²⁹¹ By the late 1950s, CARC no longer mentioned the holiday in its reports. Although Tisha b'Av observance may have died out in some regions, its persistence in a large number of Jewish communities suggests, instead, that officials came to see the day as an innocuous day of remembrance.

²⁹² Chernevtsy, in Russian. Not to be confused with Chernivtsi (Rus: Chernovtsy) in the Chernivtsi Oblast, Ukraine.

many as 1,000 members; 450 of them attended the evening service of Tisha b'Av, including 100 women. No teenagers or children were seen at the service. The next morning, 85 men and 100 women attended prayer services. After the conclusion of the services, attendees moved to the Jewish cemetery where other members of the Jewish community, who had not attended synagogue that morning, joined the commemorative ceremonies. In total, approximately 600 people gathered in the Zhmerynka Jewish cemetery—the majority of them women. Shumkov estimates that seven percent of the cemetery visitors were young men between the ages of 18 and 25, and another fifteen percent were young women between the ages of 18 and 25. Those assembled visited the graves of their relatives until the evening.²⁹³

In Chernivtsi (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine), the Jewish community consisted of 600 members. On the eve of Tisha b'Av, 120 men and 30 women gathered at the synagogue for prayers. The next morning, 100 men and 100 women prayed in the synagogue and then went to visit the cemetery. There, the number of attendees grew to 350. Over the course of the day, Shumkov estimates that as many as 500 Chernivtsi Jews visited the cemetery, with young people comprising fifteen percent of the attendees. These numbers were roughly consistent with those of the previous year. Proceedings in Chernivtsi were led by five individuals—readers, cantors, and a rabbi—all from the local community. Memorial prayers at the cemetery lasted all day since the readers and cantors recited prayers in front of each grave for whom a relative was present.

In Bershad', the local Jewish community consisted of 400 members. On the eve of Tisha b'Av, 100 men and 50 women attended evening prayers. 40 men and 50 women attended the next morning and then, as in Zhmerynka and Chernivtsi, proceeded to visit the local Jewish cemetery where two local residents and a visiting cantor from Chechel'nyk (Vinnytsia Oblast,

²⁹³ DAVO f. R-2700, op. 19, d. 47, l. 13. CAHJP RU 1992. The previous year in Zhmerynka, 120 had attended evening prayers, 80 attended morning prayers, and 200 gathered at the cemetery (Ibid).

Ukraine)—Gersh Dovidovich Klenerman—read memorial prayers until sunset. Unlike the preceding cities in the same oblast, no young people came to the Bershad’ synagogue or the cemetery.

Lastly, in Iampil’, where the Jewish community numbered 300, 150 men and 100 women attended the evening prayers on Tisha b’Av 1955. No young people were present. The next morning, 80 men and 100 women attended morning prayers, which continued throughout the day in the synagogue. As Shumkov notes, the local Jewish cemetery had been destroyed during the German and Romanian occupation, and its gravestones had been used to pave the sidewalk in front of the District Council building. As a result, Iampil’s Jews could no longer locate their relatives’ graves and, thus, could not perform the same rituals as their neighbors in Zhmerynka, Chernivtsi, and Bershad’.²⁹⁴

From this detailed and unusual CARC report on Tisha b’Av, it is clear that the traditional fast day remained a major fixture in the postwar religious and communal life of these Ukrainian Jewish communities. Most strikingly, the day’s commemorative activities attracted a significant number of young people to synagogues and Jewish cemeteries. Furthermore, memorial prayers were read publicly, creating a communal atmosphere for mourning. In contrast to many other Jewish holidays, Tisha b’Av provided secular Jews (and Jews who feared losing their jobs for attending synagogue) with a different setting for Jewish communal, commemorative, and ritual engagement. The cemetery was a specifically Jewish site that even Party members could visit without being suspected of ideological deviations. Ambivalent as CARC was toward religious gatherings outside of officially-recognized houses of worship, there was significant tolerance for

²⁹⁴ DAVO f. R-2700, op. 19, d. 47, l. 13-14. CAHJP RU 1992. Illustrating CARC’s relatively relaxed stance toward Tisha b’Av activities, Shumkov notes that he did not observe any violations of Soviet law in these four Jewish communities during the fast.

memorial services held in cemeteries—a practice that was prevalent in other religious communities as well. For example, a report from December 1975 on the Muslim population in the Minsk Oblast discusses the Tatar population, which continued to bury its dead in the Tatar cemetery in Osmolovo (Nesvizh District, Minsk Oblast, Belarus). Their funerals were conducted in accordance with religious tradition and were officiated by the former deputy mullah, Bakir Abramovich. During the summer, June-July, members of the community held memorial services for the dead and invited a mullah from the village of Muravschina to join them. CARC raised no objection to these practice.²⁹⁵

Despite CARC's uncertainty as to the religious significance of Tisha b'Av, on the whole, it tolerated these practices as innocuous expressions of mourning for the dead. While the traditional synagogue liturgy for the day is deeply connected to the destruction of the Temples, observances of Tisha b'Av in this period centered heavily on visiting local graves and saying memorial prayers. The Land of Israel (much less efforts to immigrate to the newly-formed State of Israel) was not part of the picture.

Tisha b'Av and Holocaust Commemoration

In some locales, Tisha b'Av did not simply survive as an opportunity for collective mourning of individual lives. Instead, it became an occasion for the commemoration of collective, local tragedies during the Holocaust. This was true of many Jewish communities in Belarus, including Borisov (Minsk Oblast, Belarus). Prior to the war, Jews had constituted 52 percent of the Borisov population. After the Nazi invasion, the local Jewish community was transferred to a ghetto on the edge of the city on 27 August 1941. Following a mass shooting in

²⁹⁵ GAMnO f. 812, op. 1, d. 53, l. 82-3.

nearby Zembin on 18 August 1941,²⁹⁶ the Nazi police turned their attention to the Borisov ghetto. On 20-21 October 1941, they shot 9,000 Jews in two large pits near the Borisov airfield. Later, as the Nazis retreated in 1943, they returned to the site, poured gasoline over the two graves, and burned as much evidence as they could.²⁹⁷ In 1947, the relatives of those who had died at the site raised money to construct an impressive obelisk.²⁹⁸

Liliia L'vovna Milikovskaia, a lifelong resident of Borisov, with the exception of her wartime evacuation to Russia, was born on 27 October 1933. While her father was a Communist Party member and held a prominent position in town, he came from a religious family, and Liliia's husband, Misha, had attended the Volozhin yeshiva in his youth. She recalls that Tisha b'Av was always a major commemorative holiday in Borisov, both before and after the war. Each year, in the weeks leading up to Tisha b'Av, a groundskeeper from the community would tidy up the cemetery in preparation for the holiday.²⁹⁹ On the actual day of Tisha b'Av, the Jews of Borisov would go to their relatives' graves to clean and repaint the headstones and to care for the burial plots.³⁰⁰ After the war, they also began to gather at the obelisk near the Borisov airfield on Tisha b'Av. Given the thousands of people buried in the city's two Jewish cemeteries and

²⁹⁶ For more information, see Smilovitsky, *Katastrofia Evreev*, 177, available online in English translation at <http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/belarus/Belarus.html>.

²⁹⁷ Mikhail Romanovich, interviewed by the author in Borisov, Belarus, July 23, 2014. See also Aleksandr Rozenberg, *Ocherki po evreiskoi istorii*, 34-39.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.* After decades of disrepair, the monument was restored in 2006, and in 2009, it was recognized by the state of Belarus as a historical landmark.

²⁹⁹ According to Liliia, it was common for Borisov Jewish families to visit the cemetery and clean gravestones after the spring thaw, in the fall (presumably during Elul), and frequently on deceased relatives' birthdays or *yortzeits*.

³⁰⁰ This cleaning impulse may have stemmed from the tradition of cleaning one's house on the afternoon of Tisha b'Av in preparation for messiah's coming.

near the airfield, these gatherings were quite large. These Tisha b'Av traditions continue to this day, with emigres from Borisov returning to visit their relatives' graves on the holiday.³⁰¹

There were also yearly memorial gatherings at the airfield obelisk to recall the anniversary of the October 1941 massacre. However, Tisha b'Av was undoubtedly the primary commemorative event of the year—one that could incorporate prewar, wartime, and postwar deaths into a single, communal ritual that integrated Borisov's Jewish cemeteries and mass grave into a unified, memorial landscape. Although it was not standard practice to commemorate the formation of ghettos, such dates remained prominent in local memory as the “beginning of the end.” Thus, I strongly suspect that part of Tisha b'Av's appeal in Borisov was its frequent proximity to the anniversary of the ghetto's creation on 27 August 1941. Memories of the August shooting in nearby Zembin may also have played a role in sustaining this holiday's prominence.

In other locales, after the war, Tisha b'Av activities and gatherings focused exclusively on the local mass graves. In 1947, an anonymous interviewee (b. 1920) returned to his hometown of Klimovichi (Mogilev Oblast, Belarus) after being demobilized from the Red Army. Like many survivors, he immediately began searching for information on the fate of his relatives.³⁰² Having ascertained that his parents and two younger brothers had been killed by the Germans in two mass shootings, he and his friend Aron, who had also recently returned from the Red Army, asked their fellow survivors from Klimovichi and nearby Mikhalino to gather in the village of Dolgaia Dubrava on Tisha b'Av (27 July 1947) where they would excavate the large mass grave

³⁰¹ Liliia L'vovna Milikovskaia, interviewed by the author in Borisov, Belarus, August 10, 2014.

³⁰² He immediately went to the local ZAGS [civil registry office] to obtain documentation of his parents' and his younger brother's death, according to the state records, in a mass shooting on 3 December 1943. However, from speaking with local residents, a different story emerged. They told him that his mother and two younger brothers had been shot on 6 November 1941 and that his father was shot later that month, along with 50 other men who had escaped the first *aktion*.

where approximately 750-900 Jews had been murdered on 6 November 1941.³⁰³ On Tisha b'Av, a large group gathered and began digging to ascertain the exact perimeter of the grave. Only 20 centimeters down, they began to find corpses and clothing, and many were able to identify the remains of their relatives.³⁰⁴ After this excavation, they dug a ditch around the grave to mark the site and protect it from the cattle grazing nearby. Eventually, survivors were able to construct a simple obelisk at the site, followed by a fence,³⁰⁵ and eventually a more elaborate memorial tablet.³⁰⁶ In Klimovichi, survivors and their children continued to gather at the city's Jewish cemetery and mass graves each summer, beginning in 1947 and continuing into the late 1980s, if not later.³⁰⁷

While some communities held memorial gatherings both on Tisha b'Av and on the anniversary of the largest local mass shooting (which was generally calculated according to the secular calendar), survivors in Klimovichi designated Tisha b'Av as their annual day of remembrance for the victims of the Holocaust. Unlike the *yortzeit*-anniversary model, which emphasized the specificity of local tragedy, commemorative gatherings on Tisha b'Av implicitly wove local experiences of the Holocaust into a larger history of Jewish tragedies.

In some locales, the tradition of Tisha b'Av memorial gatherings was adapted to the secular calendar and was no longer observed according to the Jewish calendar. This was the case

³⁰³ For more information, see Yad Vahsem, "Dolgaya Dubrava," *The Untold Stories*, http://yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/murderSite.asp?site_id=506 (accessed 14 July 2016).

³⁰⁴ Another account reveals that the Nazis had used a former fuel cistern as a shooting site. Because it was lined with cement, the bodies were well preserved. Testimony of Manus Khaimorovich Khazanov (b. 1916), USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 24 (Khotimsk), p. 14-5.

³⁰⁵ Testimony of R., USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 24 (Khotimsk), p. 20.

³⁰⁶ USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 24 (Khotimsk), p. 5-6, 8-9.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

in Ushachi (Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus). Mikhail Samuilovich (Semionovich) Vernov, a native of Ushachi (Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus), was among the first Jews to return to the town in 1944, after he was demobilized from the Red Army. He recalls how, in 1945-6, local Jews collected funds in order to build a monument at the mass grave where their relatives had been shot in January 1942.³⁰⁸ However, they were able to gather enough money only to build a fence around the site. As they were working at the site, a director from the *raikom* drove past and demanded, “Who gave you permission? This is none of your business. We’ll put up a monument ourselves.”³⁰⁹ However, the *raikom* never followed through on the project. Instead, in the late 1950s, Khona Futerman³¹⁰ and Ruvim Asman—two local Jews who had lost many relatives in the Ushachi ghetto—erected a simple monument, only a meter high, with the inscription, “Comrades! Bow your head to the memory of those who died. On 6 January 1942, 925 residents of the urban settlement of Ushachi and the village of Kublichy were shot by the fascist executioners.”³¹¹ After the monument’s construction, approximately 60 survivors, including the children, grandchildren, and other

³⁰⁸ According to local historian, Nikolai Nikolaevich Kirpich, there were actually two shootings in Ushachi, both near the Russian Orthodox cemetery. On 6 January 1942, the Germans shot the local population of Ushachi Jews. On the 14 January, they shot Jews from Kublichy, Babynichi, Glybochka, and other settlements in the district who had been resettled into a separate ghetto in Ushachi in December 1941. See Arkadii Shul’man, “Evrei nazyvali Ushachi—Ushots,” Moe Mestechko Project, Aug 2010, <http://shtetle.co.il/Shtetls/ushachi/ushoc.html>.

³⁰⁹ USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 13 (Ushachi, Kublichy), 21-2.

³¹⁰ Khona Futerman was born in Ushachi in 1915. At age 18, he was drafted in the Red Army, and by the outbreak of the Second World War, he had already risen to the rank of officer. His father, three uncles, aunt, two sisters, and younger brother all perished in the Ushachi ghetto.

³¹¹ Shul’man, “Evrei nazyvali Ushachi—Ushots.” A photograph of the monument taken in the 1960s is available here: http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/ru/education/learning_environments/families/images/zinman21b.jpg. Larisa Disman, whose father was a native of Ushachi, also credits the activism of Naum Borisovich Kogan, who played an important role in the construction of this monument in Ushachi. He narrowly escaped the Ushachi massacre and, after the war, settled in Leningrad. However, he returned to Ushachi on several occasions to negotiate with the local authorities for the construction of the monument. He also collected funds from survivors and made donations himself. Larisa Disman, “Ushachi—rodina moego ottsa,” Moe Mestechko Project, <http://shtetle.co.il/Shtetls/ushachi/disman.html> (accessed 20 Sep 2016). Disman lost his brother and sister in the Ushachi shooting. He survived the rest of the war in the Red Army. In the 1970s, he and his family moved to the United States, and he later died in New York.

relatives of the victims, gathered at the monument each year on the first Sunday of August. These commemorative ceremonies, during which attendees would give speeches and pray surreptitiously, continued through the 1970s. However, as the elderly died and mass emigration began, numbers dwindled.³¹²

Since the actual anniversary of the shooting fell on 6 January, we can surmise that the Ushachi community's decision to hold its annual memorial gatherings on the first Sunday of August was intended to approximate Tisha b'Av—the most common date for Holocaust commemorations in the Jewish communities of Belarus. This adjustment may have resulted from a lack of consistent access to Jewish calendars. Another likely possibility is that the community preferred to avoid charges of labor absenteeism and decided on a fixed weekend date to ensure that the gathering would never be held on a workday.

Tisha b'Av observance survived in Jewish communities across Belarus and Ukraine as a day of remembrance for the deceased. However, in many Belarusian Jewish communities, it gained an added layer of significance as a day for commemorating victims of the Holocaust. Because the universal language of the “Holocaust” was not available to Soviet survivors, these observances were, instead, deeply rooted in the local burial landscape, incorporating not only prewar Jewish cemeteries but also mass graves created during the war. Collective observances at these sites re-affirmed communal bonds based on a shared landscape of grief, a shared ritual calendar, and shared history.

³¹² Shul'man, “Evrei nazyvali Ushachi—Ushots.” According to the 1970 census, there were 15 Jews remaining in Ushachi. According to the 1989 census, only 11 (ibid). The number of Ushachi *landslayt* living in other Soviet cities also declined.

Tisha b'Av and Emigration Activism

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the 25th and 30th anniversaries of many mass shootings initiated a younger generation into the commemoration of mass graves. As a result, Tisha b'Av observance in certain major Soviet cities received fresh attention, not simply as an occasion for Holocaust remembrance, but also as a platform for emigration activism. By drawing attention to the sites of mass graves where Jews had been murdered by the Nazis, Jewish activists sought to implicate the Soviet Union for failing to protect its Jewish population during the war and to emphasize that the Soviet Union had no moral authority to prevent Jews from immigrating to the State of Israel. Unlike in the aforementioned small towns and provincial cities, Tisha b'Av had not been a visible part of Jewish observance in these major metropolitan centers during the immediate postwar period. Thus, the revival and reinterpretation of Tisha b'Av observance by Zionist activists in this setting is even more striking.

On 10 August 1971, Yuri Andropov—then Chairman of the KGB—penned a secret memorandum describing Tisha b'Av observances in Kyiv just nine days prior. That year, twelve “Zionist-minded” Jews had gathered around the memorial at Babyn Yar and attempted to launch a ten-hour “hunger” strike to protest the Soviet state’s refusal to grant them exit visas to Israel. On 29 July, to stave off the demonstration, the activists were invited to the Kyiv Executive Committee’s Office of Visas and Registration (OVIR) and informed that exit visas would be granted if their entire families, including their parents, agreed to leave the USSR. After the meeting, several of the activists wavered in their intention to assemble at Babyn Yar. However, “spurred on by extremists” within the group, they sent a telegram to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet announcing their strike and gathered as planned at the site. For this

demonstration, they were arrested for 10-15 days and fined for “violating public order.”³¹³

Because of the proximity of the Babyn Yar massacre to Rosh Hashanah in 1941,³¹⁴ it had become customary for the Kyivan Jews to gather at the site on the Jewish New Year for a memorial ceremony. The fact that Zionist activists chose to depart from this established commemorative calendar and, instead, to organize a hunger strike at Babyn Yar on Tisha b’Av, suggests that they were aware of the holiday’s connection to both the Land of Israel and to previous catastrophic events in Jewish history. For them, Tisha b’Av was no longer just a local day of remembrance centered around local sites of memory; it was a link to the distant Jewish past and a cry for justice in the present.

Over the twentieth century, Tisha b’Av became a marginal Jewish holiday in Western Europe, the United States, and Israel outside of Orthodox circles. In Reform communities, mourning the Temples’ destruction seemed backward and tribal. In Israel, mourning the loss of Jewish sovereignty seemed strangely counterfactual while living in a Jewish state, apparently having triumphed over the tragedies of the past.³¹⁵ However, in the Soviet context, Jewish life remained fragile and its future uncertain. In this setting, Tisha b’Av offered a meaningful opportunity to mourn deaths and catastrophes that were inescapably etched into the local landscape and, at times, to connect these local histories to larger narratives of Jewish history. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that this otherwise marginal holiday came to play such a central

³¹³ Boris Morozov, *Documents on Soviet Jewish Emigration*, 119.

³¹⁴ The shooting took place on 29-30 September 1941. Rosh Hashanah that year fell 21-23 September.

³¹⁵ Haskel Lookstein, an American rabbi, visited Israel just before Tisha b’Av 1967. Just two months before, Israel had emerged victorious in the Six Day War. Lookstein recalls, “The mood in Israel was anything but Tisha B’Av-like. There was simply no feeling of mourning or sadness. [...] It was clear that Israelis were in no mood to observe or even feel the sadness and mourning of Tisha B’Av. [...] The mood of the country was one of liberation and redemption with people feeling that they had been saved from, God forbid, a second Holocaust and with the sensation that not only were we saved, but the State of Israel had expanded its territory perhaps threefold and its holiest sites were back in our hands....” From Haskel Lookstein, “Recollection of a Tisha b’Av Shiur Given by the Rav,” xxviii.

role in the commemorative culture of many Soviet Jewish communities. As with other holidays in the postwar era, Tisha b'Av observances displayed elements of both continuity and generational reinterpretation. For Holocaust survivors, Tisha b'Av offered an opportunity to preserve the memory of prior generations. For the next generation of urban Jews, the holiday maintained its connection with Holocaust sites but began to assume “old-new” meanings. Traditional observances such as fasting and visiting graves left the world of religious sentiment and re-emerged as contemporary strategies of political activism.

The Twentieth of Sivan

In some Ukrainian cities, the fast day of the Twentieth of Sivan (*kaf sivan*) also served as an opportunity for communities to commemorate previous tragedies in Jewish history, and by extension, the recent events of the Second World War. In 1171 CE, the French Jewish community in Blois was accused of murdering a Christian child—the first instance of a ritual murder accusation in continental Europe. In response, almost the entire community was burned at the stake on the Twentieth of Sivan.³¹⁶ Rabbenu Tam, a leading rabbinic scholar of the twelfth century, designated the day an annual public fast. A body of *selichot* [penitential prayers] and *kinot* [dirges] for the Twentieth of Sivan emerged, in keeping with the liturgical models for existing fast days.³¹⁷ Five centuries later, in 1648-1649,³¹⁸ Bogdan Khmel'nyts'kyi led a wave of

³¹⁶ The events of 1171 and other tragedies of the Crusades are recorded in Yosef ben Yehoshu'a [HaKohen] and Meir Wiener, *Emek habacha* (Leipzig: Oskar Leiner, 1858). Translated into English: Yosef Ben Yehoshu'a Ha-Kohen and Harry S. May, *The Vale of Tears*.

³¹⁷ It does seem that many of the *selichot* used to commemorate 1170 had been written several generations earlier. However, a *selichah* written by Emunei Shelomei Yisroel specifically describes the events in Blois. See Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff, “The Twentieth of Sivan.”

³¹⁸ The primary pogroms took place during these years, but the wave of violence continued periodically for several years, even after Khmel'nyts'kyi's death in 1657.

pogroms through the regions of Kyiv, Bratslav, Podilia, Volhynia, and Red Rus'.³¹⁹ Perhaps surprisingly, the tragedies of this period were not folded into the commemorations of Tisha b'Av which, to this point, had been the traditional date for commemorating virtually all exilic catastrophes. Instead, the Khmel'nyts'kyi massacres were incorporated into the memory of 1171 and the Twentieth of Sivan.³²⁰ Shortly thereafter, Rabbi Shabbetai Katz was the first to re-establish the Twentieth of Sivan as a fast day for himself and his descendants. The Council of the Four Lands soon codified its observance for a much larger swath of European Jewry, and it became an important annual tradition for Jews in Russia, Poland, and especially Ukraine.³²¹ By incorporating the Khmel'nyts'kyi massacres into a pre-existing fast for European Jewry, the memory of 1648-1649 was both preserved as a distinct historical event and integrated into a larger narrative of Jewish history.

In Jewish communities around the world, the Holocaust raised challenging questions regarding the novelty of catastrophe and the appropriateness or impossibility of integrating its memory into pre-existing mourning rituals. The new State of Israel established Yom Hashoah [Holocaust Remembrance Day] in 1953 on the anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

³¹⁹ Most famously, these events were recorded in two famous chronicles—Rav Nathan Nota Hanover's *Yeven Metzula* and Shabbetai Katz's *Selichot v'kinnot (Megilat Eifa)*. Collectively, these massacres came to be known as the *Gezeirot Tach v'Tat*, based on the Hebrew gematria for the years 1648 and 1649. Estimates of the fatalities have varied widely, but recent scholarship places the estimate around 18,000–20,000 Jews out of a total population of 40,000 and hundreds of Jewish communities were destroyed. See Shaul Stampfer, "What Actually Happened to the Jews of Ukraine in 1648?," 218. He notes that the casualties included a number of famous rabbis, which strengthened the acute sense of tragedy surrounding these events.

³²⁰ Although the Khmel'nyts'kyi massacres spanned nearly two years, the particularly noteworthy massacre of the Jewish community in Nemirov is supposed to have occurred on the 20th of Sivan.

³²¹ Almost immediately after the revolt, rabbis such as Shabbetai Katz, Yom-Tov Lipman Heller, Shabbetai Sheftel Horowitz, and others created a liturgy of *selichot* for the fast day. See Rabbi Yehuda Spitz, "Forgotten Fast Days." See also Shabbetai Katz, *Selichot v'kinnot (Megilat Eifah)*. In 1650, a Bohemian Rabbi, Rav Lipman Heller (the Tosefos Yom Tov), also published a series of three *selichot* in memory of the Khmel'nyts'kyi massacres. See *Selichos for 20 Sivan*. Conveniently, the 20th of Sivan never falls on Shabbat, so it can be observed each year without ever being postponed.

Because Yom Hashoah falls in the month of Nisan, a traditionally festive time in the Jewish calendar, rabbis in the United States and Israel advocated instead for the Tenth of Tevet³²² as a more appropriate date for commemorating Holocaust victims and reciting kaddish for those whose date of death is unknown.³²³ In the Soviet Union, the question of how to commemorate the Holocaust was largely isolated from international Jewish discourses. Instead, individual Jewish communities developed their own local customs. The choice of date, liturgy, location, and ritual were all locally determined. For many communities, the obvious date was the yearly anniversary of a local mass shooting. In other communities, as we have seen, Tisha b'Av became the preferred date for commemoration. Soviet Victory Day, May 9, also became a popular day for commemorative efforts, perhaps in an effort to integrate Jewish experiences into the state narrative of the war.³²⁴

While the Twentieth of Sivan quickly faded from memory in most corners of the post-Holocaust Jewish world, in parts of Ukraine it seems to have survived as a commemorative occasion, at least temporarily. A July 1954 memo from the CARC Commissioner of the UkSSR, Vil'khovyi, to Shumkov—the CARC Commissioner for the Vinnytsia Oblast—notes the continued observance of the Twentieth of Sivan as a fast day and a day of mourning. Vil'khovyi cautions against banning the observance of the fast since this might enrage believers. Instead, he asks that Shumkov “discretely” gather information on the observance of Tisha b'Av and other

³²² A minor fast day commemorating the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II.

³²³ Thus, the Tenth of Tevet is also referred as *yom ha-kaddish ha-klali* [The General Kaddish Day]. See David Telzner, *The Kaddish*, 88.

³²⁴ The Jewish community in Minsk, Belarus was, perhaps, the largest community to adopt 9 May as its primary day of commemoration. To this day, Minsk Jews gather at the Yama memorial each year for a memorial ceremony.

“historical”³²⁵ Jewish holidays. For Shumkov’s reference, Vil’khovyi attached a two-page, Russian translation of an “*El moleh rachamim*” prayer written in memory of the victims of the Khmel’nyts’kyi pogroms that specifically refers to the martyrdom of Rabbi Yechiel Michael ben Eliezer of Nemirov.³²⁶ Regarding observance of the fast in 1954, Vil’khovyi notes that Twentieth of Sivan services in the Kyiv synagogue had not been particularly mournful and, indeed, the fast was not even included on the synagogue’s list of official holidays. In L’viv, fast day observances had consisted of normal weekday prayers, and the cantor did not recite the traditional “*El moleh rachamim*” prayer.³²⁷ Even though this fast day seemed to be fading from practice in major Ukrainian cities, it did in fact persist, at least into the early 1950s. As Mordechai Altshuler explains,

[The Twentieth of Sivan] had fallen somewhat into disuse only to be revived in certain Ukrainian congregations following the Holocaust, perhaps in response to the Ukrainian assistance to the Germans in the slaughter of the Jews. Yet the Twentieth of Sivan now was seen by the authorities as an expression of Jewish nationalism and an offense against unity among the ethnic groups, especially given that Chmielnicki [Khmel’nyts’kyi] was regarded as a national hero for Ukrainians.³²⁸

Although the observance of this fast day did not become the primary focus of Holocaust commemoration in Ukraine, its brief revival as a communal day of remembrance was large enough to attract CARC’s attention and shares some parallels with the observance of Tisha b’Av in the postwar Soviet Union.

³²⁵ A word that CARC officials frequently used to describe Jewish practices that they believed to have been extinct before the Second World War and which they did not wish to see revived in the postwar era. Although this seems to have been a historically accurate perception with regard to Tisha b’Av, in most instances, it seems more likely that the Soviet state’s knowledge of an ability to monitor religious activities was simply much weaker prior to the war.

³²⁶ DAVO f. 6991, op. 19, d. 44, l. 23-5. CAHJP RU 1991.

³²⁷ DAVO f. 6991, op. 19, d. 44, l. 23. CAHJP RU 1991.

³²⁸ Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity*, 65.

Historically speaking, there are two competing tendencies in Jewish ritual for commemorating communal tragedies. On one hand, there has been a tendency to subsume novel catastrophes into existing narratives. On the other hand, there have always been possibilities to recognize specific catastrophes with local fast days. In his classic work, *Zakhor*, Yosef Yerushalmi argues that medieval Jewry tended to minimize the novelty of calamities, and instead, to integrate them into the memory of the ultimate calamity—the destruction of the Temples. In this worldview, “What had happened long ago had determined what had occurred since, and even provided the fundamental explanations for what was still transpiring.”³²⁹ In medieval Jewish chronicles, “there is a pronounced tendency to subsume even major new events to familiar archetypes, for even the most terrible events are somehow less terrifying when viewed within old patterns rather than in their bewildering specificity.”³³⁰ As a result, major communal tragedies such as the expulsion from England in 1290 and the expulsion from Spain in 1492 came to be commemorated on the fast day of Tisha b’Av.

On the other hand, there remained some latitude for acknowledging local and regional calamities. The Twentieth of Sivan is one example. The tradition of composing *yizkor bikher* is another:

‘Memorial Books’—flourished especially, though not exclusively, among Ashkenazic Jews. Kept for centuries in the archives of the community [to which they pertained], into such volumes were inscribed not only the names of famous rabbis and communal leaders, but records of persecutions and lists of martyrs to be read aloud periodically in the synagogue during memorial services for the dead. [...] Typically, their major purpose

³²⁹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 34.

³³⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

was to preserve the names of those for whose souls communal prayers were to be offered in the house of worship.³³¹

Thus, these books contributed to a body of regional and local martyrologies. After the Holocaust, Soviet Jewish communities faced a choice between integrating the tragedy of the war into holidays such as Tisha b'Av and the Twentieth of Sivan or, alternatively, establishing new collective commemorations. As we have seen, Soviet Jews borrowed from both currents in Jewish commemorative history.

By far, the most common response was to organize memorial gatherings at the sites of mass shootings on the anniversary of these massacres (i.e., the *yortzeit* model of commemoration).³³² Almost universally, these dates were calculated according to the Gregorian calendar and the ceremonies were not necessarily religious in nature, although mourner's kaddish remained a frequent component. This *yortzeit* model of commemoration became the dominant model for Soviet Jewish collective efforts to commemorate the dead, including those who died during the Holocaust and those who died either before or after it. Nevertheless, for those who maintained a connection with the Jewish religious calendar and traditional religious models of collective remembrance, Tisha b'Av, the Twentieth of Sivan, and even the month of Elul offered opportunities to incorporate the experiences of the Holocaust into the prewar ceremonial calendar and the landscape of Jewish commemorative landmarks and rituals.

³³¹ Ibid, 46. Interestingly, the liturgical *selichot* composed in memory of medieval tragedies, for local fast days fell somewhere between the two major patterns of commemoration. Yerushalmi writes, "While some contain actual names and descriptions of events, most do not. The poetic forms themselves militated against too literal a concern with specific details, while in general the poet could take it for granted that the community knew the 'facts'" (Ibid, 45-6).

³³² This *yortzeit* model, along with the history of Holocaust monuments, forms the focus of my final chapter.

Conclusion

In both the *yortzeit* model and the holiday models of commemoration, we see that Soviet Jewish memorial efforts overwhelmingly centered around local history and local commemoration. Given the lack of central leadership for the Soviet Jewish community and the determination of the Soviet state to suppress Jewish national identity, perhaps this was the only possible direction that Jewish memory could have taken. The tendency toward localized memory produced a wide variety of commemorative practices which emerged, persisted, and evolved dynamically in response to calamities of the distant and the recent past. Rather than highlighting an inexorable process of secularization and disappearance, these patterns in postwar Soviet Jewish commemorative practice reveal a nuanced tradition of adaptation and evolution that allowed Soviet Jews to respond to the unique historical experiences of their families and local communities. In a time of social, political, and economic instability, both religious and secular Soviet Jews sought out methods and forums for commemorating their loved ones that would attract minimal attention from state officials while providing a sense of familial and communal cohesiveness. Through rituals of remembrance performed at cemeteries and mass shooting sites, Soviet Jews successfully integrated the deaths of their loved ones into the larger canons of Jewish history, space, memory, and ritual.

CHAPTER IV

Communal Mourning in the Synagogue and Shtiebl

Introduction

Kaddish and yizkor—two of Judaism’s most distinctive, enduring mourning rituals—are intrinsically public, collective experiences. They are traditionally recited in communal spaces such as the synagogue, the cemetery, or private homes serving as public houses of worship.³³³ Furthermore, these rituals are traditionally recited in the presence of ten or more men.³³⁴ Like many of the mourning practices examined in the previous chapter, these rituals are firmly embedded in the temporal rhythm of the Jewish calendar, which binds Jewish individuals, families, and local communities to a global Jewish diaspora and to a cyclical ritual lineage that is imagined to stretch back into distant millennia. Although kaddish and yizkor are triggered by individual death and familial bereavement, these rituals are performed in accordance with universal conceptions of Jewish sacred space and time. They are then enacted within the local community and, lastly, given meaning at the individual level.

³³³ The Soviet state’s closure of synagogue buildings and the Nazi invaders’ destruction of many more synagogues left the home as the primary site for Jewish public worship in most regions of the postwar Soviet Union.

³³⁴ While the presence of ten men is obligatory for kaddish, it is merely traditional for yizkor. Kaddish is recited in the cemetery at the time of a burial and in the home during the first seven days of mourning. Thereafter though, it is almost always recited in a synagogue. Yizkor is closely associated with major Jewish holidays and, thus, with the synagogue (though, in theory, an individual can recite yizkor alone at home). The other major prayer for the dead, *El moleh rachamim*, is part of public memorial services, including yizkor, but it also has a long history of being recited separately by individuals.

Due to Soviet restrictions on religious life and many Soviet Jews' growing distance from traditional observance, the collective mourning rituals discussed in this chapter were observed by a minority of Soviet Jews. Their ranks consisted primarily of a core group of individuals who had received a religious Jewish education or whose parents had been religious, joined at intervals by individuals who were otherwise secular. Under postwar conditions, individuals strategically selected the mourning rituals that best suited their background, beliefs, aspirations, and fears. This element of choice reflects both the atomization of Soviet Jewish ritual life and the resourceful creativity that Soviet Jews displayed as they moved within and beyond current legal possibilities. In this context, age, gender, location, and career played a major role in shaping commemorative choices. Unlike the previous chapters, which focus on individual and communal mourning in the home and local cemetery, the actors in this chapter are disproportionately elderly and male. Lack of communal engagement and fear of public exposure led most other demographic groups to conduct their commemorative rituals in spaces that enjoyed greater legal leeway than synagogues and underground prayer gatherings. Yet, for those that were able to avail themselves of public religious life and its accompanying commemorative possibilities, it provided valuable opportunities to commemorate the dead and reaffirm communal bonds among the living while maintaining traditional ritual practices.

Jewish Holidays and Calendrical Mourning

Among the most significant collective mourning rituals in Judaism is the recitation of yizkor—a litany of Hebrew prayers in memory of the dead³³⁵ that is recited on four major Jewish

³³⁵ Much like kaddish, yizkor is understood to confer merit on the souls of the deceased. See JTS, *From This World to the Next*, 114-5.

holidays: Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, the last day of Passover, and the second day of Shavuot. After several introductory, communal prayers, yizkor shifts toward individual grief by leading the service participants to recite a paragraph for each of their deceased relatives—beginning with parents and continuing with other relatives. The service then concludes in a collective mode via petitions on behalf of all Jewish martyrs. Even though these final petitions would seem appropriate for all members of the Jewish community to recite, traditionally, only those who have lost a parent take part in yizkor services.

In the Soviet Union, yizkor shared the fate of the holidays with which it is associated. Beginning in the 1920s, anti-religious propaganda led to a sharp decline in synagogue attendance and produced a large number of apparently secular Jews. Yet, as we will see, their story highlights the complex, non-linear, and selective nature of secularization. Indeed, an observable minority of the Soviet Jewish population continued to attend synagogue on major holidays: Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, and—to a lesser degree—Passover.³³⁶ Yosl Kogan from Bershad (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine) recalls visiting an underground minyan during the 1930s on Passover after the Soviet authorities closed the local synagogue: “... we came together in a house to pray. We would say yizkor.... We would blow the shofar.” Another informant, Grigorii Shor also recalls how the local minyan would rent a house and hold services secretly to evade state notice. The primary observance he identifies with the minyan was the practice of saying kaddish. As Veidlinger notes: “Shor and Kogan both cite only exceptional instances in which they would attend synagogue services—for the yizkor service, on occasion of a *yortsayt* [*yortzeit*]... for

³³⁶ Between 1945 and 1955, for example, the CARC Commissioner for the Vinnytsia Oblast observed a decline in synagogue attendance. Those who continued to attend did so primarily on the major religious holidays of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover. See DAVO f. R-2700, op. 7, d. 514, l. 3-4. CAHJP RU 1984.

Passover, or for the High Holidays.”³³⁷ If *yizkor* and *kaddish* played a significant role in motivating synagogue participation prior to the war, these commemorative rituals were even more central after the Second World War, which decimated Soviet Jewish families and left individuals of all ages bereaved. Despite increased anti-religious efforts and ongoing synagogue closures, demand for *yizkor* and holiday services remained relatively high.³³⁸

According to a 1947 report from the Minsk Oblast Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults [CARC], attendance at the city’s synagogue numbered 60-80 on a normal Saturday morning. However, on major holidays, as many as 250-300 attendees crowded into the synagogue to participate in *yizkor*. The report notes that many of these “holiday” attendees were clearly secular, evidenced by their need to ask regular synagogue-goers for help in following the services³³⁹. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, CARC officials often blamed the popularity of these major holidays on their supposedly nationalistic undertones,³⁴⁰ citing the traditional “Next year in Jerusalem!” proclamation said on Yom Kippur and Passover.³⁴¹ However, with the exception of the aforementioned 1947 report, CARC rarely acknowledged the relationship between these holidays and the commemoration of the dead.³⁴² Nevertheless, a closer reading of CARC documents over the postwar decades highlights the enduring appeal of *yizkor* as an

³³⁷ Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 122.

³³⁸ See Smilovitsky, *Jewish Life in Belarus*, 91, 98.

³³⁹ GAMnO f. 3651, op. 2, d. 3, l. 39. Unfortunately, as in many Belarusian archives, CARC records from the years 1948-1953 are missing.

³⁴⁰ DAVO f. R-2700, op. 7, d. 514, l. 2-4. CAHJP RU 1984.

³⁴¹ See, for example, TsDAGOU f. 1, op. 24, d. 783, l. 20. CAHJP RU 2002. Complaints regarding the “nationalistic” nature of these holidays were extremely widespread during the last years of Stalin’s life and during Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaigns.

³⁴² Leonid Smilovitsky also observes that holidays on which *yizkor* is recited represented the peak of annual religious involvement. See Smilovitsky, *Jewish Life in Belarus*, 91.

opportunity for commemorating lost loved ones, even among otherwise secular, unaffiliated Jews.

Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, remained the peak of annual synagogue attendance. However, its numerous and dramatic rituals make it difficult to determine the particular significance of yizkor in boosting synagogue attendance. Furthermore, it is confined to a single day, unlike Passover—a festival that lasts eight days and has distinct rituals associated with each day. The last day of Passover, unlike Yom Kippur, is remarkable only thanks to yizkor. Although synagogue attendance on Passover was uniformly lower than on Yom Kippur, the separation between yizkor and the other rituals of the holiday make it easier to track the distinct role of yizkor in drawing Jews to the synagogue. Using CARC’s Passover records, I seek to disaggregate “yizkor Jews” from a core group of “synagogue regulars” and from a slightly larger group of “holiday Jews” who attended services on the first, second, and seventh days of Passover and were not motivated solely by yizkor.

Between the end of the Second World War and 1953, yizkor remained the largest attraction to Passover services, drawing far higher numbers on the eighth day than at regular Shabbat services or even the first day of Passover. Below is a chart tracking attendance at Passover services between 1950 and 1953 in the Minsk and Kalinkovichi synagogues—the only two officially registered synagogues in early-postwar Belarus:

Table IV.1: Attendance at Passover Services in the Minsk and Kalinkovichi Synagogues, 1950-53

The Minsk Synagogue ³⁴³	1950	1951	1952	1953
Regular Sabbath prayers	50	60	45	50
Evening Prayers on Passover eve	110	120	100	100
Morning prayers, 1 st day of Passover	150	160	150	150
Evening prayers, 7 th day of Passover	100	120	100	90
Morning prayers, 8 th day of Passover [yizkor]	300	350	300	700
The Kalinkovichi Synagogue				
Regular Sabbath prayers	60	70	70	80
Evening Prayers on Passover eve	160	180	170	160
Morning prayers, 1 st day of Passover	160	180	170	160
Evening prayers, 7 th day of Passover	150	180	170	200
Morning prayers, 8 th day of Passover [yizkor]	280	350	300	700

This chart reveals that attendance on the non-yizkor days of Passover approximately doubled to tripled in comparison to the number of attendees on an average Saturday morning. Attendance nearly doubled or doubled yet again for the eighth day of Passover, on which yizkor recited.³⁴⁴

In the early postwar era, this striking pattern of commitment to yizkor remained virtually universal in Jewish communities across Belarus and Ukraine. Communities also leveraged this commemorative practice in petitions for access to local synagogue buildings, perhaps in hopes that a commemorative impetus for religious observance would appear less threatening to Soviet officials. For example, in 1948, 24 members of the unregistered synagogue in Chernivtsi (Chernivtsi Oblast, Ukraine) wrote to the city Procurator. Just two and a half months earlier, their

³⁴³ Chart reproduced from Smilovitsky, *Jewish Life in Belarus*, 98.

³⁴⁴ In 1953, Iosef Stalin had died roughly a month before Passover—on 5 March 1953. Although one might expect a jump in synagogue attendance, participation at Passover services on the first and seventh days of the festival remained stable relative to 1952, even decreasing slightly. However, on the eighth day (7 April 1953), attendance in both Minsk and Kalinkovichi jumped to an astonishing 700. The previous day, 6 Apr 1953, the exoneration of the Jewish individuals implicated in the Doctors’ Plot had been publicly announced. The significant jump in attendance at eighth day services that year was likely a sign of celebration and relief after months of political tension.

synagogue had been closed due to its “unsanitary condition.”³⁴⁵ In their petition, the congregants entreated the Procurator to open the synagogue so that they could celebrate Passover, 24 April through 4 May 1948. First, their letter emphasizes the historical significance of the holiday, commemorating the Jews’ liberation from Pharaoh. Next, the petitioners underline the importance of Passover as an occasion for remembering the deceased, including those who perished in the Great Patriotic War.³⁴⁶ While it is possible that the congregants mentioned the Great Patriotic War strategically, to highlight their patriotism, we should not underestimate the enduring significance of yizkor for Soviet Jewish veterans and Holocaust survivors, many of whom were secular in their day-to-day lives but maintained an enduring attachment to yizkor as an opportunity to remember their loved ones.

Over the next two decades, CARC continued to receive numerous petitions for synagogue access, many grounded in the desire to recite yizkor. In June 1961, Iakov Abramovich Levinzon—head of the Jewish religious community in Khotyn (Chernivtsi Oblast, Ukraine)—wrote to the oblast CARC Commissioner to request that the local synagogue be allowed to remain open. The building had been constructed in 1914, and after the Second World War, it was returned to the community in April 1955. It was now under threat of closure after a local Jew claimed that his father had been killed in the synagogue. In his petition, Levinzon denies any connection between the man’s death and the synagogue community, saying that the man had died of alcoholism. The elderly man’s other son had come to the synagogue regularly to say kaddish in father’s memory. If the synagogue community were somehow responsible for this tragedy, would his son willingly have continued to go there? Shifting attention from these

³⁴⁵ A common justification for synagogue closures.

³⁴⁶ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 52, l. 28-28a. CAHJP RU 1894.

troubling allegations, Levinzon emphasizes the importance of the synagogue for the recitation of kaddish on *yortzeits* and yizkor four times a year. Departing somewhat from halachic requirements, he describes these rituals as requiring the presence of 10-15 people. Lastly, he insists that yizkor must be performed in the synagogue, in a location where no one resides, rather than at home. Having ambitiously stated his case for the local synagogue to remain open, Levinzon offers reassurances that only the disabled and elderly retirees attend the synagogue, therefore absenteeism by working adults or school age children to participate in these rituals would not be a problem.³⁴⁷

In both Chernivtsi and Khotyn, we see the enduring importance of yizkor (and kaddish) in postwar communal life. At the same time, these communities strategically leveraged yizkor to maintain access to their public houses of worship, hoping that this memorial ritual would appeal to the authorities' emotional sensibilities and secure a favorable response.

Nevertheless, holiday observance did decline gradually over the postwar decades. As a result, participation in yizkor services also waned. However, this was hardly a linear process, and declining numbers are only part of the picture. In 1959, Khrushchev initiated a vigorous anti-religious campaign. CARC officials closed many remaining synagogues and sought to disband underground minyans. In the Vinnytsia Oblast, the synagogues in Chernivtsi and Iampil' were closed in 1960, leaving the synagogues in Vinnytsia, Zhmerynka, and Bershad' to support the oblast's sizeable Jewish population. Intimidated by the recent closures, none of the three remaining synagogues undertook their traditional building renovations in preparation for Passover 1960, and attendance at holiday services also dropped in response to the ongoing, anti-religious campaign. In 1959, 500 individuals had attended Passover services in the Vinnytsia

³⁴⁷ DACHO f. 623, op. 2, d. 172-173, l. 21-2. CAHJP RU 1974.

synagogue; in 1960, only 315 attended. In Zhmerynka, the number dropped from 975 to 850. CARC officials attributed this decline both to the success of their anti-religious propaganda and to the gradual death of elderly religious Jews.³⁴⁸ Similar synagogue closures across the Soviet Union led to a significant drop in the observance of Jewish holidays in the remaining synagogues, and by the mid-1960s, synagogue attendance on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover had fallen dramatically, resulting in decreased observance of yizkor.

During the late 1960s and 70s, CARC reports from across Belarus and Ukraine continue to mention synagogue services conducted on the first and second days of Passover. However, they rarely mention services on the last two days, much less the observance of yizkor. Does this mean that Passover yizkor services indeed fell into obscurity during this period? Or was the absence of yizkor in CARC's reports a result of bureaucratic oversight?

Table IV.2: Attendance at Passover Services in the Minsk Synagogue, 1966-73

The Minsk Synagogue³⁴⁹	1966	1967	1970	1971	1972	1973
Morning prayers, 1 st day of Passover	100-120	240-250	36	137	90	190
Morning prayers, 2 nd day of Passover	100-120	240-250	--	272	--	--
Shabbat of Passover week	--	--	--	--	--	160
Evening prayers, 7 th day of Passover	--	--	--	--	--	150
Morning prayers, 8 th day of Passover [yizkor]	--	--	--	--	130	200
-- indicates data unavailable						

The jump in synagogue attendance in the early 1970s, at a time when Soviet secularism was supposedly at its zenith and Jewish religious observance was supposedly on the wane, is startling. Even though CARC was usually eager to paint synagogues as hotbeds of Zionist activism, the 1973 report explicitly emphasizes that the increase in attendance that year was

³⁴⁸ DAVO f. R-2700, op. 7, d. 514, l. 36-39. CAHJP RU 1984.

³⁴⁹ Chart reproduced from Smilovitsky, *Jewish Life in Belarus*, 98.

entirely divorced from the Zionist Jewish youth who regularly congregated around metropolitan synagogues on Jewish holidays in the 1960s and 70s. In fact, young people were entirely absent from the Minsk synagogue in 1973. Furthermore, for the first time in years, CARC's 1973 records reflect the observance of the Passover festival over all eight days, culminating with the highest attendance on the last day of Passover—again, attributable only to the recitation of yizkor. While attendance was on the upswing, it seems unlikely that the Minsk Jewish community underwent a religious revival in the early 1970s substantial enough to revive rituals that had previously been abandoned. Instead, the Minsk CARC office's surveillance and reporting of discrete rituals seems to have improved as synagogue attendance expanded following a period of decline.

From looking at Jewish communities in other oblasts during throughout the 1960s, we can confirm that the observance of the last two days of Passover continued in other communities. Furthermore, there was enough contact between Jewish communities that yizkor could hardly have died out in one city, only to continue in others. For years, the city of Mogilev (Mogilev Oblast, Belarus) had two underground minyans that met regularly in private apartments. In 1968, these minyans held Passover services on the evening of 4 April, with morning and evening prayers on the first, second, seventh, and eighth days of Passover.³⁵⁰ On a normal Saturday, the minyans would attract 50-70 attendees each, all elderly and predominantly male. In contrast, on the first days of Passover 1968, there were approximately 100 attendees at one minyan and between 100-120 at the second minyan. Whereas attendees on a regular Saturday consisted almost exclusively of elderly men, during Passover 1968, 25-30% of attendees were middle

³⁵⁰ GAMogO f. 2336, op. 1, d. 4, l. 90-1.

aged, and 10-15% were young people under 25, including both men and women.³⁵¹ Although this report does not provide separate attendance statistics for the last day of Passover, which would allow us to measure yizkor observance, the available statistics clearly indicate that the Mogilev community continued to celebrate all eight days of the festival. By 1974, the total number of minyans in the Mogilev oblast had risen from eight to ten, and they continued to gather in private homes to celebrate the first day of Passover. Although certain Jewish families had baked large quantities of matzah and performed all the other preparatory rituals for the holiday,³⁵² the report makes no mention of services on the second, seventh, or eighth days of Passover. In this case, the change in reporting seems to stem from the appointment of a new CARC Commissioner in the Mogilev Oblast. In all likelihood, the newer commissioner was less familiar with Jewish practices and failed to collect complete attendance data.

By comparing the stories of Minsk and Mogilev, it seems that both communities continued to observe yizkor during Passover, despite wide variations in CARC's reporting of this ritual from year to year, region to region. Based on available data from the years when CARC did record yizkor observance, it seems that this traditional mourning ritual remained appealing to a broader swath of Soviet Jews, beyond regular Shabbat attendees and the small, additional group of Jews who attended holiday services on non-yizkor days as well.

Due to heavy emigration and the continued waning of the elderly Jewish population, the late-1970s saw a sharp decline in the number of underground minyans and synagogue attendance overall. However, these changes did not necessarily translate into the abandonment of religious ritual by the remaining Jewish population. In the Minsk synagogue in 1978, there were 220

³⁵¹ GAMogO f. 2336, op. 1, d. 13, l. 39-40.

³⁵² GAMogO f. 2340, op. 1, d. 31, l. 20.

attendees at services on the last day of Passover.³⁵³ The next year, attendance dropped sharply.³⁵⁴ On the last day of Passover 1979, only 130 attended services—just over half of the previous year’s number.³⁵⁵ When asked about the decline in attendance, the synagogue’s representative, V.N. Shebes, attributed it to the emigration of many Jews from Minsk.³⁵⁶ Attendance continued to decline in the early 1980s. In 1980, 67 elderly worshipers gathered on the last day.³⁵⁷ In 1981, there were 90 attendees on the last day of Passover.³⁵⁸ This pattern repeated in 1982. That year, on the last day of Passover, 73 attended services.³⁵⁹ Undoubtedly, the overarching pattern in Jewish communal life during this period was one of decline—largely due to demographic attrition. Nevertheless, yizkor continued to draw a dwindling population of Jews together to recall their loved ones. Furthermore, yizkor numbers continued to surpass attendance on the other days of Passover, indicating the distinct appeal of this ritual to a broader swath of Soviet Jews.

Throughout the postwar period, yizkor exerted a consistent pull toward the synagogue, attracting Jews who were otherwise absent from public religious life. The coincidence of yizkor with major Jewish holidays evoked powerful memories of family, childhood, and the intergenerational chain of obligation to recall deceased loved ones. This emotional backdrop

³⁵³ GAMnO f. 812, op. 1, d. 64, l. 11-2.

³⁵⁴ GAMnO f. 812, op. 1, d. 65, l. 54. From 1978 onwards, annual CARC reports on the celebration of Easter and Passover in the Mogilev Oblast no longer mentioned Jewish activities, presumably because religious activities surrounding the holiday had declined so dramatically. See GAMogO f. 2340, op. 1, d. 47, l. 25-48.

³⁵⁵ GAMnO f. 812, op. 1, d. 64, l. 11-2.

³⁵⁶ GAMnO f. 812, op. 1, d. 65, l. 54.

³⁵⁷ GAMnO f. 812, op. 1, d. 67, l. 16.

³⁵⁸ GAMnO f. 812, op. 1, d. 71, l. 49.

³⁵⁹ GAMnO f. 812, op. 1, d. 72, l. 13-4.

created powerful incentives for even secular Jews to visit the local synagogue to recite (or hear) yizkor. On a daily and weekly basis, synagogues were primarily populated by elderly, Jewish men. However, “yizkor Jews” represented a much more diverse subset of Soviet Jewry—including women, many secular middle-aged Jews, and even some young people. Unlike kaddish, which is traditionally recited aloud only by mourners, yizkor is largely recited by the cantor or service leader. In the middle of the service, bereaved individuals can silently recite personalized supplications on behalf of their deceased relatives. This balance between delegated performance and private reflection makes yizkor highly accessible to women and Jews without a comprehensive religious education. To the extent that CARC officials tracked synagogue attendance by gender, their statistics regularly indicate that an unusually large number of women attended synagogue on days when yizkor was recited. For example, in 1962, the CARC Commissioner of the Zhytomyr Oblast reported that on the first seven days of Passover, elderly men had comprised 75-80% of the worshipers. However, on the last day of Passover, approximately 65% of synagogue attendees at services were elderly women.³⁶⁰ This pattern is also evident in Soviet Jewish communities’ own representations of yizkor. For example, Iakov Abramovich Levinzon’s June 1961 petition on behalf of Khotyn’s Jewish community emphasizes that both men and women participated in yizkor services.³⁶¹

Brukhe Moiseevna Fel’dman was born in 1938 to a Yiddish-speaking family in Bershad’ (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine). Her father died during the war in 1943. Once Brukhe turned 13 or 14, her mother explained to her that Jews must fast on Yom Kippur and go to the synagogue to recite yizkor. Indeed, she recalls people of all ages, even children, attending services in Bershad’

³⁶⁰ DAZho f. 4994, op. 4s, d. 6, l. 29-30. CAHJP RU 1977.

³⁶¹ DACHo f. 623, op. 2, d. 172-173, l. 21-2. CAHJP RU 1974.

on Yom Kippur. Brukhe and her mother went every year to say yizkor for Brukhe's father and grandparents. More precisely, they went to "hear" yizkor. Unlike kaddish, yizkor participation was traditionally open to both men and women. This fact heightened its significance for women who otherwise had few opportunities to mourn in a public religious setting. Brukhe does not indicate whether her mother (born ca. 1920) could read the prayers herself. For her part, Brukhe would listen to the rabbi and the men saying yizkor and cry.³⁶² For Brukhe, yizkor was primarily an emotional experience—an annual moment of communal, ritualized catharsis for emotions that had few outlets during the rest of the year. As a young woman with no ability to read the prayers or understand their literal meaning, Brukhe actively positioned herself as a mourner by remaining in the room during yizkor—a moment when, before the war, young people traditionally had left the synagogue. Through her physical presence in the synagogue, through her commemorative intentions as she listened to the rabbi, and through the tears she shed in memory of her father and grandparents, Brukhe became a full participant in the yizkor ritual.

Brukhe's story illustrates yizkor's appeal not only across gender lines, but also across the educational and generational gaps that otherwise limited many Soviet Jews' religious participation. Brukhe's story also illustrates Yom Kippur's status as *the* holiday for commemorating the dead. Although an observable minority of Soviet Jews did continue to attend yizkor services on the eighth day of Passover, Yom Kippur remained the peak of annual

³⁶² AHEYM, MDV 380. On other occasions throughout the year when yizkor wasn't said, Brukhe recalls that the rabbi or another man in the community would say "moleh" [*El moleh rachamim*] in memory of the dead. No matter what, there was always at least one person in the community who could read the prayer on behalf of everyone present.

synagogue attendance.³⁶³ This popularity stemmed at least in part from enduring notions of Yom Kippur as the holiest day of the Jewish year. However, the mourning rituals of the day and its thematic emphasis on mortality undoubtedly played a role in attracting otherwise secular Jews to the synagogue to recall their loved ones in a communal setting. Soviet Jews who attended synagogue only once a year did so on Yom Kippur largely because the holiday offered an opportunity to recall the dead. The thematic connection between Yom Kippur and *yizkor* is quite intuitive, unlike Passover, which bears little relation to death. Yom Kippur's status as a fast day lends it a somber, mournful tone that reminds the living of their own mortality. Furthermore, with its emphasis on judgement and martyrdom, the liturgy evokes a sense of trepidation that naturally brings the deceased to mind. Oral history interviews and Soviet Jewish memoirs often highlight this thematic resonance between the Yom Kippur and *yizkor*. While memories of reciting *yizkor* and *kaddish* on Yom Kippur are abundant, interviews and memoirs do not mention *yizkor* on Passover,³⁶⁴ even though the archival record clearly demonstrates that this practice also continued.

³⁶³ For example, on Yom Kippur 1949, the *yizkor* service at the Moscow synagogue drew 10,000 attendees. The same year in Kyiv, 8,000-10,000 attended Yom Kippur services. These numbers were unusually high and were likely a response to the ongoing Anti-Cosmopolitan Campaign and the recent establishment of the State of Israel. Similar jumps in attendance occurred at smaller synagogues across the Soviet Union and included young people as well as prominent intellectuals and state officials. See Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity*, 82. 1951-3, attendance at weekday services in the Minsk synagogue varied between 15 and 40. On Yom Kippur, there were 500 attendees. See Smilovitsky, *Jewish Life in Belarus*, 93. Yom Kippur's dominance remained steady in Jewish communities across the Soviet Union and across the postwar decades.

³⁶⁴ Instead, informants focus on the struggle to procure matzah and making culinary delicacies associated with Passover such as gefilte fish and matzah *chremsl*. E.g. Testimony of Serafima Moiseevna Lyn'ko (b. 1946 in Kamen', Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus) in Amosova, *Lepel'*, 82.

Communal, Religious Rituals and Holocaust Commemoration

The catastrophic losses of the Holocaust inevitably marked the observance and experience of Jewish holidays, endowing them with tremendous emotional weight, not just on a personal level but also on a communal level. However, Soviet Jewish communities did not confine their commemorative efforts to the Jewish holidays. Instead, throughout the postwar decades, they utilized religious rituals in a variety of contexts to invent new commemorative opportunities.

In 1945 and 1946, Jewish religious communities across Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia organized special memorial services to commemorate those who had died in the Holocaust. These events were not held on pre-existing holidays. Instead, they generally followed the *yortzeit*-model and corresponded to the anniversaries of local tragedies during the war.³⁶⁵ Almost immediately, these religious commemorative ceremonies met with rigid opposition from local, republic, and Union-level officials, especially when such ceremonies were held outside of the synagogue or sought to attract non-religious Jews. Again, Soviet officials were stringently opposed to any effort by a religious community to expand its influence beyond a carefully circumscribed community of believers.

In 1946, the Jewish religious community in Kam'ianets'-Podil's'kyi (Khmel'nits'kyi Oblast, Ukraine), asked the local city council [*gorsovet*] for permission to hold a day of mourning on the anniversary of the local mass shooting that had claimed the lives of 25,000 men,

³⁶⁵ During this time, several Jewish communities also held commemorative ceremonies to mark the anniversary of their liberation—much in the tradition of local Purims. A top secret CARC report from November 1946 describes how the Jewish religious community in Simferopol held a celebration to mark the one-year anniversary of Victory Day and Crimea's liberation. Participants included religious Jews, Krymchaks, and Russians, some of whom were Party members. The Jewish community in Mozyr' (Gomel' Oblast, Belarus) also held a similar Victory Day celebration and banquet in 1945, which was even attended by city officials. RGASPI f. 17, op. 125, d. 405, l. 99. CAHJP RU 1816.3. However, these ceremonies, too, quickly fell afoul of Soviet officials.

women, and children.³⁶⁶ Their request was denied,³⁶⁷ as were many other similar requests across the Soviet Union. While Soviet Jewish religious communities were prevented from organizing these sorts of formal commemorative ceremonies by 1947, Soviet Jews continued to conduct ostensibly secular commemorative gatherings at mass graves throughout the postwar decades (see Chapter V). However, within synagogues and underground minyans, major Jewish holidays—particularly the yizkor service on Yom Kippur—became the primary occasions for individuals to recall those who had died during the war in a religious, communal setting.³⁶⁸

In July 1944, Etunia Bauer Katz returned to her hometown of Buchach (Ternopil' Oblast, Ukraine) after losing nearly her entire family during the war. She recalls the High Holiday that fall and sense of loss they evoked:

When the High Holy Days arrived, our small community of Jewish survivors straggled apprehensively into a makeshift, improvised House of God. When the reader, my father's friend, Mr. Horowitz, tremulously intoned the sacred verses—"Hear, O Israel"—those of us gathered could not help letting our memories overcome us. As we listened to those words our tears flowed. There, on the platform between the men, next to the reader, I could imagine my Tatko [father] with his three sons, resplendent with the subtle grace of the moment. Instead, the tiny cluster of men embodied profound sadness. Huddled together as though in one family, all of us, formerly rich or poor, educated or not, religious or secular, old and young, were united in grief.³⁶⁹

At these first communal gatherings after the war, one can only imagine the silent headcount that attendees took as they glanced around the room, noting the absence of friends and loved ones as their communities reconvened. In this moment of acute grief, Etunia considers the motives that brought people to the synagogue despite everything they had endured, "Like beggars searching

³⁶⁶ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 52, l. 91. CAHJP RU 1894.

³⁶⁷ TsDAGOU f. 1, op. 70, d. 1172, l. 4-6. CAHJP RU 1956. TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 52, l. 92. CAHJP RU 1894.

³⁶⁸ See Altshuler, "Jewish Holocaust Commemoration," 274-9. See also Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union*, 42-3.

³⁶⁹ Etunia Bauer Katz, *Our Tomorrows Never Came*, 121.

for shelter in winter, we longed for the warmth of tradition. Tradition called to us and, deeply ingrained, our faith sustained and held us together. We came, then, to confirm our faith in God. Above all, we must have wished to reaffirm and feel God's divinity."³⁷⁰ For Etunia, bereavement and the desire for divine sovereignty converged in the recitation of kaddish, "We said Kaddish, but not in accordance with the traditional liturgy. Rather, our voices erupting in sobs sounded more like a chaotic shattering of vessels. But we continued. At the conclusion of our prayers, we wished one another "*B'Shana HaBa'a B'Yerushlayim*" (Next year in Jerusalem)."³⁷¹ This scene of violent grief parallels the outburst of mourning in Sandormokh (Karelia, Russia) described in Catherine Merridale's *Night of Stone*.³⁷² In both instances, pent up emotions find belated expression through traditional mourning practices. Although the Jewish community in Buchach undoubtedly included yizkor as part of its Yom Kippur services, Etunia focuses on kaddish as the locus of cathartic grief. Perhaps the list of silent yizkor supplications for her relatives was too overwhelming, while kaddish offered a simpler, more universal, and collective expression of overwhelming grief.

As important as Yom Kippur and other Jewish holidays were for collective remembrance, many survivors were unable to find solace or catharsis in the Jewish holidays and their associated mourning practices. Some had become fully secular before the war, and thus, had no pre-existing attachment to religious mourning rituals. For others, such as Thomas Hecht, the war precipitated a sharp departure from religious observance. While hiding in the forest outside of Bus'k (L'viv Oblast, Ukraine), Thomas Hecht learned of the death of his father and brother

³⁷⁰ Ibid, 121-2.

³⁷¹ Ibid, 122.

³⁷² Merridale, *Night of Stone*, 6.

during the liquidation of the Bus'k ghetto from a villager. The man described how Thomas' relatives had been taken to the Jewish cemetery and shot. Thomas recalls, "I was struck... with the thought that it was all right for me to hate God. During this epiphany, I vowed never to fast on Yom Kippur, as a sign of defiance of God. At the same time, I vowed never to say the Kaddish for my father and Lonek."³⁷³ Thomas explains his refusal to recite kaddish not as a sign of negligence or disrespect, but as a gesture of defiance toward God and a rejection of kaddish itself, which is an "obligatory solemn prayer recited for the dead" yet, "at the same time, a hymn in praise of God."³⁷⁴ In the wake of mass atrocity, many survivors felt that God had either turned a blind eye or simply did not exist. In this light, religious mourning rituals could be perceived as an insult to the memory of the deceased. Such sentiments, along with continued secularization, led many survivors to abandon synagogue mourning rituals outright. Nevertheless, other Jews maintained religious habits and inclinations, even ostensibly secular Jews. For these individuals—like Brukhe Fel'dman and Etunia Bauer Katz—communal mourning rituals were a powerful draw toward public, religious ceremonies such as kaddish and yizkor.

Kaddish in the Soviet Jewish Family and Synagogue

While traditionally yizkor was associated with major Jewish holidays, kaddish was a daily ritual.³⁷⁵ As synagogue attendance became increasingly intermittent in the Soviet context,

³⁷³ Thomas T. Hecht, *Life Death Memories*, 138.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 138.

³⁷⁵ During the first eleven months after a parent's death, the oldest son was traditionally responsible for reciting mourner's kaddish three times a day at public prayer services. Subsequently, he would recite kaddish only on the parent's *yortzeit*. "...the earliest references to the *Kaddish* as a 'mourner's prayer' date from the late eleventh century and are found in the traditions of Ashkenazic Jewry. The *Kaddish* is believe to intercede favorably on behalf of the dead and help alleviate their suffering in Gehenna [place for the spiritual purification of souls]. Tradition relates that only the most heinous sinners will suffer the travails of Gehenna for the maximum time of one year. Accordingly, the mourner's *Kaddish* is recited for one's parents only during the first eleven months of the *yud-bet*

kaddish, too, became an infrequent ritual. In order to find a minyan or to avoid surveillance at their local synagogue, some Soviet Jews would travel from great distances to recite kaddish publicly on Yom Kippur or on the *yortzeit* of their loved ones. Like yizkor, kaddish is rooted in familial relationships—it is a prayer recited in memory of close, deceased relatives. Under traditional formulas, the oldest male son was responsible to recite kaddish for his parents, a husband for his wife, etc. During the Soviet era, and especially in the post-Holocaust context, this presumptive order of death was thrown into chaos by secularization, migration, and high mortality rates. Suddenly, survivors were responsible for extended family trees that had been riddled with loss. Parents said kaddish for their children. Siblings said kaddish for each other. In 1972, Sidney Rackoff, an American rabbi from West Virginia, visited the Soviet Union. At the synagogue in Odesa (Odesa Oblast, Ukraine), he encountered several men who fasted regularly in memory of family members who had died in the Second World War.³⁷⁶ After visiting the Minsk synagogue, Rackoff noted that “Fathers and grandfathers are supposed to be mourned and said Kaddish after by sons. That is the normal way of the world. Not so in the Soviet Union. One enters the synagogue to see every single man there saying Kaddish for all his sons.”³⁷⁷

As we saw in Chapter II, inter-generational interactions within Soviet families played a significant role in shaping the Jewish knowledge and identity of young Soviet Jews. As Soviet labor expectations pushed mothers into the workforce, children were raised increasingly by their grandparents. Despite its progressive intentions, the state unwittingly facilitated the transmission of traditional beliefs and practices from the older, pre-Soviet generation to a young generation of

hodesh [twelve-month mourning period], in order to avoid giving the impression that the deceased was included in that category. At the conclusion of the twelve month mourning period, the mourner’s *Kaddish* is recited only on the *Yahrtzeit*.” See JTS, *From This World to the Next*, 65.

³⁷⁶ Rackoff, *American Rabbi Meets Soviet Jews*, 2.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

Soviet citizens, often with a deeply Sovietized intermediate generation.³⁷⁸ As Sylvia Rothchild concludes, based on her oral history interviews with Soviet Jewish families who immigrated to the United States between 1973 and 1980, "...traditions were maintained in secret within families long after public worship was forbidden."³⁷⁹

Mourning, in particular, was a central experience that brought the elderly and young into dialogue over Jewish traditions and Soviet norms. Even after their deaths, the older generation continued to play an important role in perpetuating Jewish traditions. For example, Felix B., "promised his grandmother that he would say kaddish for her when she died. A rabbi wrote the words for him in Russian letters, since he could not read Hebrew, and he went to the synagogue in Moscow on the anniversary of her death to light a [*yortzeit*] candle and say the proper words."³⁸⁰ A Jewish professor at the University of Kyiv recounted "the elaborate plans he made every year to attend meetings or conferences in Moscow at the time of his father's *yahrzeit* [*yortzeit*]. Unknown outside his native city, he could slip into the synagogue and say the traditional blessings in the proper way."³⁸¹

Several common patterns are reflected in these two testimonies. First, we see the distances that young, professional Soviet Jews traveled to fulfill their obligation to deceased relatives while preserving their career prospects. While elderly retirees could recite kaddish in their local synagogue or minyan with little fear, younger Jews depended on the anonymity afforded by larger, distant synagogues. Despite these fears, we also see the role of kaddish as an entrée into synagogue life for otherwise secular Jews whose sense of obligation to the deceased

³⁷⁸ See Rothchild, 108. Mentioned in Chapter II.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 44.

³⁸⁰ Ibid, 43.

³⁸¹ Ibid, 44.

was their sole motivation for synagogue attendance. Indeed, equipped with a transliteration of the prayer, kaddish could easily be recited by anyone. While transliterating the full Hebrew prayer book was impossible, many communities provided visitors with Russian transliterations of kaddish, knowing that secular Jews came to synagogue to recite this prayer. Lastly, the notion of fulfilling one's duty to the dead "properly" [*kak polozheno*] is virtually ubiquitous in oral history interviews conducted with Soviet Jews. Most interviewees are acutely aware of their religious ignorance during the Soviet period. Thus, the ability to perform even the smallest ritual in the appropriate, traditional way was extremely significant and meaningful to them, particularly when such rituals were performed in memory of a loved one.

Through the recitation of kaddish by children and grandchildren, the values and practices of an older generation persevered long after their deaths. In fact, one could even argue that death served a regenerative role, triggering the resurrection of dormant practices. Of course, the number of young Soviet Jews who had the familial, emotional, and social/professional capacity to recite kaddish was constrained and uneven, even among members of the same family from the same generation. For example, Zorekh Motelevich Kurliandchik was born in 1924 in Novohrad-Volyns'kyi (Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine) to a religious Jewish family. He was the youngest of four children. While all of the children attended a Soviet Yiddish school for some of their education, Zorekh's oldest brother Berl had studied in a *kheyder* and knew Hebrew well. Nevertheless, by the time their father died in 1933 during the Holodomor, Zorekh's three older siblings had already joined the Komsomol [the Soviet Youth League] and, as a result, could not attend synagogue³⁸² to recite kaddish for their father. Zorekh's mother, Ruse, told him that he

³⁸² According to Kurliandchik, the Soviet authorities closed all of the synagogues in Novohrad-Volyns'kyi in 1934. Afterwards, an underground minyan gathered in a private home on shabes. After the war, a synagogue was briefly re-established.

must go to synagogue every year on his father's *yortzeit* to say kaddish. As a result, he would not be able to join the Komsomol.³⁸³ Although Zorekh does not elaborate, this decision undoubtedly had an impact on his professional prospects and made him an outlier among his peers—even among his own siblings.

Understandably, such sacrifices were extremely uncommon, and many Soviet Jewish families sought out other ways to honor their relatives' last wishes. The most common alternative was to pay someone in the local Jewish community to recite kaddish on the relatives' behalf, whether for the full eleven-month mourning period or only once a year on the *yortzeit*. This system existed long before the Bolshevik Revolution and was originally intended to guarantee kaddish recitation for individuals who died with no surviving male relatives. However, in the Soviet context, this mechanism was adopted by many families who could not risk public exposure at the synagogue or underground minyan. In his Russian-language chassidus blog, Itzik Roytman (b. 1964 in Moscow) recalls growing up in a secular Jewish family that continued to observe a select number of Jewish rituals including matzah each year on Passover. The only other major Jewish ritual he recalls from his childhood is his mother frequently visiting the Moscow synagogue to request that kaddish be said in memory of deceased relatives. In particular, every year in early December, she would request kaddish in memory of her parents.³⁸⁴ Presumably, Itskhak's father was not able to attend synagogue to say kaddish on his wife's behalf. Instead, regular synagogue attendees provided kaddish as a service and received compensation for their efforts.

³⁸³ AHEYM, MDV 643.

³⁸⁴ Itzik Roytman, "Gimel tamuz."

The communal and financial aspects of kaddish recitation frequently aroused CARC's suspicions of profiteering in Soviet synagogues. As Mordechai Altshuler observes, kaddish and other forms of synagogue fundraising, "existed in a gray zone of permissibility and prohibition.... Accordingly, during the relaxation of the antireligious campaign, the authorities regarded this type of activity as tolerable, but during periods of crackdown they invoked various clauses to repress congregations...."³⁸⁵ While it was technically legal for synagogues to collect funds on their premises, CARC strongly discouraged any effort by synagogues to attract new congregants, i.e. potential sources of revenue. In February 1953, CARC officials reported that one of the Kyiv synagogue officials "had taken home a card index of Jews who had died and had been sending postcards to their relatives, inviting them to the synagogue or the cemetery to perform religious rites for anyone who had been buried in a secular funeral."³⁸⁶ Although the synagogue official's intent was likely focused on the provision of ritual outlets for Kyiv's secular Jews, in CARC's eyes, such actions were clearly motivated by profiteering.

The prospect of individuals collecting money on synagogue premises, with the potential for income tax evasion, aroused particularly strong concerns. In an effort to counter tax evasion, on 16 June 1953, Ulasevich—the CARC Commissioner for the BSSR—wrote the head of the Frunze District's Financial Department of Minsk to report that Izrail' Faibishevich Kaganovich was serving as an employee of the synagogue. In this capacity, Izrail' had been performing such duties as reciting yizkor and kaddish, for which he received three to five rubles—paid directly to Izrail' by the individuals requesting the prayers. This money, in addition to the 200 rubles Izrail'

³⁸⁵ Altshuler, *Religious and Jewish Identity*, 148.

³⁸⁶ TsDAGOU f. 1, op. 24, d. 2741, l. 102. CAHJP RU 1944.

received monthly from the synagogue (for assisting the rabbi and congregants during services) provided him a total cash income of 2,000-3,000 rubles per month.³⁸⁷

In Zhytomyr (Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine), Inike Mordkovich Khorashan was a member of the local Jewish religious community where fellow congregants paid him recite memorial prayers for the dead. In 1961, fearing that the local finance department [*finotdel*] might tax his income, he fled Zhytomyr. Later that year though, in preparation for the upcoming High Holidays, Inike sent the following invitation to several Jews in Minsk who had relatives buried in the Zhytomyr Jewish cemetery:

I know the Jewish cemetery in Zhytomyr very well and know who is buried where. I will come for a visit and will be at the cemetery to help recite prayers for the dead. The dead will rejoice since I will be able to show their relatives where they are buried. I will be able to make a good living and distribute money in charity if you will help me pay for a ticket to Zhytomyr.

Although he was no longer based in Zhytomyr, Inike hoped to continue capitalizing on his familiarity with traditional mourning rituals and his comprehensive knowledge of the Zhytomyr Jewish landscape. Inike's solicitation of private income aroused a swift response from the CARC Commissioner for the Zhytomyr Oblast who intervened to thwart Inike's visit to Zhytomyr.³⁸⁸ Despite CARC's efforts to stem "profiteering" in the performance of mourning rituals, throughout the postwar period, individuals such as Izrail' and Inike continued to work in Jewish communities across the Soviet Union, providing ritual services that other Jews were unable to perform for themselves, whether due to ignorance or fear.

Communities that provided visitors with transliterations of kaddish into Russian letters, rather than delegating religious rituals to paid functionaries, also met with CARC's censure,

³⁸⁷ NARB f. 952, op. 3, d. 9, 100-102. In Smilovitsky, *Jewish Life in Belarus*, 282.

³⁸⁸ DAZhO f. 4994, op. 4s, d. 6, l. 56. CAHJP RU 1977.

especially if visitors included young, otherwise secular Soviet Jews. For example, in 1960, CARC officials revoked the registration of the Novohrad-Volyns'kyi Jewish religious community, which had been officially registered after the war on 19 April 1946 with 400 members. Among the list of the community's "nationalistic," "socio-political" offences was the transliteration of kaddish, "In order to attract more young people to the synagogue," especially those that didn't know Hebrew.³⁸⁹ Whether or not kaddish served a fundraising function, CARC officials were deeply concerned about the ability of kaddish to attract secular, unaffiliated, and younger Jews to the synagogue.³⁹⁰ Consequently, CARC took regular measures to curtail the growth of religious communities and spread of religious influence through kaddish.

From the perspective of Soviet Jewish communities themselves though, kaddish was not simply a source of revenue or attendance. It was a *raison d'être*—a fact that communities repeatedly foregrounded in their correspondence with Soviet officials throughout the postwar decades. For example, in Pinsk (Brest Oblast, Belarus) in the early 1950s, a group of 20-50 elderly Jews, age 50 and older, gathered every Saturday and on holidays to pray at the home of Lazar Igorevich Shul'man at 111 Pervomaiskaia ulitsa. On 23 October 1954, Mordukh Notovich Fridman, a 73-year-old, religious Jew who served as the ersatz-rabbi for this community, met with the CARC Commissioner for the Brest Oblast in the city council building. Mordukh firmly insisted that the Jews were not breaking any laws by conducting prayer services and demanded to know: "Why can't I and other elderly Jews who lost children, loved ones, and relatives in the war gather to pray and light candles in memory of our children and relatives? Why can other

³⁸⁹ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 296, l. 87. CAHJP RU 1924.

³⁹⁰ While teaching religious practices to young adults was technically legal, religious instruction for minors was strictly prohibited by Soviet law. In Novohrad-Volyns'kyi, in the late 1940s, local officials and Zhytomyr Oblast CARC officials learned of an underground *cheder* that was teaching orphans how to recite kaddish for their parents in exchange for money or food. CARC immediately forced the communal leaders to close down the *cheder*. See Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity*, 155.

faiths pray but we poor Jews aren't allowed to?"³⁹¹ Here, Mordukh highlights that praying for the dead was the primary motivation for religious Jews to pray collectively. Furthermore, he likely sensed that mourning was the justification for communal prayer most likely to gain the sympathy of the CARC Commissioner. As Leonid Smilovitsky argues, Jewish efforts to regain access to confiscated synagogue buildings were grounded in two major themes: Jewish heroism during the war and survivors' desire to pray for their lost children.³⁹² For example, in 1947, the Jewish community in Orsha (Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus) petitioned the Chairman of the BSSR Council of Ministers. They described themselves as Jews "who were fortunate to have survived the invasion of the Hitlerite thugs" and explained that they had returned home only to find their native town in ruins, with none of the sixteen prewar synagogues remaining. To assuage their grief, they longed to "pray for the memory of their children who had 'fallen honestly' at the front in the Great Patriotic War, and for the memory of their relatives, the innocent victims of the Nazi genocide." Grounding their request in a patriotic, commemorative spirit, Orsha's Jews requested that the authorities grant them permission to use an uninhabited house in Orsha—the former home of Jews who had died in the Holocaust—as a synagogue.³⁹³

In the early post-Stalin Thaw and prior to Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign (1958-64), Jewish communities penned a fresh wave of petitions to open synagogues. For example, in 1956, the Jewish community of Kryvyi Rih (Dnipropetrovs'k Oblast, Ukraine) wrote to the head of CARC asking for a prayer house to be opened for their use. The letter, signed by

³⁹¹ GABO f. 1339, op. 1, d. 9, l. 51-2.

³⁹² See Smilovitsky, "Jews under Soviet Rule," 494. During the war, virtually all synagogues and shtiebls in Belarus and Ukraine had been destroyed. Of those that survived, many were taken over by Soviet state institutions immediately after the war.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 495.

the head of the *dvadtsatka*,³⁹⁴ Shabash, emphasizes that the approximately 50 congregants are all elderly—60 years of age and older—and that they had grown up in religious families. Here, Shabash astutely wards off one of CARC’s enduring concerns—proselytizing. His letter displays political acumen in one more crucial respect. By 1956, the Soviet mythology of the Great Patriotic War, emphasizing military heroism and obscuring civilian casualties, had begun to take shape. In keeping with this script, Shabash writes, “Many of our family members were killed at the front during the Great Patriotic War and also during the Great October Revolution. According to Jewish religious tradition, we are obligated to pray for the peace of their souls.”³⁹⁵ During this transitional period after the death of Stalin, some petitions for synagogue access were successful. For example, in Khotyn (Chernivtsi Oblast, Ukraine), the synagogue was returned to the Jewish community in April 1955.³⁹⁶

Such successes were generally short-lived though, and the early 1960s brought a fresh wave of synagogue closures. In petitions to ward off such closures, communities continued to draw on the language of familial loss and commemoration. In early October 1963, the Jewish community of Khust (Zakarpatiia Obalst, Ukraine) wrote a petition to Leonid Brezhnev—then Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union—asking him to overturn the local *oblispolkom*’s decision in February 1962 to confiscate their synagogue. The letter highlights the devastation visited on the community by the war and emphasizes the importance the synagogue for commemorating the dead:

According to our religious traditions, on a *yortzeit*, a special religious ritual is performed in the synagogue. There are many in our community who lost everyone and everything.

³⁹⁴ The governing board of 20 members required for a religious community to obtain formal registration.

³⁹⁵ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 212, l. 66. CAHJP RU 1913.

³⁹⁶ DACHO f. 623, op. 2, d. 172-173, l. 21. CAHJP RU 1974.

It's no surprise that these people, mostly elderly, seek comfort in religious traditions, and for them the synagogue is their only comfort. Closing the synagogue would take away their only moral support....

The petition continues by acknowledging that the community was no longer able to fill the synagogue to its capacity of 132 men's seats and 132 women's seats. However, the building that the *oblispolkom* had offered as an alternative was ten times smaller and would not allow the synagogue to serve the local religious community's needs. The petition concludes, "Please allow us to stay in the building that our fathers, who were killed at the hands of the fascists, used to pray in."³⁹⁷

In each of these stories, we find varied rhetorical strategies, all attempting to extract concessions from a largely recalcitrant Soviet bureaucracy. Yet, the common thread connecting all of the preceding petitions is the centrality of kaddish and other collective mourning rituals in postwar Soviet Jewish life—in part because it was a “sympathetic cause” that appealed to the authorities' emotions, but also because the prayer was indeed a central feature of postwar religious life in these communities. Given the catastrophic demographic losses inflicted by the Holocaust and the steady “greying” of provincial Jewish communities after the war as young Jewish secularized, migrated internally, and emigrated, kaddish and other mourning rituals were a primary motivation for individuals to participate in communal, religious life. By integrating individual and familial losses into communal ritual, kaddish reinforced support networks and mutual responsibility at a time when Jewish communities were threatened by demographic decline. While kaddish could not change these demographic realities, it motivated surviving community members to remain engaged and active in public religious life through the direct or delegated recitation of kaddish. While some Soviet Jewish communities eventually began to

³⁹⁷ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 406, l. 143-146. CAHJP RU 1935.

recite kaddish without a minyan, overwhelmingly, Soviet Jews remained deeply committed to reciting kaddish in its traditional setting—a minyan of at least ten, adult males.

The history of kaddish in the postwar period suggests that Soviet Jews' secularism existed on a broad continuum. Of course, there were completely secular individuals who never entered a synagogue or participated in any religious mourning rituals. However, there was also a wide spectrum of ostensibly secular individuals who were fully engaged in Soviet society yet were willing to participate in kaddish, even if they never joined the ranks of elderly synagogue regulars. Daily synagogue attendance during the first eleven months of mourning might not have been possible, but annual synagogue visits on yortzeits were. Transliterated renditions of kaddish were available to help those who could not read Hebrew letters, and, for a nominal fee, kaddish could be delegated to a knowledgeable community member. This range of options made kaddish a uniquely flexible, accommodating ritual for a wide range of Soviet Jews in the postwar era. Furthermore, it provided a meaningful sense of continuity between generations and the satisfaction of fulfilling one's obligation to the deceased.

Kaddish at Mass Graves

Beyond the walls of the synagogue, kaddish also played a vital role in the commemoration of mass graves. By the late 1940s, CARC had put a swift end to commemorative ceremonies organized by religious communities. However, when organized without reference to religious institutions, memorial ceremonies at these sites enjoyed significant latitude to meld secular commemoration with traditional memorial prayers such as kaddish.

Avraham Aviel Lipkonsk was born in 1929 to a religious family in Naujasis Daugėliškis (Utena County, Lithuania), then part of interwar Poland. After escaping from the massacre of

Radun' ghetto inmates, Avraham joined a partisan troupe in the forest. In July 1943, Avraham and a group of survivors living in the forest returned to the site where many of their partisan comrades had been murdered in an ambush a few weeks prior:

We supplied ourselves with shovels and some blankets that we found strewn about the ground, and went out to the marshes to look for the victims' corpses. [...] The bodies, which had lain [exposed] to the rain and the much under the warm rays of the sun had lost all resemblance to human beings created in the image of God. Those same friends, with whom only three weeks previously we had fought for our lives, were now unrecognizable. It was only possible to identify them by their clothing or shoes. [...] We had no means of disinfection and a lighted cigarette in one's mouth was the only way to cope. [...] After we had filled the graves, we said Kaddish for the holy [victims], and engraved the date on a sturdy tree: 16.6.1943.³⁹⁸

Other survivors, bereft of family and Jewish community, found themselves alone at the graves of their loved ones, without the ability to recite kaddish. After the Red Army liberated her hometown of Buchach (Ternopil' Oblast, Ukraine), Etunia Bauer Katz recalls finding the bodies of her father and three siblings a mere fifteen days after their murder by a band of *banderivtsi*.³⁹⁹ In her memoir, she describes the makeshift burial proceedings she made along with Janek, a fifteen-year-old Polish boy who accompanied her to the gravesite:

I could not utter a word; only a kind of hiccup, an inhuman sound, escaped me. In my agony I could only think, Why, God, why? [...] I followed Janek's instructions and dug the grave. I dug, I hit, I slashed at the earth, carving out a grave deep and wide enough for my dear people. Janek then helped me carry the bodies and lay them gently to rest. Although he was young, Janek had the maturity and intelligence of compassionate understanding. "We cannot just bury them without some prayers," he said—and with that, something somewhere within me snapped. God, what have you done? "Tatko! Tatusiu! Look who is saying Kaddish for you! You had three sturdy, healthy, dutiful, loving sons to say Kaddish for you. They each put on the *thephillin* [sic] daily for morning prayers before school. They found time for the *Mincha-Ma'arev* as well, between the schools, and you beamed with pride! Now," my soul cried, "look who is saying Kaddish—a *Shayget[s]*, a Christian!" Anger and pain choked me, so much so that whatever prayer Janek murmured, I did not hear. He may have even included some *Yezus Christus* words for all I know. Thankfully, it was all incoherent to me; all I heard and felt

³⁹⁸ Avraham Aviel, *A Village Named Dowgalishok*, 228-30.

³⁹⁹ Ukrainian nationalistic insurgents.

was that he, the Shayget[s], and not my father's sons, was praying. My nails dug deep into the spade handle, pressing it deep into the earth, and my heart sank with it. When Janek finished his litany, he began to cover the bodies, and the stone automaton that I had become followed his instructions as though in a trance. My heart clung to the grave as it received my beloved family. I spoke not a word. I said nothing to God either; in the riot of emotion in my mind and heart, I had lost sight of God. Finally, I spoke to Janek and thanked him for his help, his kindness, his thoughtfulness. He surely meant well by the prayer, and I appreciated his sensitivity.⁴⁰⁰

In performing burial rites for her murdered family, Etunia mourns the fact that her two brothers, who should have borne the responsibility of saying kaddish for their father, had been killed alongside him. Rather than attempting to recite the traditional words sanctifying God's name—a step that would, itself, have been unconventional since women traditionally did not recite kaddish—Etunia rebukes God for having allowed a loving father to die without living sons to commemorate him. In their stead, a non-Jew offers Christian prayers in memory of Etunia's entire family, thereby outsourcing all gestures to traditional religious decorum and ceremony to a “shaygets.” The inclusion of traditional funerary prayers in the earliest commemorations often depended on how many members of the prewar Jewish community had returned. In Etunia's case, it seems that she was among the first returnees. Later elements of her autobiography indicate that the Buchach Jewish community gradually revived and began to hold religious services again. However, the process of reconvening local communities often took years, especially since many men remained mobilized in the Red Army.

Despite the war's destabilizing effect on Jewish families, communities, and traditional mourning practices, in the decades after liberation, many survivors participated in communal efforts to bury and mourn mass shooting victims, particularly outside of major Soviet cities. In smaller cities and towns, mass graves were not subject steady surveillance, and local authorities adopted a wide variety of stances toward Jewish efforts to construct monuments and conduct

⁴⁰⁰ Etunia Katz, 103.

memorial gatherings. Unlike synagogues, which fell under CARC's jurisdiction, mass graves were largely unregulated space. The final chapter discusses commemorative efforts at these sites in greater detail. Here, I simply emphasize the role of kaddish and religious rituals in these funerary proceedings.

On 2 March 1973, fifty local Jews gathered at the "Yama" mass grave in Minsk where 5,000 Jews had been murdered thirty-one years prior in March 1942. According to the American Jewish newsletter, *Jews in the U.S.S.R.*: "A short service was held in memory of the thousands of murdered Jews. Three wreaths with Hebrew and Yiddish inscriptions were laid and Kaddish and Yizcor [yizkor] memorial prayers were recited. Representatives of the authorities and the police who were present did not attempt to interfere. Hunger strikes were conducted by Jews attempting to leave for Israel on this date."⁴⁰¹ These gatherings seem to have continued, and just a years later, attendance had grown dramatically. On 9 May 1977 (Soviet Victory Day), after the conclusion of the municipal, state-sponsored ceremony, a group of 3,000 Jews gathered at the Yama memorial to say kaddish and yizkor.⁴⁰² The mix of religious elements, visual symbolism, and political activism in the Minsk Jewish community around Holocaust commemoration captures the diversity of mourning practices and motivations in the postwar Soviet Jewish community. Traditional rituals such as kaddish and yizkor were mobilized to mourn the past and to protest current Soviet emigration policy. In strictly religious terms, the recitation of yizkor

⁴⁰¹ *Jews in the U.S.S.R.* a weekly information bulletin. Ed. Colin Shindler. Vol II, no 10. March 9, 1973. P 1. American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) Archives. P-866: Laurel Gould and Alan J. Gould Papers. Box 11, Folder 1 "Jews in the USSR, 1973-1974."

⁴⁰² During the recitation of kaddish, Soviet officials demanded a translation of the prayer into Russian. Ilya Goldin, a Jewish activist, explained to the officials that the prayer had been written more than two thousand years ago and, therefore, could not possibly contain any anti-Soviet innuendo. AJHS Archives P-866, box 10, folder 3, "Minsk service attracts thousands," *National Conference on Soviet Jewry News Bulletin* no. 110, 3 June 1977, 1. AJHS Archives P-866, box 12, folder 2, "Jewish Memorial Service in Minsk," *Jews in the U.S.S.R.*, a weekly information bulletin, ed. Nan Greifer. VI, no 19, 13 May 1977, 4.

outside of its four designated holidays indicates the religious illiteracy of participants in these ceremonies. Yet, it also reveals their commitment to recalling Jewish wartime victims using traditional Jewish texts and ceremonies. The decision by emigration activists to fast on this date also echoes the traditional custom to fast on a parent's *yortzeit*. Here, though, the Minsk activists connect the slaughter of their relatives to their own demands for emigration rights—implicating the Soviet Union for its failure to protect Jews during the war and its continued destruction of Jewish cultural life after the war.

Mishnayas

An additional synagogue mourning custom, rooted in synagogues' traditional function as houses of study and not merely prayer, is the practice of reciting chapters from the Mishnah in memory of the deceased. This custom:

became widespread in the wake of the immense popularity enjoyed by Lurianic kabbalah in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Just as the Lurianic doctrine of *tikkun* (repair) sought to effect redemption for the world by 'raising the sparks that have fallen,' so did the study of select chapters of Mishnah seek to alleviate the suffering of the deceased and 'raise' their souls to *Gan Eden*. Typically, the chapters were selected so that the initial letters formed the name of the deceased. Additionally, four chapters whose initial letters spelled the word *neshamah* were also studied, as in Hebrew the world for soul, *neshamah*, is an anagram of the world *Mishnah*.⁴⁰³

The feature of this practice that cemented its role as a mourning custom, however, is the recitation of *kaddish d'rabbanan*, a variant of mourner's kaddish that is recited only after a period of study. Crucially, "Given that the study of the Torah and Talmud [are] considered intrinsically joyous, the mourners themselves were [traditionally] enjoined from taking part in this study and the learning was instead conducted by those who visited the mourner's home

⁴⁰³ JTS, *From This World to the Next*, 63.

during *shivah*.⁴⁰⁴ Subsequently, however, during the twelve-month mourning period and on the *yortzeit*, mourners themselves could participate.

Because the study of *mishnayes* required a traditional Jewish education, with a knowledge of Mishnaic Hebrew, one might expect this practice to have died out swiftly in the Soviet Union. However, in many Jewish communities, including Odesa, Kharkiv, Kyiv, Kherson, and Dnipro, Mishnah study circles continued to gather publicly in synagogues during the early postwar years.⁴⁰⁵ As Altshuler explains,

This [practice] created some consternation among the Soviet institutions that dealt with religion: according to the 1929 laws on religion and subsequent amendments, burial prayers were allowed to be conducted in the home of the deceased, and the question therefore was to what extent Mishnah study could count as burial prayer, and whether it could be conducted in the synagogue and whether the practice constituted a religious study circle.⁴⁰⁶

While religious study by adults was technically legal, as with kaddish itself, CARC officials were deeply concerned with the opportunities for profiteering provided by *mishnayes* study groups (similar to concerns about kaddish). Reports during the late 1940s carefully catalogued the income of Mishnah teachers. For example, in January 1949, the CARC Commissioner for the UkSSR, reported that a teacher in the Odesa synagogue was receiving 500 rubles a month from the synagogue leadership for teaching *mishnayes*.⁴⁰⁷ That same month, the CARC Commissioner for the UkSSR issued a memorandum to Ukraine's oblast-level CARC offices indicating its concern with the practice of Mishnah study in synagogues and requesting that the oblast commissioners take measures to disband such study groups. The report mistakenly describes

⁴⁰⁴ JTS, *From This World to the Next*, 63.

⁴⁰⁵ See Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity*, 156; DACHO f. 623, op. 2, d. 28, l. 2. CAHJP RU 1967.

⁴⁰⁶ Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity*, 155.

⁴⁰⁷ GAVO f. R-2700, op. 19, d. 36, l. 29. CAHJP RU 1987.

mishnayes as “prayers for the dead” and claims, “If someone dies, members of the [*mishnayes*] circle go to the home of the deceased and, over the course of seven days, teach the members of the family and relatives how to say “*mishnayes*.”⁴⁰⁸ Most likely, *mishnayes* circles were not teaching the families to recite *mishnayes* but, instead, simply studied *mishnayes* in honor of the deceased as part of *shiva* calls.

The conduct of *mishnayes* study groups within synagogues also drew CARC’s condemnation. In the same report, Vil’khovyi portrays *mishnayes* as a non-essential feature of synagogue life, claiming that they were never part of the synagogue canon. In CARC’s parlance, this implied that *mishnayes* were a ploy by the religious Jewish community to drive up synagogue attendance, make a profit, and inflame nationalistic sentiments. In Kyiv, for example, Vil’khovyi claims that the *mishnayes* circle had been operating without permission of the synagogue’s rabbi. Instead, the circle had its own leadership and “teacher,” as well as its own deputies and agents who were responsible for acquiring old prayer books containing *mishnayes*. These individuals would then re-bind the prayer books and sell them at a significant profit. In a meeting with the *mishnayes* circle and the synagogue’s rabbi, Vil’khovyi learned that teaching *mishnayes* was quite “profitable”: each student paid the head of the circle 10-25 rubles per class, and the teacher ran three to four groups each month, consisting of no less than two men per group. These findings further confirmed Vil’khovyi’s suspicions of profiteering, and, in response, he ordered his oblast commissioners to disband *mishnayes* groups and to warn synagogue officials that failure to comply could lead to the closure of synagogues.⁴⁰⁹ In response,

⁴⁰⁸ DACHO f. 623, op. 2, d. 28, l. 2. CAHJP RU 1967.

⁴⁰⁹ DACHO f. 623, op. 2, d. 28, l. 2. CAHJP RU 1967. Vil’khovyi sent a similar memo to Shumkov, the CARC Commissioner for the Vinnitsa oblast, also in January 1949, regarding the practice of reading *mishnayes* (DAVO f. R-2700, op. 19, d. 36, l. 28. CAJHP RU 1987).

it seems that many synagogues ceased holding separate study groups, but instead, incorporated *mishnayes* study into the break between the afternoon and evening prayers.⁴¹⁰

Whether held in the home or in synagogue, with the participation of mourners or simply in their presence, the practice of studying *mishnayes* again demonstrates the continued power of mourning rituals to invigorate Soviet Jewish communities after the Holocaust. It remains unclear how long this practice continued in the postwar era. As the older generation of Jews who had been educated in religious Jewish schools prior to the Bolshevik Revolution passed away, the practice understandably waned. However, as we have seen with yizkor and kaddish, younger Jews found creative ways to adapt mourning rituals. Like kaddish, *mishnayes* had a pre-existing tradition of delegated performance, making it easily adaptable to postwar conditions. As with kaddish, the practice of studying *mishnayes* also aroused concerns over profiteering, whether through the sale of lessons or of refurbished copies of the Mishnah. Nevertheless, CARC's surveillance records offer a clear testament to the persistence of this practice across a broad geographic region, at least in the early postwar years.

Conclusion

Due to heavy state surveillance and regulation, synagogues were the quintessential public space in postwar Soviet Jewish life. Yet they also served as the backdrop for deeply personal emotions and rituals. The ravages of the Holocaust and the Second World War had decimated Soviet Jewish communities and families, and survivors felt a strong, enduring desire to honor the memory of the deceased both individually and collectively. This led many to participate in public, religious rituals such as kaddish and yizkor.

⁴¹⁰ Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity*, 155-6.

Undoubtedly, regular synagogue participants were disproportionately elderly—a pattern only reinforced by the younger generations’ lack of religious education. Nevertheless, middle-aged and young Jews found creative ways to adapt traditional, public mourning rituals such as kaddish and yizkor to their unique individual and familial circumstances, whether by paying an elderly synagogue-regular to recite kaddish on their behalf or by venturing to a distant city once a year to recite kaddish in anonymity. Women, marked as mourners by their mere presence in the room, listened intently and wept silently as cantors intoned the words of yizkor on Yom Kippur. Young Jews without a knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic utilized Russian transliterations of kaddish. These creative approaches to communal, religious engagement successfully integrated individuals who would otherwise have avoided public religious activities, whether due to fear or ignorance.

Choice and flexibility, as much as they reflected the atomization of Soviet Jewish ritual life, also revealed Soviet Jews’ resourcefulness as they moved within and beyond the legal constraints imposed by Soviet policies. Carefully navigating constraints of age, gender, educational background, social status, financial capacity, geographic location, etc., some Soviet Jews thoughtfully selected and performed the mourning rituals that best suited their background, beliefs, aspirations, and fears. Meanwhile, they also negotiated the preferred venues and frequency of ritual participation. Except in the most unusual circumstances, practices such as sitting *shiva* for seven days or reciting kaddish daily for 11 months after a parent’s death simply could not be implemented in the postwar Soviet context. Instead, the religious mourning customs that seem to have survived best did not interfere with regular work schedules, were performed infrequently, and could be “outsourced” or adapted.

In the postwar Soviet Union, the survival of public, religious mourning rituals faced substantial challenges, including stark demographic decline, heavy migration, and persistent state efforts to monitor and constrain the Jewish public life. Each of these factors threatened the institutional and interpersonal cohesion necessary to sustain Jewish public mourning practices. Yet, in their determination to honor the memory of their deceased relatives, Soviet Jews found creative strategies to avail themselves of Jewish communal life—whether through infrequent participation or through indirect, delegative relationships. In turn, the commemoration of the dead revitalized and sustained communal bonds among the living.

CHAPTER V

Ties that Bind: Local Memory and Its Community⁴¹¹

Introduction

In recent years, the topic of Holocaust commemoration during the early postwar decades has received growing attention. Previously, scholars of psychology assumed that collective mourning in the wake of genocide is inevitably delayed. For example, Anna Ornstein argues that there is frequently a delay between a disaster and efforts to memorialize it since the loss must first be “internalized” before it can be expressed through creative “memorial spaces.” For Ornstein, memorials and monuments, “offer opportunities for belated mourning because they are themselves efforts to complete the work of bereavement; they have the power to bring the past into the present in such a way that feelings that have long lain dormant break through and retroactively reshape the present....”⁴¹² While memorials and monuments indeed play an important role in collective mourning after the Holocaust, scholars have begun to question narratives of belatedness.

⁴¹¹ A map of geographic locations mentioned in this chapter is available at: https://drive.google.com/open?id=1SNpKOhA3_6JSqujDW-6w1YcE680&usp=sharing. Note that the spelling may differ from the convention used here.

⁴¹² Ornstein, 636.

Undoubtedly, early Holocaust commemoration differed in form and scale from the memorial culture—large, public monuments, Hollywood movies, comprehensive educational programs, etc.—that has crystalized since the 1970s. Yet, if we broaden our view of what constitutes commemoration, a new picture of mourning in the early postwar decades begins to emerge. In recent years, revisionist historians have convincingly challenged previous assumptions that the American and Israeli Jewish communities failed to commemorate the Holocaust until the Eichmann Trial reignited memories of the Holocaust and Israel’s triumph in the Six Day War brought a burst of renewed Jewish confidence. Hasia Diner’s 2009 book, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962*, demonstrates that American Jewry established a vibrant memorial culture in the early postwar decades centered on performances, liturgies, fundraisers, etc. rather than architectural landmarks. She argues that this culture became an integral component of American Jewish public life even if it had not yet achieved recognition on a national level. In a similar fashion, Judith Tydor Baumel overturns the myth of survivors’ commemorative silence in the Israeli context. While the Holocaust was undeniably marginal in the emerging Israeli national ethos, it was alive and well in the popular culture of Jews who emigrated from Europe in the 1930s and after the Second World War. She emphasizes the vital role that memorial books played in Israelis’ Holocaust commemoration from the mid-1940s through the 1970s. While monuments, memorial stones, and commemorative inscriptions also began to appear in Israel during this early period, the difficulty of accessing victims’ remains made textual memorials the dominant form of commemorative activity until the Israeli state eventually began to embrace Holocaust memorialization and integrate it into the national narrative.⁴¹³

⁴¹³ See Judith Tydor Baumel, “In Everlasting Memory.” For more information on early Holocaust commemoration, including commemorations within DP camps, see David Cesarani and Eric J. Sundquist, eds., *After*

Like the United States and Israel, the Soviet Union was also reluctant to integrate the history of the Holocaust into its national discourse. Furthermore, like survivors in Israel, the United States, and elsewhere, Soviet Jews have been accused of commemorative “silence”—albeit, for very different reasons. In light of the Soviet Union’s repressive policies toward Jewish national expression and communal life, scholars have struggled to locate and conceptualize an autonomous, Soviet Jewish civil society. However, the history of Soviet policy toward Jewish commemoration is, in fact, quite complex, as is the story of Soviet Jews’ commemorative efforts.

Despite periodic references to Nazi brutality against Jews in Soviet film, photography, and literature,⁴¹⁴ the universalized narrative of the Great Patriotic War emphasized heroic death over civilian tragedy and Soviet unity over the specificity of Jewish wartime losses. We should not underestimate the degree to which this official, legitimizing myth genuinely resonated with many important aspects of Soviet Jews’ wartime experience, including their service in the Red Army and partisans. Nevertheless, the state’s hagiographic narrative did obscure Soviet Jews’ distinct, calamitous experiences during the Axis occupation. In response, a significant number of Soviet Jews made immediate and persistent efforts to construct Holocaust monuments and to conduct memorial ceremonies at the sites where their relatives had been murdered. Rather than agitating for the inclusion of Jewish experiences in the Soviet national narrative, Soviet Jews forged an autonomous memorial culture centered on local landscapes, experiences, and networks. In many respects, these public, communal commemorations anticipated the memorial

the Holocaust.

⁴¹⁴ A series of recent studies have demonstrated that, far from being silenced, the Holocaust appeared regularly in Soviet cultural life, within certain ideological limitations. See Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*; Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*; Harriet Murav, and G. Èstraïkh, eds, *Soviet Jews and World War II*; David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*.

culture of public monuments and commemorative ceremonies that would emerge in the West from the 1970s onwards.

In large part, the early emergence of Holocaust monuments in the Soviet context was a function of the landscape that greeted survivors as they returned home. Unlike survivor-refugees in Israel and the United States, survivors in the Soviet Union had direct access to the mass graves where their loved ones had been murdered. This naturally turned their commemorative efforts toward the physical landscape—the care of mass graves, the construction of monuments, and the conduct of memorial gatherings at these sites.

This chapter examines the distinctive commemorative culture of Jewish survivors in Belarus and Ukraine that emerged around the sites of mass grave. On the one hand, bureaucratic roadblocks and legal gray zones greatly complicated the efforts of Jewish communities to construct monuments and conduct ceremonies. Limitations on Jewish national expression also curtailed explicit references to the uniquely Jewish tragedy of the Holocaust. On the other hand, as we will see in this chapter and the next, Soviet Jews successfully carved out memorial opportunities parallel to Great Patriotic War commemorations. In doing so, they produced a commemorative culture that sustained, or even revitalized, the associational life of otherwise crumbling communities. Thus, I find a symbiotic relationship between mourning and rebuilding—death and a form of resurrection. While this story certainly puts to rest narratives of Soviet Jews’ wholesale “assimilation” and “silence,” it also broadens our understanding of Soviet Jewish associational life and political activism during the latter Soviet decades. By focusing on provincial communities of Soviet Belarus and Ukraine—the heartland of the former Pale of Settlement and the landscape most heavily devastated by Nazi atrocities—we discover

patterns of postwar Jewish communal life that were in tension, yet not in direct conflict, with Soviet mores.

The exact contours of commemorative activities were unique to each locale. Thus, this chapter is structured around local case studies that reveal regional variations as well as overarching commemorative patterns. Many of these stories highlight the role of individual survivors in initiating commemorative efforts and the role of communal networks in bringing these projects to fruition. Together, these sources reveal the history of a commemorative culture as it emerged around mass killing sites in Belarus and Ukraine, including its textual, material, and ritual aspects. In this effort, I trace the history of monuments' appearance and disappearance;⁴¹⁵ their role as gathering places; and the constraints imposed by financial considerations, local authorities, and self-censorship.

Past Precedents

Many aspects of the Holocaust were entirely unprecedented and bore little resemblance to the kinds of death that traditional Jewish rituals were equipped to commemorate. The scale and methods⁴¹⁶ of mass killing meant that individual remains could rarely be identified. Furthermore, Holocaust events were firmly embedded in secular time. Dates associated with the establishment of ghettos, ghetto liquidations, mass shootings, etc. were remembered with primary reference to

⁴¹⁵ Many of the earliest monuments were built of wood and rotted away within a decade. Numerous other monuments have suffered vandalism, alteration, and demolition—primarily by Soviet authorities, but most recently by international Jewish organizations working to install more explicitly “Jewish” commemorative markers. While these efforts have largely been welcomed by the local Jewish communities, they have also done much to erase the Soviet-era commemorative landscape and supplanted local commemorative practices. This has greatly complicated the task of understanding how Soviet Jews mourned the Holocaust from the 1940s through the early 1990s.

⁴¹⁶ Including mass shootings and gassings. Other examples could include death in a ghetto or a concentration camp due to poor sanitation and disease, death in hiding or while serving in the partisans or Red Army.

the Gregorian calendar. Hebrew dates, if mentioned at all, were secondary, unless the secular date coincided with a major Jewish holiday. Thus, it was not entirely natural to incorporate Holocaust deaths into the traditional Jewish calendar of *yortzeits* and *yizkor* services.

On a spatial level, while some Nazi mass shootings did take place in Jewish synagogues and cemeteries, the Holocaust brought previously unremarkable fields, forests, rivers, ditches, and street corners into the Jewish mourning landscape. The novelty of these deaths required creative mourning strategies that were not necessarily bound to religious symbols and rituals. As a result, Holocaust commemoration empowered secular Jews to create and participate in Jewish communal life in ways that they could not (or would not) have in Jewish cemeteries or synagogues, whether due to state surveillance or a sense of alienation from traditional mourning rituals. The sheer novelty of these sites made them ideal spaces for new forms of Jewish associational life to emerge at a time when the Soviet government was actively curtailing traditional models of Jewish communal life.

Despite these novel aspects, the mass atrocities of the Holocaust were not completely unprecedented in the history of European Jewry, and Soviet Jews had previous mourning experiences on which to draw. Since the 1880s, catastrophic pogroms had swept through the former Pale of Settlement with increasing frequency and severity. While early pogroms had relatively low death tolls, pogroms in the 1910s and 1920s saw much higher death rates, climbing into the tens of thousands. The way in which Jewish communities conducted mass burials and commemorated pogrom victims in the pre-Holocaust era set important precedents for similar efforts in the post-Holocaust era.

Numerous photographs of pogrom victims awaiting burial have survived from the 1920s and earlier. In some respects, their corpses were cared for in ways consistent with traditional

Jewish burial practices. For example, the corpses were often laid out on the ground prior to burial in keeping with the traditional practice of moving the deceased to the ground immediately after death and leaving them there until burial.⁴¹⁷ The custom of leaving a lit candle at the head of the deceased prior to burial also appears in photographs relatively frequently.⁴¹⁸ Although these particular practices were impossible to maintain during the chaos of the Holocaust and were ill-suited for post-Holocaust commemorative efforts, Soviet Jews would also incorporate aspects of traditional Jewish burial culture, especially in the construction of early monuments.

Pogrom and Holocaust commemoration also departed from standard burial practices in many respects due to the scale and nature of the deaths inflicted. For example, virtually all images of pogrom victims prior to burial show their bodies laid out for public view, with either their faces or entire bodies exposed. This stands in stark contrast to traditional Jewish taboos that require the body to be shielded from view by a combination of shrouds, blankets, or coffins. In the case of pogrom victims, the practice of leaving the bodies exposed was adopted in order to

⁴¹⁷ For example, one photograph shows an elderly man who was killed in a May 1919 pogrom in Cherkasy, Ukraine. He is laid out on the ground in the local Jewish cemetery awaiting burial. (YIVO People of a Thousand Towns Online Photographic Catalog, record ID 4447, collection ET, catalog no. 54821). Another photograph from Dnipropetrovs'k, ca. 1905, shows a row of child pogrom victims, most dressed for burial, lying on a wooden floor (YIVO People of a Thousand Towns Online Photographic Catalog, record ID 3685, collection R1, catalog no. YEKATER 6).

⁴¹⁸ In one image from 1905 in Dnipropetrovs'k, a row of pogrom victims lies in a room awaiting burial. Rather than a candle for each body though, two candles stand evenly spaced within the row. (YIVO People of a Thousand Towns Online Photographic Catalog, record ID 3683, collection R1, catalog no. YEKATER 4). In another image from Zhytomyr, ca. 1919-1920, numerous taper candles are burning next to a row of pogrom victims. (YIVO People of a Thousand Towns Online Photographic Catalog, record ID 4428, collection ET, catalog no. 54739).

allow relatives and friends to identify the dead⁴¹⁹--a practice that became common even among religious Jews. There are numerous images of deceased religious Jews, with beards and *tallesim*,⁴²⁰ whose faces remained uncovered prior to burial.⁴²¹ The practice of leaving the victims' faces open also served as a political statement, defying the anonymity of victimhood. During the pogroms, socialist and Zionist political organizations played a crucial role in organizing self-defense units, and they also took an active role in burial proceedings for their fallen comrades. It became quite common to take group photographs of the living with the dead with banners either placed across the deceased or towering above the living. Such banners served as temporary gravestones, and through the platform of photography, they were transmitted around the world as postcards. Indeed, these images traveled quite rapidly to Western Europe and the United States where they were used for fundraising.⁴²² As these examples show, in the wake of mass murder, some traditional mourning models are applied to novel circumstances

⁴¹⁹ See YIVO People of a Thousand Towns Online Photographic Catalog, record ID 3444, collection R1, catalog no. UKRAIN 16. The image shows a line of corpses, seemingly in a courtyard, with survivors standing on either side of the row. The caption reads "Jews come to identify their dead." A photograph taken after the 1905 pogrom in Odesa shows the bodies of the victims laid out in the cemetery with their faces uncovered. They have been placed in front of the ritual building/morgue and are awaiting burial. Their relatives are circulating among the bodies to identify them (USHMM Photograph 27067). Surprisingly, this lack of concern for covering the dead, almost universally, continued up until burial. For example, a photograph taken between February and April 1919 in Ivankiv (Kyiv Oblast, Ukraine) shows a gathering of young men and women at the Jewish cemetery. They are standing around the body of a young man who died during a pogrom. He is laid out on a stretcher in regular clothing, covered from the waist down in a white sheet but with his arms and face open (YIVO People of a Thousand Towns Online Photographic Catalog, record ID 4403, collection ET, catalog no. 54586).

⁴²⁰ Prayer shawls.

⁴²¹ E.g. YIVO People of a Thousand Towns Online Photographic Catalog, record ID 4439, collection ET, catalog no. 54798. See also Record ID 961, collection R1, catalog no. ODESSA 5; Record ID 3443, collection R1, catalog no. UKRAIN 15; Record ID 964, collection R1, catalog no. ODESSA 8.

⁴²² In this context, the banners served both as captions for the image and as appeals for aid. See YIVO People of a Thousand Towns Online Photographic Catalog, record ID 976, collection R1, catalog no. ODESSA 18. USHMM Photo 87643. YIVO People of a Thousand Towns Online Photographic Catalog, record ID 1240, collection R1, catalog no. RUSS 28. YIVO People of a Thousand Towns Online Photographic Catalog, record ID 660, collection R1, catalog no. GOMEL 1. Another image (record ID 1156, collection R1, catalog no. UKRAIN 5) appeared on the back of a French handbill produced by the International Anti-Pogrom League.

while others are supplanted by practical necessities or emotional imperatives that reflect the Jewish community's response to unprecedented disaster.

Undeniably, the post-Holocaust reality differed significantly in the degree of destruction that had been wrought. Only a small percentage of survivors remained. While many returned home to seek out the bodies of their relatives, others did not (or could not) return due to shifting borders, emotional distress, economic privation, etc. Of those who returned from hiding, military service, or evacuation, many were unable to locate their loved ones' gravesites due to the remoteness of many killing sites, the lack of grave markers, and a number of other complicating factors. Unlike pre-war pogroms, most survivors had not been present in their hometowns during the mass shootings, leaving them reliant on the testimonies of non-Jewish neighbors to locate graves. For these reasons and many others, the post-Holocaust burial landscape and the commemorative practices that emerged around it remain unique, even if there are certain echoes of traditional Jewish burial culture and previous responses to mass violence.

The degree of influence that past precedents could exert on post-Holocaust commemoration depended heavily on the Soviet context—the opportunities and limitations it offered. Well before the pogroms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jewish communities across Europe had developed *yizkorbikher*⁴²³—memory books dedicated to documenting the history of individual shtetls and their inhabitants. Generally, these books were written in the wake of mass violence and destruction and often included the names of the victims. This memorial genre first appeared in response to the massacre of Jewish communities in the Rhineland during the First Crusade. The books were read aloud in synagogues on Shabbat Hazon before Tisha b'Av, during the four annual *yizkor* services, and on the anniversaries of

⁴²³ Also referred to as *yizkerbikher* or *memorbuecher*. These are closely related to the genre of *pinkas kehilot*, communal record books. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

local tragedies during the Crusades.⁴²⁴ After the First World War and the Russian Civil War, survivors revived the genre to commemorate the victims of the deadly pogroms that had claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Jews.⁴²⁵ In the decades following the Holocaust, *yizkorbikher* were among the earliest and most popular commemorative forms among survivor emigres in Western Europe, Israel, and the Americas.⁴²⁶ Although post-Holocaust *yizkorbikher* have not attained the same liturgical significance as their pre-modern counterparts, they serve a similar role in commemorating individual deaths and the destruction of entire communities. Compiled from survivors' memories and family photographs, these published and unpublished volumes served as portable, symbolic monuments in the early postwar decades at a time when public Holocaust monuments were largely absent in Western Europe, Israel, and the United States.⁴²⁷ Unlike public monuments, *yizkorbikher* were not designed to draw broader public attention to the history of the Holocaust. Instead, they were written by survivors, primarily in Yiddish and Hebrew, and were intended for an internal audience of fellow survivors.

⁴²⁴ See JTS, *From This World to the Next*, 96.

⁴²⁵ All of the *yizkorbikher* that I'm aware of from this period were published by immigrants who left their hometowns in the wake of the destruction. E.g. *Khurbn Proskurov: tsum ondenken fun di heylige neshomes vos zaynen umgekumen in der shreklikher shkhite, vos iz ongefirt gevoren durkh di haydamakes*. See also, *Yizkor dem ondeynken Zhitomirer kdoyshim*.

⁴²⁶ See Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden*, 1-19. Baumel, "In Everlasting Memory," 150-154.

⁴²⁷ There are, of course, exceptions. In Israel, the first public Holocaust memorial was built in Tel Aviv in 1947 by the Zdonska-Wolla *landsmanschaft*. Members held a burial service for a bag of ashes from the *Chelmno* extermination camp and later erected a marble gravestone. Nevertheless, public Holocaust monuments remained quite rare in Israel and elsewhere until the 1960s. Baumel, 155. See also James Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 7.

In the Soviet Union, with few exceptions, *yizkorbikher* did not experience the same post-Holocaust popularity as in other parts of the world.⁴²⁸ In large part, this was due to the postwar political climate that suppressed Jewish communal institutions during the Anti-Cosmopolitan Campaign and severely censored public expressions of Jewish grief. State control over presses prevented the sort of self-publishing that became the hallmark of *yizkorbikher* in Israel and the United States. On a more fundamental level, because Soviet survivors had direct access to the mass graves where their relatives were buried, their commemorative focus naturally fell on the physical landscape rather than print culture. As survivors returned to their hometowns from evacuation or service in the Red Army, they immediately turned to the construction of monuments and the organization of commemorative ceremonies—memorial activities that would persist throughout the postwar Soviet period.

Barriers and Resistance to Commemoration

In the years following the war, Jewish communities across the Soviet Union submitted petitions to open memorials or to otherwise mark mass graves. Sometimes local administrators were sympathetic, particularly in the Baltic countries.⁴²⁹ Jews in Belarus also enjoyed some latitude for commemorative action, as evidenced by the construction of monuments in Minsk, Rechitsa, Glubokoe, and other towns. As time went on, Soviet authorities increasingly resisted the involvement of private individuals and religious communities at mass graves. Yet, such

⁴²⁸ One notable exception was Ehrenburg's *Black Book* project. Also, according to Mordechai Altshuler, "In 1946, the L'viv (*Lwów*) community began to gather survivors' testimonies and planned to publish this material in 1947. [Around the same time,] The Vinnitsa [Vinnitsia] community asked the municipality of that town for permission to publish a book with the names of Jewish townspeople whom the Nazis had murdered" (Altshuler, "Jewish Holocaust Commemoration," 274). However, due to the political climate at the time, these projects did not come to fruition.

⁴²⁹ See Altshuler, "Jewish Holocaust Commemoration," 279-80.

involvement was often a response to the authorities' neglect of these graves. A 1947 CARC report from Moscow regarding cemetery maintenance acknowledges that mass graves were legally problematic since, unlike cemeteries, they fell outside the jurisdiction of local authorities.⁴³⁰ In this legal no-man's land, local *gorsovety* had no incentive to care for these sites, and in most cases, left them untended and unmarked. As a result, survivor testimonies mention that these sites were often covered in litter and frequently became targets for vandalism and grave robbery. Small wonder, then, that local Jewish communities assumed responsibility for these sites, even if they were technically public property.

Soviet authorities were also uneasy about the potential of these graves to become pilgrimage sites for a particular nationality. In many locales, the Nazi occupiers had shot Soviet POWs, partisans, Roma, and other nationalities in the same mass graves where they had shot Jews. Soviet administrators used this fact to demand that monuments at mass graves should be strictly universal—dedicated to “peaceful residents” or “Soviet citizens,” even if the overwhelming majority of those interred at a particular site were Jews. For example, in November 1946 the CARC Commissioner of the Odesa Oblast wrote to the Deputy Commissioner of CARC UkSSR to report that the Odesan Jewish religious community had requested permission to hold a public funeral ceremony on 10 December in memory of the Jews who had been burned alive and shot (December 1940-January 1941) in the Bogdanovka concentration camp during the German-Romanian occupation. The Odesan commissioner requested that the community's petition be rejected since Jews had not been the only victims killed in Bogdanovka. Furthermore, the mention of such funeral ceremonies in the press would

⁴³⁰ NARB f. 952, op. 1, d. 7, l. 5-6. CAHJP RU 1853.

be “undesirable.”⁴³¹ Similar official concerns regarding the perceived expression of ethno-religious particularism remained prevalent throughout the postwar Soviet era. Nevertheless, local officials played an ambivalent role in the construction of monuments and conduct of memorial ceremonies.

In the earliest postwar years, local officials were sometimes quite supportive until regional and republic-level officials reprimanded them, beginning around 1947. This shift occurred even before the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and continued to solidify in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Rather than reflecting international affairs, the state’s changing attitudes were far more reflective of domestic Soviet priorities. In 1947, Victory Day was demoted from its status as a national holiday, and it would remain a regular workday in the Soviet Union until 1965. As Lisa Kirschenbaum and Nancy Wingfield explain, “In the immediate post-war years, the cults of wartime heroes faded or were suppressed in the Soviet Union. The Stalinist state worked to quash the self-reliance and emphasis on personal motivations and attachments that had characterized wartime propaganda.”⁴³² Thus, the period of legitimacy for even tightly-controlled forms of public Holocaust commemoration spanned only from 1944 through 1946.⁴³³

During this brief window of opportunity, in Ternopil’ (Ternopil’ Oblast, Ukraine), Rabbi Kleiner organized a fundraising campaign within the local Jewish community. The funds were used to tidy up the mass grave where the Jews of Ternopil’ had been shot during the war and to construct a monument at the site. The resulting monument’s inscription was bilingual, with

⁴³¹ TsDAGOU f. 4648, op. 2, d. 17, l. 57. Accessed at the CAHJP RU 1884.

⁴³² Kirschenbaum and Wingfield, “Gender and the Construction of Wartime Heroism,” 471.

⁴³³ From 1947 on, Soviet synagogues no longer held special memorial services, although this certainly did not prevent them from reciting *El Moleh Rachamim* during *yizkor* services on Yom Kippur and other major holidays. See Altshuler, “Jewish Holocaust Commemoration,” 279.

Hebrew and Russian. No photographs of the memorial have survived, but archival documents reveal that the Russian inscription read “Eternal memory and glory to the Jews who fell at the hands of the German fascists.” Rabbi Kleiner organized an unveiling ceremony at the monument with the participation of local municipal officials, including the secretary of the *gorkom*⁴³⁴ and the representative of the Ternopil’ *gorsovet*.⁴³⁵ However, Rabbi Kleiner’s activities and the participation of local officials soon drew the attention of Vil’khovoi, the CARC Commissioner for the UkSSR. In a report from 25 July 1947, Vil’khovoi laments that “nationalistic tendencies” have become quite pronounced around mass graves. He emphasizes that these sites hold the remains of “patriots of our homeland who were tortured by the German fascists,” and, furthermore, these graves contain religious as well as non-religious members of various nationalities. He thus asserts that the Jewish religious community should not be involved in the commemoration of such graves. Vil’khovoi continues by denouncing Rabbi Kleiner’s efforts as manifestations of nationalistic activism.⁴³⁶ This 1947 memorandum exemplifies the Soviet authorities’ sharp turn away from permitting Jewish commemorative activities toward viewing such efforts as manifestations of Jewish nationalism, particularly when religious clergy and organizations were involved.

Fundraising campaigns deepened suspicions toward Jewish commemorative efforts. In Dnipro (Dnipropetrovs’k Oblast, Ukraine), the head of the Jewish community received permission from the regional authorities to host a fundraising concert for the construction of a monument at a Jewish mass grave. In a 1949 report, the head of CARC in Moscow, Polianskii,

⁴³⁴ City committee.

⁴³⁵ GARF f. 6991, op. 3, d. 61, l. 160. CAHJP RU 1801.

⁴³⁶ TsDAGOU f. 1, op. 23, d. 4556, l. 129-134. CAHJP RU 1941.

complained that Jewish communities were undertaking charitable activities with nationalistic motives. In this report, he specifically cites the Dnipro community's fundraising efforts.⁴³⁷ In response, in 1950, Vil'khovyi condemned the Dnipro Jewish community for its supposedly nationalist, Zionist activity.⁴³⁸ As discussed in the previous chapter, whenever Jewish commemorative efforts involved financial transactions, Soviet officials quickly sounded alarms regarding "Jewish nationalism" and "profiteering," especially since commemorative activities had the potential to attract otherwise secular Jews to religious communities. In Rostov-na-Donu (Rostov Oblast, Russia), between 1944 and 1948, the religious Jewish community held annual memorial services at the site where 18,000 individuals had been shot on 11 August 1942. These enjoyed official support from the local authorities and attracted over 3,000 participants. However, in 1949, the authorities abruptly refused permission for the ceremony on the grounds that both religious and non-religious Jews had been invited to participate.⁴³⁹ This change in local climate reflects the ongoing pressure against religious Jewish communities in the late 1940s to limit their sphere of influence and the range of activities in which they could be involved.

In response, leaders of religious Jewish communities soon ceased visible involvement in commemorative efforts, and memorial ceremonies abandoned explicitly religious overtones.⁴⁴⁰ Instead, nebulous, informal Jewish communal groups and Jewish individuals assumed leadership over these projects, thereby sidestepping CARC's surveillance and legal jurisdiction. These new

⁴³⁷ GARF f. 6991, op. 3, d. 61, l. 55.

⁴³⁸ GARF f. 6991, op. 3, d. 66, l. 164-5.

⁴³⁹ GARF f. 6991, op. 3, d. 75, l. 76-81. At least in 1949, the ceremony seems to have continued as scheduled, even without official permission.

⁴⁴⁰ One of few exceptions was the Vitebsk Jewish religious community's 1963 petition to rent a private home where members could hold a memorial ceremony for their relatives who had died in the war. NARB f. 952, op. 3, d. 36, l. 320-1.

commemorative activists continued to erect monuments and conduct memorial ceremonies, generally without obtaining (or even requesting) official permission.

In some instances, Soviet efforts to discourage Jewish commemorative efforts veered into the realm of outright defacement and desecration. A September 1959 report in *The New Leader*, notes that “In Baranovich [Baranovichi, Brest Oblast, Belarus], a memorial erected to 4,000 Jewish victims of the Nazis has been destroyed. A public lavatory has been built in its place. [...] In Minsk... Jewish inscriptions have been effaced from a memorial in the former ghetto, which, with its inhabitants, was destroyed by the Nazis.”⁴⁴¹ Although it is unclear from the report who was responsible for these attacks, the political context of the time makes it clear that they were conducted with state approval—either explicit or implicit. In Kamen’ (Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus), 177 Jewish residents of the village had been shot on the road to Lake Ladosno on 17 September 1941. Energized by the 25th anniversary of the shooting, in 1967, Jewish survivors paid for the construction of a granite monument at the site.⁴⁴² It was engraved with a six-pointed Star of David and an inscription that read, “Comrades, bare your heads to the memory of those who perished. Beneath this mound rest 177 peaceful Soviet Jewish residents of the town of Kamen’ who were brutally shot by the fascist executioners on 17 September 1941. Eternal memory to them.”⁴⁴³ Local residents and relatives of the victims from across the Soviet Union gathered to attend the monument’s unveiling. In an unusual move, the *oblispolkom*⁴⁴⁴ had authorized the project, though none of the officials attended the ceremony.

⁴⁴¹ AJHS P-899, box 3, folder 4, “Jewish in the Soviet Union: Special Report” *The New Leader*, 14 Sep 1959, 25.

⁴⁴² The monument was designed by Iosif Reitman, a construction engineer from Leningrad whose relatives had been murdered in Kamen’.

⁴⁴³ Amosova, *Lepel’*, 91.

⁴⁴⁴ Oblast executive committee.

Approximately a year later, Girsh Raikhel's son, whose father had played an active role in tending to the Kamen' mass gravesite since the family's return from evacuation in 1947, was summoned to the local *oblispolkom*. The same official who had authorized the monument's construction informed Girsh that the *oblispolkom* would like to assign the local school the task of maintaining the memorial. However, this guarantee of upkeep was offered on the condition that the Jewish community would agree to remove the word "Jewish" from the monument and change the "Zionist" six-pointed star to a Soviet, five-pointed star.⁴⁴⁵ Girsh categorically refused to make the requested changes. The following spring when he went to visit the monument, he found that the changes had been made anyway, undoubtedly by the *oblispolkom*.⁴⁴⁶ As we can see from the history of Kamen's monument, the physical integrity of these grave markers was contentious and volatile. More generally, the legal status of Jewish mass graves and commemorative efforts was ambiguous and unstable, leaving monuments and other commemorative efforts at the mercy of local officials' whims. With mixed success, Soviet Jews adopted a wide variety of strategies—from deliberate avoidance, to tireless lobbying, to outright defiance—in an effort to maintain mass graves, construct monuments, and conduct memorial ceremonies.

⁴⁴⁵ Such compulsory alterations were quite common. In Bolhrad (Odesa Oblast, Ukraine), a memorial in the old Jewish cemetery where 126 Jews had been shot on 2 September 1941 was erected in the 1950s. It originally featured a six-pointed star. Just above it though, a five-pointed star seems to have been added later. In Kiliia (Odesa Oblast, Ukraine) a monument at the Jewish cemetery where roughly 300 Jews were shot was also erected in the 1950s. The bottom leg of the original six-pointed star was later removed. See Kozlenko and Gorshkov, *Geografii Katastrofy*, n.p. These examples are purely illustrative. They are not intended to suggest that the imposition of five-pointed stars was more common in the Odesa Oblast.

⁴⁴⁶ Girsh Raikhel's son, "Iskalechennyi pamiatnik," Moe Mestechko Project, May 2009, <http://shtetle.co.il/Shtetls/kamen/kamen.html>.

Survivors Return and Remember in the Early Postwar Years

The earliest commemorative efforts in the Soviet Union were initiated by survivors themselves, who fell into three groups. First, there were survivors who returned to their hometowns briefly but soon left the Soviet Union. These were primarily *zapadniki*—Jews from the western regions of Belarus and Ukraine had been annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939—who were permitted to repatriate to Poland between 1944 and 1946.⁴⁴⁷ Second, there were survivors who chose not to return to their hometowns and, instead, settled elsewhere within the Soviet Union, often in the provincial cities of their native oblasts. Despite their geographic separation, many of these survivors visited their hometowns frequently and were active in commemorative efforts. The third group of survivors were those who chose to rebuild their lives in their hometowns. This group also played a vital role in commemorative efforts, although, thanks to outward migration and the gradual death of the elderly, by the 1980s, many formerly Jewish shtetls had no remaining Jewish residents.⁴⁴⁸ Survivors in each of these three categories returned to their hometowns in the early postwar years, whether briefly or permanently, to search for the graves of their loved ones and to connect with fellow survivors. As a result, all three groups played a significant role in the earliest commemorative efforts.

For those who decided to leave the Soviet Union shortly after liberation, several factors influenced their decision. Many took advantage of this opportunity as a stepping stone to immigration to Palestine or the United States. However, we also cannot overlook psychological motivations for this emigration as well. As Chaïke Koltun-Pozner explains, she “and a few more

⁴⁴⁷ Their counterparts from Eastern Belarus and Ukraine are referred to as *vostochniki*.

⁴⁴⁸ For example, in 1985, only one Jewish resident remained in Ianovichi (Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus). See USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 15, Ianovichi, 231.

Jews from Liuboml' (Volyn Oblast, Ukraine) came back, but none of us stayed there, loath to live in a place soaked with the blood of our nearest and dearest ones!"⁴⁴⁹ Dovid Melamed, who served in the Red Army in the Far East during the war, also returned to Liuboml', but only briefly: "I tried to make a home there and create a new life for myself together with the small remnant of our former Jewish community; but I found it almost impossible to live where the very air breathed of the fresh deaths of all those who were near and dear to me. We therefore left our once-dear Libivne [Liuboml'] and emigrated to Israel."⁴⁵⁰ In emigrating, these survivors permanently left behind the graves of their relatives—both those that had died before the war and those that perished during the Holocaust.

The unbearable anguish of rebuilding life next to mass graves also prompted migration within the Soviet Union. Dora Meerovna Fel'd, who was born in 1920 in Baranovichy (then part of Poland, now Brest Oblast, Belarus), returned to her hometown shortly after the war. She quickly determined that she couldn't remain in Baranovichy because "Every home, every corner reminded me of those who had been tortured and killed." As a *zapadnik*, Fel'd had the right to repatriate to Poland, yet she chose to settle in Birobidzhan instead.⁴⁵¹ Internal migration, by both *zapadniki* and Jews from the older regions of the Soviet Union, was often an escape from the tragic past, but just as frequently, such migration was driven by the need to secure housing, food, and employment in the desperate economic conditions of the late 1940s. Such opportunities were more readily available in district and oblast centers than in small towns and villages.

⁴⁴⁹ Sobel, 303.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, 344.

⁴⁵¹ B.P. Sherman, *Baranovichskoe getto*, 29.

In the early postwar years, survivors—both those who remained in the Soviet Union and those who soon emigrated—played an active role in organizing commemorative ceremonies as well as cleaning and marking mass graves. They did so as individuals along with fractured networks of surviving family members and *landslayt*.⁴⁵² Chayim Rozenblit, a religious survivor who fled the Liuboml' ghetto, returned to the town on 22 June 1944, “First of all I made a pilgrimage to my mother’s grave [in the ghetto]. The grave was already covered with grass. After spending about an hour there, I went back to town.” That evening, he met a few other Jewish survivors to share their wartime experiences. At the end of the evening, they decided to visit the mass grave near the brick factory in the nearby village of Birky:

The next morning all of us went there. A horrid scene met our eyes. The graves were filled with garbage. The gentiles had made the place a garbage dump. Cows grazed there. We immediately appealed to the Soviet authorities to forbid any encroachment on this holy place. They agreed and even offered to fence the place in. But we did not wait for their help. We raised funds among the *shearit hapleyata* (survivors). We bought some wooden posts and wire and fenced in the mass grave. We also put up a tombstone and made a gate.⁴⁵³

Another survivor, Baruch Milch, emerged from hiding after the war and returned to his hometown of Tovste (Ternopil' Oblast, Ukraine). Like Chayim and Etunia, Baruch’s first priority was to return home in search of fellow survivors and his family’s graves:

I went to the cemetery. Most of the tombstones were still in place, including that of the mother of Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov. The mass graves [where 2,000-3,000 Jews had been murdered by the Nazis in May 1943 in the cemetery] were particularly conspicuous; the ground in those locations had sunk about half a meter. Human limbs protruded here and there, and Victor, the Gentile cemetery-keeper who still lived in the small house that stood there, helped us cover them.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵² Sing. *landsmen*. Jews who shared a common hometown.

⁴⁵³ Sobel, 259.

⁴⁵⁴ Baruch Milch, *Can Heaven Be Void*, 232.

Baruch and his brother-in-law decided to work as doctors in Tovste and nearby Borshchiv while continuing to search for surviving relatives. However, they soon discovered that they were the sole survivors in the area. Baruch then traveled to Pidhaitsi—a city roughly 100 km northwest of Tovste—where his parents and son had been murdered by the Nazis. Upon arrival, he discovered that the streets had been repaved with stones from the Jewish cemetery.⁴⁵⁵ The next morning, he and several other survivors in Pidhaitsi gathered next to,

a mass grave outside the town to recite public prayers and Kaddish for the victims. There were barely enough Jews for a minyan.... One of the survivors showed me a photograph of the mass grave before it had been filled in. It was difficult to look at the frightful scene, in which body parts of hundreds of people who had been slaughtered there were visible. To the best of my knowledge, this is where my parents were murdered. Now the pit was covered with a shallow layer of fresh soil. It was quiet all around, with neither the rustling of leaves nor the chirping of birds. There was not even a single tree. We took a large sheet of paper and wrote down the history of this mass grave, including the dates. We placed the paper in a bottle and buried it deep in the ground beside the grave.⁴⁵⁶

In Liuboml' and Pidhaitsi, we see an effort to lend a sense of dignity and permanence to the mass graves by filling them in with soil. Liuboml' survivors first sought to demarcate and protect the local mass grave by building a makeshift wooden fence, and only then did they erect a monument. In Pidhaitsi, rather than erecting a visible monument, survivors turned to traditional memorial prayers, including kaddish. They also recorded the history of the site and buried it in a makeshift time capsule next to the grave. Unlike above-ground monuments, this historical marker would remain known only to those survivors who were there that day.

Because survivors were limited by the overwhelming poverty of the early postwar years, basic commemorative strategies—using simple, repurposed materials—were extremely widespread. Commemorative ceremonies and prayers conducted at mass graves never enjoyed

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, 234.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, 241.

official endorsement or recognition. Yet, the state's outright rejection of commemorative efforts in synagogues encouraged survivors to hold less formal memorial gatherings at mass graves—spaces that tended to attract far less official attention, in part due to their ambiguous legal status and, in part, due to the difficulty of maintaining effective surveillance over these sites. In this sense, mass graves were somewhat insulated from the Soviet public sphere. Though Soviet administrators periodically intervened, mass graves proved fertile ground for a nascent Jewish civil society. Early efforts by returning survivors to construct makeshift memorials and hold memorial gatherings at mass graves established a model of commemorative activism that would continue for the rest of the Soviet period and into the present.

Traditional Grave Markers

One of the distinctive features of many early monuments was their similarity to traditional Jewish gravestones. From the early 1950s on, virtually all monuments erected at mass graves resembled Soviet style obelisks and steles, regardless of whether they were erected by Jewish communities or the local Soviet authorities. However, in the early postwar years, many communities integrated more traditional motifs into their commemorative efforts. For example, many monuments drew heavily on the textual conventions of traditional Jewish gravestones. A photograph from Baranovich (Brest Oblast, Belarus) shows 41 survivors at a 1944 memorial ceremony in honor of the three thousand Jews who were murdered in Baranovich on Purim, 4 March 1942. The survivors are pictured standing and sitting around a small Hebrew gravestone that adheres to the conventions of traditional Jewish gravestones. It opens with the peh-nun acronym for “here lie” and closes with the tav-nun-tsadi-bet-hey formulation, expressing a wish

that the souls of those buried there should be “bound in the bonds of life.”⁴⁵⁷ This commemorative marker could easily be mistaken for a regular gravestone in a Jewish cemetery except for the fact that it marks the grave of 3,000 rather than a single individual. The grave’s location at the edge of a ravine and the fact that there are no other graves in sight also betray the gravestone’s untraditional role. Despite the unconventional circumstances surrounding this gravestone, the Jews of Baranovichi turned to their traditional burial culture in their earliest efforts to commemorate friends and relatives who had perished in the Holocaust.

In Sirotino (Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus), the first Holocaust monument was erected in 1946 by Ruvim Masarskii in memory of the 200 Sirotino Jews who had been murdered on 18 November 1941.⁴⁵⁸ Since Masarskii had lost at least five of his relatives in the shooting (including his mother, wife, and children), this was clearly a personal mission for him.⁴⁵⁹ The mass grave was located outside the town, in a sand quarry between Sirotino and the village of Byvalino. Like the memorial in Baranovichi, Masarskii’s minimalistic monument resembled a traditional Jewish gravestone. The inscription opens with a Star of David and the traditional peh-nun acronym. Below, a Hebrew inscription reads, “Our fathers, brothers, and sisters from the city of Sirotino who were killed by the evil Hitler on the 28th day of Mar Cheshvan 5692.” Like the Baranovichi monument, Sirotino’s Hebrew inscription then closes with the traditional acronym

⁴⁵⁷ USHMM Photograph 12422.

⁴⁵⁸ “Testimony of Mikhail Aronovich Beilinson,” USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 12, Sirotino, 4-5. Yad Vashem, “Gniloi Most,” *The Untold Stories: The Murder Sites of the Jews in the Occupied Territories of the Former USSR*, http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/murderSite.asp?site_id=401 (accessed 24 May 2016). Yad Vashem, “Commemoration of Jewish Victims,” *The Untold Stories*, <http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/commemoration.asp?cid=338>, (accessed 24 May 2016). According to Masarskii’s monument, the date of the shooting was 18 November 1941 (Yad Vashem Photograph 3886). According to the Soviet Extraordinary Commission, the shooting occurred on 24 September 1941 (GARF f. 7021, op. 84, d. 12, copy YVA JM/20004).

⁴⁵⁹ Leonid Smilovitsky, “Eternal Monuments.”

for “May their souls be bound in the bonds of life.” Unlike the Baranovichi survivors though, Masarskii also included a Russian inscription beneath the Hebrew one, clearly addressing a broader audience—non-Jews or non-religious Jews, perhaps both. The Russian inscription reads, “Eternal memory to relatives killed at the hands of the fascist executioners! 18 November 1941.”⁴⁶⁰ Finally, in Russian, the monument concludes, “From Masarskii, Ruvim Leizerovich,” indicating who was responsible for constructing the memorial.

There are several noteworthy features of this gravestone. First, in the Hebrew inscription, the words Sirofino and Hitler are spelled according to Yiddish conventions rather than Hebrew ones. Furthermore, the usage of “Mar Cheshvan,” as opposed to simply Cheshvan or Marcheshvan is striking. The correct name of this month in the Hebrew calendar is the topic of much debate, but the traditional consensus is that it is a bitter month—indicated in this gravestone by separating “Mar” [bitter, in Hebrew] from the rest of the month.⁴⁶¹ Of the Marcheshvan gravestones that I have seen in Belarus and Ukraine, the month is normally written simply as “Cheshvan.” Thus, I suspect that Masarskii made a deliberate decision to emphasize the bitterness of the date by writing “Mar Cheshvan” as he did.

Another striking feature of the monument is the difference between the Hebrew and Russian inscriptions. While the Hebrew directly names Hitler, an individual, as responsible for the deaths, the Russian prefers the plural, anonymous (yet vivid) “fascist executioners.” Perhaps these linguistic decisions were made in keeping with two differing cultural narratives of responsibility for atrocity. For traditional Jews, the archetypical narrative of destruction and

⁴⁶⁰ Yad Vashem Photograph 3886/1.

⁴⁶¹ Part of Marcheshvan’s supposed bitterness is its lack of holidays, in comparison with the preceding month of Tishrei. The other bitter association is a midrashic tradition that Sarah, the matriarch of the Jewish people, died in Marcheshvan. See Esther Rabbah 7:13. For more information on the debate over this month’s name, see Rabbi Ari Zivotofsky, “Tzarich Iyun.”

survival—Purim—revolves around the machinations and downfall of one evil individual—Haman. It is a story of spiritual conflict between evil and good, embodied in the characters of Haman, Esther, and Mordechai. In the Soviet context, however, anti-Nazi propaganda railed against fascism—an ideology—and the collective “fascists” that embraced it.⁴⁶² These differing mythologies of destruction seem to be reflected in Masarskii’s language choices, producing a monument that is equally rooted in Jewish and Soviet cultures.

The fact that Masarskii included Hebrew at all is quite remarkable, especially since Sirofino had been under Soviet rule prior to 1939. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Jewish life in Sirofino had deteriorated rapidly. Between 1914 and 1926, the Jewish population shrank from 260 to 181 Jewish families, and by some estimates, approximately 100 Jewish families remained in Sirofino by the beginning of the Second World War. By 1924, the town no longer had a rabbi, and by the 1930s, two of the town’s three synagogues had been closed—one became a Soviet club and the other a fire station.⁴⁶³ Despite these demographic and cultural changes, after the war, Masarskii was still able to calculate the Hebrew date of the massacre and construct a monument with Hebrew engraving. Furthermore, he did so in the belief that these traditional gravestone motifs would be meaningful (and comprehensible) to his fellow survivors. Indeed, the distinction between the Holocaust monuments in the Eastern and Western regions of Belarus and Ukraine is not as pronounced as one might expect, and survivors on both sides of the

⁴⁶² Both wartime propaganda and subsequent Soviet commemoration of the war focused on the defeat of “fascism” and the atrocities committed by the “fascists.” Occasionally the word “Hitlerites” (not Hitler!) would appear in Russian-language monuments. The words “Nazis” and “Nazism” were absent though. Yiddish and Hebrew monuments frequently borrowed the Russian word for “Hitlerites” [*gitlerovtsy*] rather than “fascists,” or simply used the Hebrew version of Hitlerites, *gitlertsim*. Again, keeping the emphasis on Hitler rather than a political ideology.

⁴⁶³ Testimony of Mikhail Aronovich Beilinson,” USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 12, Sirofino, 2-3. Klara Mindlina, “K istorii odnogo pamiatnika.” 134-5.

pre-1939 border drew on traditional Jewish funerary tropes in early efforts to commemorate their loved ones.⁴⁶⁴

The fact that Sirotino's monument includes the name of the individual who erected it is highly unusual for Holocaust monuments. While Soviet and Jewish gravestones in Belarus and Ukraine frequently include dedications, e.g. "from bereaved sons and daughters," both Jewish and non-Jewish monuments at mass graves are generally undated and anonymous. In the case of Holocaust memorials that were built without official permission, no one would want to risk taking responsibility for the project. However, in 1946, the Soviet authorities' hostility toward Holocaust commemorations had not yet been clearly established. Thus, Masarskii may have felt there was nothing to fear by including his name, especially since he was well-renowned for his service in the partisans during the war and became director of the local garment workers' cooperative after the war.⁴⁶⁵ As Soviet policy shifted in the late 1940s, the desire for secrecy and anonymity surrounding commemorative efforts sharply increased.

By 1948, Masarskii's monument had been damaged, and much of the Hebrew inscription was no longer legible.⁴⁶⁶ In an effort to prevent further damage, in the late 1950s, Masarskii constructed a wooden fence around the grave.⁴⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the monument eventually

⁴⁶⁴ This is true at least with regard to the use of Hebrew in inscriptions. Religious ceremonies (or, rather, documentation of their occurrence) are more prominent in the western regions of Belarus and Ukraine, while Yiddish inscriptions appear more frequently in the east.

⁴⁶⁵ Leonid Smilovitsky, "Eternal Monuments."

⁴⁶⁶ Yad Vashem, "Commemoration of Jewish Victims," *The Untold Stories*, <http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/commemoration.asp?cid=338> (12 May 2016).

⁴⁶⁷ A 1957 photograph shows Masarskii and his wife, Nadezhda Mikhailovna standing beside the damaged monument with its wooden fence: http://mishpoha.org/library/08/img/0806_03.jpg (accessed 28 May 2016). Klara Mindlina, "K istorii odnogo pamiatnika," 136.

disappeared, as soon as the early 1960s,⁴⁶⁸ or, according to other accounts by the mid-1970s⁴⁶⁹ or as late as 1991.⁴⁷⁰

In Ivano-Frankivs'k (Ivano-Frankivs'k Oblast, Ukraine), sometime between 1945 and 1947, a small number of survivors erected a similar, bilingual memorial in the city's "new" Jewish cemetery (est. 1927). Over the course of the war, approximately 40,000 Jews had been shot in various mass graves throughout the cemetery,⁴⁷¹ and in 1945, a group of at least 28 survivors exhumed these graves and united them into a single mass grave.⁴⁷² Soon thereafter, the survivors erected a simple grave marker, which seems to have survived into the post-Soviet era.⁴⁷³ Like the memorials in Baranovichi and Sirofino, the grave marker in Ivano-Frankivs'k could easily be mistaken for a traditional Jewish gravestone. The stone is simple with a rounded top. It includes no photographs or special designs. The only feature that distinguishes it from the surrounding gravestones is the inscription. Rather than opening with a Star of David or a peh-nun acronym, the gravestone begins with the Hebrew phrase, "In everlasting memory" and continues with the Hebrew inscription: "Those who are beloved and pleasant in both their lives and deaths are not separated. The pure and upright who were killed for the sanctification of God's name in

⁴⁶⁸ Shul'man, "Istoriia odnogo pamiatnika," <http://mishpoha.org/library/08/0806.php> (accessed 3 Feb 2016).

⁴⁶⁹ "Testimony of Mikhail Aronovich Beilinson," USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 12, Sirofino, 5.

⁴⁷⁰ Smilovitsky, "Eternal Monuments."

⁴⁷¹ See Yad Vashem International Institute for Holocaust Research, "Stanislawow region (until 1939 Poland)," *Online Guide of Murder Sites of Jews in the Former USSR*, [http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/institute/killing_sites_catalog_details_full.asp?region=Stanislawow&title=Stanislawow%20region%20\(until%201939%20Poland](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/institute/killing_sites_catalog_details_full.asp?region=Stanislawow&title=Stanislawow%20region%20(until%201939%20Poland) (accessed 26 July 2016).

⁴⁷² USHMM Photograph #80762. A 1994 map of the cemetery indicates only one, small mass grave. See "Map of the Jewish Cemetery in Ivano Frankivsk (Stanislaw)," <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/stanislawow-cemetery/iva002.html> (accessed 18 July 2016).

⁴⁷³ See Andrzej Polec, *Zapomniani--my Żydzi kresowi*, n.p.

the city of Stanislavov [Ivano-Frankivs'k] at the hands of the murderers, the fascists, and the Hitlerites in the Second World War, 1941 to 1944.”⁴⁷⁴ The first sentence of this Hebrew inscription is a quote from the “*Av ha-rachamim*” [Father of Mercy] prayer in memory of all Jewish martyrs that is recited as part of Shabbat and *yizkor* services.⁴⁷⁵ The biblical source for this traditional declaration is David’s lament in Samuel II 1:23 over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. By including this quote, the community not only linked the deaths of the Holocaust to the longer history of Jewish martyrology, it also seems to have sought a biblical precedent for the death of multiple generations in a single tragedy. Perhaps this verse also spoke to survivors because it affirmed the goodness of the victims and saw their collective death as confirmation of their righteousness. This Hebrew inscription is striking for its deeply religious nature, which unabashedly refers to the victims of the Holocaust as martyrs. Yet, in the same breath, the Hebrew inscription also incorporates the Soviet language of “fascists.” In fact, the forms used for “fascists” and “Hitlerites” are direct transliterations from the Russian “*fashisty*” and “*Hitlerovtsy*” that were incorporated into Hebrew using Yiddish spelling conventions and grammatically integrated as the second half of the grammatical construct [*smichut*] beginning with “*rotschei*” [murderers]. Because there had been so many shootings at the cemetery during the war, the monument makes no attempt to list each of their dates; instead, the monument gives the years that Ivano-Frankovs’k was under occupation. The Russian inscription on the bottom half of the monument is essentially a translation of the Hebrew, though the Russian is

⁴⁷⁴ USHMM Photograph #22656.

⁴⁷⁵ “Father of compassion, who dwells on high: may He remember in His compassion, the pious, the upright and the blameless –holy communities who sacrificed their lives for the sanctification of God’s name. Lovely and pleasant in their lives, in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles and stronger than lions to do the will of their Maker and the desire of their Creator. [....]” Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Sacks Siddur*, 528-9.

grammatically awkward, perhaps reflecting the fact that Ivano-Frankivs'k had been Polish territory prior to 1939.⁴⁷⁶ Given the bilingual format of the stone and the linguistic contortions in each language's inscription, it appears that no one language could convey the grief of the survivors in Ivano-Frankivs'k.

The same quote from the "*Av ha-rachamim*" prayer appeared in one other monument that I'm aware of—in Ozaryntsi (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine). The village came under joint Romanian and German occupation on 20 July 1941. The next day,⁴⁷⁷ the entire Jewish population of the town was rounded up and taken to the local synagogue. From there, a group of 30-70 Jewish men, mostly Bessarabian refugees, were selected "for labor." Instead, they were taken to the Polish cemetery and shot in a ditch.⁴⁷⁸ Soon thereafter, the relatives of the victims transferred their bodies to the local Jewish cemetery, giving them a proper burial. Shortly after Ozaryntsi's liberation on 10 March 1944, the Jewish community erected a large tombstone at the grave.⁴⁷⁹ At the top was a Star of David and the traditional peh-nun acronym. Below follows a Hebrew inscription, again, based on the *Av ha-rachamim* prayer. It reads, "'Beloved and pleasant in life, they are not divided' they were murdered at the hands of the Hitlerites on the 20th of Menachem Av 5701 [1941], and these are their names [souls]...." What follows is a list of names in Hebrew

⁴⁷⁶ The use of Russian and the inclusion of Russian loanwords in the Hebrew suggests that the Jewish community was consciously working to Sovietize itself.

⁴⁷⁷ According to some accounts, on 13 August.

⁴⁷⁸ Testimony of Lev Bondar', survivor from Ozarintsy, USC Shoah Foundation VHA #33675. GARF f. 7021, op. 54, d. 1271, l. 56, 59, copy YVA JM/19690.

⁴⁷⁹ Yad Vashem, "Commemoration of Jewish Victims," *the Untold Stories*, <http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/commemoration.asp?cid=772> (accessed 14 May 2016)

inside the outlines of four gravestones that had been etched into the larger monument. A few names in Russian appear to have been added at a later date.⁴⁸⁰

Although survivors from Ivano-Frankivsk and Ozaryntsi incorporated a conspicuous element of Jewish martyrology into their commemoration efforts, on the whole, such martyrological references are strikingly absent in Soviet Jewish monuments. The most common exceptions are references to the dead as “*kdoshim*,” [holy martyrs].⁴⁸¹ One might expect early Holocaust monuments to feature the Hebrew abbreviation “hey-yud-dalet,” which stands for “May God avenge their blood”—an honorific traditionally reserved for martyrs and victims of anti-Semitism. Given the prevalence of calls for vengeance in both Soviet propaganda and Jewish culture during the war, the absence of this theme in commemorative efforts just a few years later is quite striking.⁴⁸² Perhaps postwar encounters with these mass graves convinced survivors that no revenge could atone for the crimes committed. Or, alternatively, perhaps they felt they had already exacted their revenge against the Germans during the Red Army’s westward march toward Berlin. In either case, martyrological references were greatly outnumbered by other visual and textual borrowings from traditional Jewish gravestones. The persistence of these themes is surprising given pre-war Soviet secularization, the devastation of the Holocaust, and the overwhelming poverty of the early postwar years. While this was hardly the only set of cultural tropes that informed Jewish commemorative efforts, the geographic range and

⁴⁸⁰ Yad Vashem Photograph 6637. See also “Bratskaia mogila,” accessed 6 June 2016, <http://io.ua/24453370p>.

⁴⁸¹ For example, the Yiddish inscription on a monument in Klimovichi (Mogilev Oblast, Belarus) reads, “Here lie buried the victims from Klimovichi who were murdered by the fascist murderers on 6 November 1941. Eternal memory to the holy martyrs [*kdoshim*, spelled in Hebrew]. Tav-nun-tsadi-bet-hey.” Yad Vashem Photograph 2988/13.

⁴⁸² Although still uncommon, the cry for God to avenge the victims’ blood did reappear in some monuments constructed 1990 or later, e.g. in Lakhva (Brest Oblast, Belarus), in Torchyn (Volyn’ Oblast, Ukraine) and Lutsk (Volyn’ Oblast, Ukraine).

persistence of traditional funerary practices are remarkable for the mere fact of their survival and for their ability to adapt to unprecedented tragedy.

Fences and Landscaping

As we saw from Chayim Rozenblit's testimony regarding fencing off the mass grave in Birky (Volyn Oblast, Ukraine), demarcating gravesites was an important commemorative strategy for survivors struggling to protect and preserve their loved ones' memory. Although many of these projects were initially quite makeshift, some communities managed to construct substantial and impressive memorial sites despite the austerity of the early postwar years. In the Vinnytsia Oblast, the vast majority of the Jewish residents of Kalynivka and Pykiv had been shot in four mass graves outside of Kalynivka near the Molotov kolkhoz in late May and June 1942.⁴⁸³ Manya Gayler (b. 1921), a survivor from Kalynivka, returned to her hometown in 1944. When she visited the gravesite, she recalls finding small bones lying on the surface of the grave. Manya soon moved away from Kalynivka, and she recalls that all the other surviving Jews from the town and its surrounding villages also moved away. Nevertheless, they remained in contact with each other and collected funds to erect a monument at the site.⁴⁸⁴ They did not have sufficient funds to construct a separate monument at each of the four mass graves, so, instead, they built a large fence around the entire territory from whitewashed brick obelisks connected by metal

⁴⁸³ Testimony of Simen Gershkovich (b. 1932 in Pykiv), USC Shoah Foundation VHA #2390. "The Jewish Cemetery," http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/murderSite.asp?site_id=614. "The Jewish Cemetery," http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/murderSite.asp?site_id=973. Of a Jewish population of 1,644 in 1926 (Yad Vashem, "Pikov," *The Untold Stories*, <http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/index.asp?cid=504>, accessed 15 May 2016), only about 30 Jews from Pykiv survived the war, whether by serving in the Red Army or by evacuating east. See Testimony of Grigory Gitman (b. 1929 in Pykiv), USC Shoah Foundation VHA #22230.

⁴⁸⁴ YIVO RG 104, series III, box 6, folder 106, testimony by Manya Geyler, 3-4, 24-25. Testimony copied from Yad Vashem, collected in Jerusalem (Jan 1994), testimony number 03/7261, tape number 033C/2940. See also, testimony of Leonid Langerman (b. 1923 in Pykiv), USC Shoah Foundation VHA #18247.

poles. A photograph from 30 May 1946, the anniversary of the first shooting, shows the dedication ceremony at the memorial site with at least 24 survivors of all ages present. On the right side of the gate, the traditional acronym tav-nun-tsadi-bet-hey is inscribed vertically. On the left side, “eternal memory” is engraved in Russian. Across the top of the gate, 30 May 1942 is inscribed with a Hebrew epitaph above.⁴⁸⁵ A metal six-pointed star is perched above the gate. Opposite the gate, at the opposite end of the memorial site, is a large obelisk with a Soviet, five-pointed star at its top.⁴⁸⁶ This monument, and another which is not visible in the photograph, were provided by two Odesan Jews—Frimerman and Eidel’man. Survivors from Pykiv and Kalynivka had contacted them for assistance in constructing a monument since these two men were known for their interest in commemorative efforts after the war. Frimerman and Eidel’man paid for the construction and delivery of two large monuments, one to be erected on the largest Kalynivka grave, and another to stand next to the three smaller graves.⁴⁸⁷

In communities with the necessary resources and connections, large, fenced, memorial complexes such as the one in Kalynivka were not uncommon. In fact, they were quite widespread. For example, immediately after the war, survivors in Inkakliai and Utena, Lithuania constructed memorial complexes very similar to the one in Kalynivka—with fences made of brick obelisks connected by metal poles.⁴⁸⁸ However, many other communities began their commemorative work with far simpler fences and, only later, were able to build more permanent

⁴⁸⁵ Yad Vashem photograph 1515/2.

⁴⁸⁶ Yad Vashem photographs 7233/1, 1515/3, and 1461/2.

⁴⁸⁷ YIVO RG 104 (Eyewitness Accounts of the Holocaust Period), series III, box 6, folder 106, testimony by Manya Geyler, p. 3-4, 24-25. Testimony copied from Yad Vashem. Collected in Jerusalem (Jan 1994), testimony number 03/7261, tape number 033C/2940.

⁴⁸⁸ USHMM Photograph #97653. YIVO RG 120 Lithuania Utian/Utiam 1, RG 120 Lithuania Utian/Utiam 2, USHMM photograph # 38102).

memorial structures. In these cases, makeshift fences played a crucial role in preserving the memory of these sites.

In the Manivtsi forest (Khmel'nits'kyi Oblast, Ukraine), the Jews of Krasyliv, Kuz'myn, Bazaliia, Antoniny, and other nearby towns were murdered in July 1942, on or around the time of Tisha b'Av.⁴⁸⁹ On Yom Kippur (21 September 1942), or, according to some accounts, in August 1942, the Jews of Kul'chyny were also taken to the Manivtsi forest and shot.⁴⁹⁰ In 1944, shortly after liberation, Jewish survivors who returned to the Krasyliv region immediately marked and preserved the graves of their loved ones by erecting crude wooden fences around each of the three mass graves.⁴⁹¹ Within a few years, survivors from Krasyliv and the surrounding area erected a monument at each of the three graves.⁴⁹² The two monuments in the forest were identical—large black obelisks with a Russian inscription “Eternal memory to the victims of fascism. 1942.”⁴⁹³ The third monument, in a field just outside the Manivtsi forest, seems to have been erected at a later point. An August 1984 photograph shows a large, black, trapezoid reminiscent of many Soviet era gravestones. A metal fence encircles the site and demarcates it from the surrounding field.⁴⁹⁴ Later photographs of the first two obelisks suggest that the original

⁴⁸⁹ Yad Vashem, “Manevtsy forest,” *The Untold Stories*, http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/murderSite.asp?site_id=1000 (accessed 28 May 2016).

⁴⁹⁰ Yad Vashem, “Manevtsy Forest,” *The Untold Stories*, http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/murderSite.asp?site_id=225 (accessed 30 May 2016).

⁴⁹¹ Testimony of Leonid Goldenberg, YVA O.48/301.16. Testimony of Sima Slutski (b. 1912 in Kul'chyny), USC Shoah Foundation VHA #30173.

⁴⁹² Testimony of Leonid Goldenberg, YVA O.48/301.16.

⁴⁹³ Yad Vashem, “Commemoration of Jewish Victims,” *The Untold Stories*, <http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/commemoration.asp?cid=247> (accessed 29 June 2016). Yad Vashem, “Commemoration of Jewish Victims,” *The Untold Stories*, <http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/commemoration.asp?cid=753> (accessed 29 June 2016).

⁴⁹⁴ Yad Vashem Photograph 7777/3.

wooden fences disappeared,⁴⁹⁵ but in the presence of permanent grave markers, these fences were no longer crucial to maintaining the memory of these sites. Thanks to the immediate postwar efforts of survivors to mark these three graves, the Manivtsi forest became the site of annual commemorative gatherings for the Jews of Krasyliv and the surrounding villages,⁴⁹⁶ and it seems that the same black monuments are still standing today.⁴⁹⁷ The longevity of these monuments is likely due, at least in part, their non-partisan dedication to the “victims of fascism.” Leonid Goldberg, a survivor from Krasyliv, recalls that, in addition to the Jewish civilians shot in the Manivtsi forest, Soviet POWs were also executed there.⁴⁹⁸ This factor may also explain why the local Jewish community was permitted to mark these sites so explicitly, and why these monuments have survived into the present.

Unlike many Jewish shtetls we have examined, Pryluky (Chernihiv Oblast, Ukraine) was reasonably deep in the Soviet interior, and the German Army did not reach the town until mid-September 1941. This gave a significant number of Jews from Pryluky the chance to evacuate. However, those who remained in Pryluky were forced into a ghetto in early 1942. Mass shootings had begun earlier, in October 1941, but the largest and most famous shooting occurred on 20 May 1942 in a ravine near the Pliskunivka River. Immediately after the war, Jewish survivors returned to Pryluky and fenced off the site with a series of white obelisks connected by

⁴⁹⁵ A photograph from 16 August 1975 shows two elderly women standing next to a large, black monument at one of the two graves in the forest. The monument stands atop a *kurgan* (Yad Vashem Photograph 7777/4). A 1984 photograph shows one of the two, identical monuments in the Manivtsi forest still standing. See Yad Vashem Photograph 7777/1.

⁴⁹⁶ Yad Vashem, “Commemoration of Jewish Victims,” *The Untold Stories*, <http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/commemoration.asp?cid=753> (accessed 29 June 2016)

⁴⁹⁷ Yad Vashem, “Commemoration of Jewish Victims,” *The Untold Stories*, <http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/commemoration.asp?cid=247> (accessed 29 June 2016).

⁴⁹⁸ YVA O.48/301.16.

metal poles, much like the memorial in Kalynivka. Inside the fence, they planted a memorial grove of trees and flowers, which stand out from the otherwise barren landscape of the ravine.⁴⁹⁹ According to the autobiography of Vladimir Entin, a native of Pryluky, the local authorities forbade the construction of a monument from the mid-1940s through the late 1960s, rejecting all petitions for permission to undertake such a project. In 1967, without official permission, Vladimir and his friend from the Pryluky ghetto, Leonid Briskin, erected a cast-iron gravestone in the middle of the garden.⁵⁰⁰ The inscription on the metal plate read: “Your memory will be preserved for eternity. Here lie buried the victims of fascism who were shot by Hitler’s soldiers during the occupation of Pryluky, 1941-1943.”⁵⁰¹ Vladimir recalls that they chose this ethnically neutral inscription in order to avoid provoking the local authorities,⁵⁰² who, given their ongoing refusal to grant permission for a monument, could have ordered the plaque’s immediate removal.⁵⁰³

As we see from these examples, fences and landscaping were crucial commemorative strategies for survivors in the early postwar years. They served as temporary grave markers until communities could raise funds for more elaborate monuments. In locales such as Pryluky, where the local government resisted the construction of more traditional monuments, fences and

⁴⁹⁹ Vladimir Entin, *Iosif Ze'ev Ben-Dov i Priluk*, 66. “Testimony of Marx Khaimovski about the commemoration of the Jews from Priluki in Ukraine,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SLfIHqOyZI. Yad Vashem, “Priluki,” *The Untold Stories*, <http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/index.asp?cid=506> (accessed 23 May 2016).

⁵⁰⁰ Entin, 63-6.

⁵⁰¹ Photograph of Vladimir Entin and Leonid Briskin at their monument, Feb 2012, <http://jewua.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/DSCF0496.jpg>.

⁵⁰² Entin, 63-6.

⁵⁰³ Again, the ethnically neutral inscription appears to have saved the monument from demolition. A 1976 photograph shows the original fence and landscaped garden encircling Vladimir and Leonid’s monument. Yad Vashem Photograph 3652/4. See also Yad Vashem Photograph 5385 which is from approximately the same period.

landscaping often served as the sole grave markers for decades. With these sites clearly differentiated from the surrounding landscape, survivors could easily locate the graves of their relatives and feel that the site was in some way commemorated, albeit in a non-traditional fashion.⁵⁰⁴ Meanwhile, the authorities had little reason to interfere since these commemorative strategies were devoid of any visual or textual references to Jewish “nationalistic” sentiment. Perhaps this explains why communities such as the one in Cherven’ (Minsk Oblast, Belarus) planted gardens or groves of trees around mass graves even if they had already installed monuments. In the mid-1960s, survivors from Bar (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine) also planted trees at the mass grave when they erected two memorial obelisks.⁵⁰⁵ This landscaping may have played a purely aesthetic role, but I also suspect that the plants and trees were intended to serve as grave markers in the event that the authorities decided to demolish the monuments.

Although most of the fences and landscaping around mass graves required only basic building materials, even these were in very short supply in many communities during the early postwar years. In Ianovichy (Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus), two simple plaques reading, “It’s here” were the only markers at the local mass grave until the mid-1950s.⁵⁰⁶ Similar makeshift plaques were quite common during this early period. The burial mound, known in Russian as a *nasyp* or *kurgan*, was another common, low-cost method that survivors used in the earliest post-war years

⁵⁰⁴ Jewish custom discourages planting flowers or trees at gravesites. This custom is based on the prohibition against benefitting from the bodies of the deceased or flaunting human pleasure in the presence of the dead, e.g. eating in Jewish cemeteries is also prohibited. Memorial parks and groves have their origin in the European Enlightenment, which emphasized the symbiosis of the human soul and nature. This led to the emergence of elaborately landscaped Christian cemeteries and also to memorial parks for national heroes and fallen soldiers. Even before the Holocaust, but particularly in its wake, secular Jews around the world adopted this commemorative practice. In Israel, a substantial number of National Fund forests were planted in honor of Holocaust victims. See Baumel, 162-3.

⁵⁰⁵ Testimony of Mikhail Felberg, Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project, IRN #515853 (accessed through USC Shoah Foundation).

⁵⁰⁶ “Ostalos’ tol’ko pamiat’,” Moe Mestechko Project, <http://shtetle.co.il/Shtetls/janovichy/janovichy.html> (accessed 18 May 2016).

to ensure that mass graves would not fade (or sink) into obscurity. Incidentally, in the late 1960s, the Soviet authorities also adopted this style of ancient burial mound to create memorial complexes in honor of soldiers who died during the Great Patriotic War (e.g. in Minsk and Mozyr', Belarus). These memorial complexes were known as *kurgany slavy*. Smaller towns and villages, such as Noryns'k (Zhytomyr Oblast, Ukraine), also formed simple burial mounds at the mass graves of Soviet soldiers and civilians. Nathan Sobel recalls how Jewish survivors in Liuboml' (Volyn' Oblast, Ukraine) protected the physical legacy of their relatives and neighbors using a *nasyp*:

the few Jews left alive decided to build a barbed-wire fence around the newest and largest cemetery of our town for the mass graves of the murdered *kdoyshim* [holy martyrs]. This was done with the help of an engineer. After fencing in the mass graves, I and two of my friends (Shneyer Vishnits and Moyshe Blumen) decided...to build a *nasip* as a memorial. All three of us worked til nighttime without stop and erected a mound 20 feet long, 13 feet wide and 10 feet high. And we seeded it with grass. I began to engrave a tombstone to put atop the hill, but because most Jews had left Libivne⁵⁰⁷ for Poland, I could not finish my task.⁵⁰⁸

Sobel and his comrades clearly lacked the financial and material resources to construct an elaborate memorial to their loved ones. Instead, they utilized resources at their immediate disposal—barbed wire and dirt—to demarcate the territory of the grave. If only symbolically, this effort guaranteed that the physical evidence of the murder would not disappear into the landscape but, instead, would stand out from it and demand acknowledgement from passers-by, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Shortly after Sobel's emigration, the remaining Jews in Liuboml'

⁵⁰⁷ The Yiddish name for Liuboml'.

⁵⁰⁸ Sobel, 252-3. From Poland, Sobel moved to Israel and later to the US.

managed to construct a wooden obelisk atop the *nasyp*.⁵⁰⁹ Like other wooden gravestones and monuments, this original memorial has not survived, and due to the mass migration of Jewish survivors into Poland, it seems that the monument was not replaced until 1987.⁵¹⁰

As we see from the history of Liuboml' and other towns, survivors' immediate focus upon returning home was not on transmitting the history of these sites to future generations or making public statements to the authorities. Although some communities were able to construct elaborate memorial sites within a few years, most communities were initially reliant on makeshift methods of marking, fencing, landscaping—primarily intended to protect the remains of those buried and to maintain the possibility of locating the site. Due to a combination of poor construction and vandalism, most of these early memorials have not survived. While these rudimentary construction methods could not provide a lasting memorial, they sustained the visibility and memory of these Holocaust sites until more explicit, permanent commemorative structures could be built—a process that sometimes took decades and often never happened.

Based on surviving physical evidence alone, it would be easy to conclude that there was little to no Jewish memorial activity in the early postwar years.⁵¹¹ Furthermore, because later

⁵⁰⁹ Sobel, 308. One photograph from approximately 1945 shows a group of 20 survivors, all men, gathered at a newly constructed monument (Sobel 308). A second photograph from 1945 shows a group of 16 male and female survivors gathered at the same obelisk. See “Virtual Jewish World: Luboml, Ukraine,” <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/images/Poland/survivors.jpg>, accessed 21 Mar 2016. The website cites that only 51 Jews from Liuboml' survived the Holocaust.

⁵¹⁰ The new monument in Liuboml' included a marble plaque with a Ukrainian inscription, “Here are buried the Soviet people killed at the hands of the German fascist invaders during the Great Patriotic War.” See Nakonechnyi, *Na evreiskoi valke*, 57. Nakonechnyi does not seem to be aware of the earlier wooden monument. This lack of mutual awareness between early/emigrant commemoration and later/Soviet commemoration is quite common and is reflected in the sources each group produced.

⁵¹¹ With rare exceptions, the oldest surviving Holocaust monuments in Belarus and Ukraine are from the 1960s—a period when Soviet Jewish communities began to take renewed interest in Holocaust sites as the 20th and 25th anniversaries of wartime massacres approached. By this point, the Soviet Union was no longer beset by crushing shortages of raw materials and the individuals involved these projects had sufficient resources to purchase sturdier construction materials. While Israel's victory in the Six Day War likely encouraged an increase in Jewish activism, I believe the milestone anniversaries were the more fundamental driving force at a time when the Soviet state was encouraging great civic activism around the Great Patriotic War.

monuments commonly lacked the Jewish visual and textual content of these early, ephemeral monuments, it is also tempting to conclude that Soviet Jews never employed traditional Jewish motifs in their Holocaust commemoration. Such assumptions are especially natural when studying the Eastern regions of Ukraine and Belarus, which, unlike their Western counterparts, had endured the full brunt of Soviet anti-religious policies since the end of the Civil War. However, there is no consistent territorial distinction. Instead, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian inscriptions appeared on both sides of the 1939 annexation line, as did secular and religious language. One can't even determine that Yiddish was more popular in larger, secular cities while Hebrew was more popular in smaller, religious towns.⁵¹² Instead, in the earliest postwar years, the choice of language, imagery, and message on monuments was determined by the non-representative handful of individuals who survived and the commemorative approach they found most meaningful. Furthermore, commemoration of the dead often prompted acculturated, secular individuals to turn to traditional language and practices—to the extent of their logistical abilities. For example, in Eastern Belarus and Ukraine, it was relatively easy for secular survivors to produce traditional Hebrew or Yiddish inscriptions since these could be copied and adapted from old gravestones. Thus, at least with regard to the construction of monuments, pre-war experiences as either Soviet or Polish citizens did not play a decisive role in Soviet Jews' commemorative choices, and, instead, a fairly homogenous commemorative culture began to emerge.⁵¹³

⁵¹² With regard to Yiddish, spelling conventions varied widely. Not surprisingly, Soviet orthography was more common in Eastern Belarus and Ukraine even if it wasn't universal.

⁵¹³ Unlike monuments, traditional memorial services were much harder to arrange without a community of observant Jews. Thus, most of the explicitly religious services I have encountered in memoirs, testimonies, and *yizkor* books occurred in the newly annexed territories, especially in the Volyn and Ternopil' oblasts. The exact nature of commemorative ceremonies in other regions during these early years remains unclear due to a lack of sources. However, I suspect that it was relatively harder in Eastern Belarus and Ukraine to find individuals who could read *kaddish* or *el moleh rachamim*, even if participants would have wanted to hear these traditional prayers.

Postwar migration also contributed to the relative homogeneity of postwar commemorations. From the late 1940s on, as *zapadniki* emigrated en masse and *vostochniki* migrated internally, territorial distinctions gradually faded. This is not to suggest that cultural differences between the *vostochniki* and remaining *zapadniki* disappeared. Rather, geographic location and cultural orientation were no longer mutually contiguous. Due to heavy internal migration (both voluntary and forced) after the war, even in smaller towns, the local Jewish population did not necessarily have roots in the region.⁵¹⁴ Instead, the cultural gap that persisted and even deepened was between rural and urban Jewish life, and this gap had profound implications for the trajectory of Jewish commemorative efforts. In cities, state opposition to Jewish nationalism and Jewish political activism would come to play an important role in shaping the motives and motifs of Jewish Holocaust commemoration. Here, my focus remains on provincial and rural towns—areas that were inevitably influenced by Soviet policies but where current and former residents had greater leeway to continue local patterns of memory independent of state ideology or opposition to it.

⁵¹⁴ For example, in Koson' (Zakarpats'ka Oblast' Ukraine), "Of the 20,000 survivors [20% of the Jewish population from Subcarpathia], the great majority did not return to Subcarpathia, but remained in D.P. camps in Germany in the hopes of reaching Palestine or some other destination. [...] some groups resettled in their former places of residence in Subcarpathia. Later other Jews arrived from distant parts of the Soviet Union, mainly office workers and technical administrators employed by the Soviet state. Differences developed between the two Jewish groups and they did not amalgamate. Cultural differences remained. According to Soviet estimates, there were 13,000 Jews in Subcarpathia in 1971. The actual number was probably much greater, but there was no real Jewish life to speak of. The remnants of Jewish heritage were maintained by only a few survivors of the original Jewish population. In the second half of the 1970s the Soviets opened the doors for many to leave. Hundreds of families left Subcarpathia for Israel, Hungary, the United States and other countries of the world. Very few remained of the 'original' population. In Kaszony, as far as is known, only one family remained—the family of Karcsi Lebovics." See Joseph Eden, *The Jews of Kaszony*, 85.

Local Memory and Its Diaspora

Soviet Jews' reasons for migrating away from their hometowns varied widely. Some could not bear to live next to the graves where their families had been murdered. Others had already begun to relocate during the 1920s and 30s in search of better housing and professional opportunities,⁵¹⁵ leaving behind parents and grandparents who were subsequently murdered in the Holocaust. Still others simply felt too vulnerable after the war as one of only a handful of Jews remaining in their native towns. In previous chapters, we have already encountered Holocaust commemorations that were available in the domestic sphere, the cemetery, and the synagogue, some of which could be easily implemented in migrants' new home cities. But how would these migrants relate to the mass graves where their relatives and friends had been murdered? We might expect these survivors to become quickly divorced from these sites and from the local commemorative culture of their hometowns. Instead, Soviet Jewish migrants played an integral role in establishing and sustaining local memory, even after the last remaining Jewish residents in their towns had passed away.

In the United States, Israel, and elsewhere, postwar Jewish emigres revived traditional immigrant associations—*landsmanshaftn*—to organize commemorative efforts. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these organizations had played an important role as immigrant social clubs and mutual aid societies based on shared ties to a common town of origin in Eastern Europe. After the Holocaust, *landsmanshaftn* played a critical role in bringing survivors together and encouraging them to record their memories of prewar life in their native

⁵¹⁵ Beginning in the 1920s and 30s, young Soviet citizens left villages in large numbers to pursue educational opportunities in cities, whether in the oblast centers or republic capitals. After graduation, these young professionals were dispatched to job assignments across the Soviet Union, and over the course of their careers, many would relocate several times. Jews participated fully in this Soviet pattern of upward mobility, which continued after the war.

towns. Despite widespread awareness of the role of *landsmanshaftn* in the United States and Israel, the associational and commemorative life of Soviet Jewish citizens who migrated away from their hometowns but remained within Soviet territory has not been explored.

Because of limitations on civil society and restrictions on perceived Jewish nationalistic activity, we cannot expect Soviet *landsmanshaftn* to function in quite the same way as their counterparts elsewhere. Instead, Soviet Jewish migrants maintained a close-knit, if informal, network of fellow *landslayt* that included current residents of the town and migrants who had settled in all corners of the Soviet Union. Despite continued dispersal away from their native shtetls, Soviet Jews maintained these networks through phone calls, letters, and periodic reunions. From the earliest postwar months, internal migrants—both those who migrated prior to the war and those who relocated during or after the war—became actively involved in commemorative activities around the mass graves in their hometowns, including public ceremonies, fundraisers, and monument construction.

In the early postwar years, Jewish survivors who returned to live in their native towns coordinated most commemorative efforts by soliciting financial support and participation from their *landslayt* who had settled elsewhere after the war. For example, in Beshenkovichi (Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus), Lazar Moiseevich Mitsengendler (1890-1963) was one of very few Jews to return to Beshenkovichi after the war. Based on the testimony of his daughter-in-law, Valentina Beresten', Mitsengendler felt a special sense of duty to preserve the memory of local Jews who had died during the war. With the help of non-Jewish locals, he researched the fate of his family and the other Beshenkovichi Jews and compiled a list of the victims' names.⁵¹⁶ Sometime between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s, Mitsengendler launched a fundraising campaign to

⁵¹⁶ Unfortunately, the list has not survived.

construct a monument at the local mass grave. He solicited and received donations from Beshenkovichi *landslayt* living in cities as far-flung as Brest, Minsk, Kyiv, Odesa, Moscow, Tashkent, and Leningrad.⁵¹⁷ Everyone donated in accordance with their means, so the donation amounts varied widely.⁵¹⁸ After several years of fundraising, the community was able to commission a monument to be made in Leningrad. It was a tall block of stone with a bilingual inscription. The Yiddish inscription, written in Soviet orthography, reads, “Here lie [peh-nun] the 1068 innocent, annihilated Soviet citizens [killed] by the fascist hands on the 24th of Shvat 5702.” Beneath, the Russian inscription reads, “Here are buried the 1068 local residents, killed at the hands of the Hitlerites 11 February 1942. From relatives and landmen.”⁵¹⁹ After construction, the monument and fence for the site were brought to Beshenkovichi from Leningrad on two large trucks.⁵²⁰ There, they were installed with the help of current and former Jewish residents of the town, including Lev Isaakovich Iudovin (b. 1908), a native of Beshenkovichi who had left the town in the 1920s but returned to participate in the monument’s

⁵¹⁷ So many Belarusian Jews settled in Leningrad after the war that the city’s postwar Jewish community consisted almost entirely of Belarusian transplants.

⁵¹⁸ Testimony of Valentina Vladimirovna Beresten’, (b. 1935), in Marina Voronkova, “Kholokost v Beshenkovichakh,” Moe Mestechko Project, <http://shtetle.co.il/Shtetls/beshenkovichi/beshenkovichi.html> (accessed 25 May 2016). Beresten’ is the daughter-in-law of Mitsengendler.

⁵¹⁹ USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 1 (Beshenkovichi), 17. Interestingly, the use of “fascists” and “Hitlerites” in Yiddish and Russian is the inverse of what I have seen in other towns. See images of the monument at: Jewish Heritage Research Group in Belarus, “Holocaust: Beshenkovichi,” http://jhrghelarus.org/Heritage_Holocaust.php?pid=&lang=en&city_id=234&type=3. Most earlier testimonies say the monument read 1067 victims. It seems to have been updated at some point. The monument has survived to the present day. It is made of high quality materials, unlike early monuments. Also, it is located in a wooded area. I suspect that this helped to prevent vandalism or demolition. For a recent, high resolution image, see https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/85/Ghetto_Beshenkovichi_1a.jpg (accessed 30 May 2016).

⁵²⁰ Testimony of Lev Isaakovich Iudovin USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 1 (Beshenkovichi), 29. Testimony of Valentina Vladimirovna Beresten’, (b. 1935), in Voronkova, “Kholokost v Beshenkovichakh.”

installation.⁵²¹ At the dedication ceremony, relatives of the victims traveled from great distances to participate in the ceremony,⁵²² and a photograph from the occasion shows a gathering of approximately fifty attendees of all ages.⁵²³

In other towns, migrants themselves took the lead in initiating commemorative activities—a pattern that became increasingly common as Jewish populations dwindled in rural areas. Even in the early postwar years, migrant *landslayt* played a crucial role in commemorative activities. For example, roughly five years after the end of the war, relatives of the Jews who had been massacred in Krugloe (Mogilev Oblast, Belarus) came to visit from Leningrad. Some had migrated there before the war; others only relocated there after the war. Again, these survivors' first priority was not the construction of a monument but protecting the remains of those buried. Krugloe's *landslayt* collected funds and hired a group of workers to exhume the scattered mass graves in the area and transfer them to a single mass grave in the Krugloe Jewish cemetery. In total, over 500 bodies were reburied. Later, in the early 1960s, the Krugloe *landsmen* conducted another fundraiser to construct a monument at the cemetery. Like most monuments created during the 1960s and later, it is crowned with a five-pointed Soviet star. Beneath, the Russian inscription reads, "Here lie the remains of the 515 victims of the Jewish nationality from the town of Krugloe who were murdered by the fascists during the years of the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945. Eternal memory to you from [your] bereaved relatives, friends, and acquaintances.

⁵²¹ See testimony of Lev Isaakovich Iudovin USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 1 (Beshenkovich), 29.

⁵²² Testimony of Valentina Vladimirovna Beresten', (b. 1935), in Voronkova, "Kholokost v Beshenkovichakh." The date of this ceremony is unclear. It could have occurred on the anniversary of the shooting, on Tisha b'Av, Victory Day, or some other date.

⁵²³ Efim Iudovin, "Bez sroka давности," Moe Mestechko Project, <http://mishpoha.org/library/08/0809.php> (accessed 14 April 2016).

1962.”⁵²⁴ Even though the monument was constructed in the early 1960s, and the inscription is in Russian, the monument directly mentions the Jewish nationality of the victims.⁵²⁵

Given the accusations of “profiteering” that haunted Soviet Jewish religious life, communal fundraising efforts such as the ones conducted by Mitsengendler and the *Krugloe landsmen* functioned at the edge of Soviet legality. Sometimes they were initiated by a single individual. In other instances, an “action committee” took the lead. In both cases, these private initiatives closely resembled Soviet patterns of Party activists soliciting donations and “voluntary” labor for community service and public works projects. Unlike these state sanctioned projects though, Jewish memorial activists struggled, sometimes for decades, to obtain official permission for their projects. As migrants, they traveled great distances at their own expense to meet with *raispolkom* and *gorispolkom*⁵²⁶ officials in their hometowns. The outcomes of these bureaucratic encounters varied widely—from outright refusal, to demands that monuments should remain ethnically neutral, to passive support.

In Cherven’ (Minsk Oblast, Belarus), efforts to construct a monument began immediately after the war and were led by Vladimir Isaakovich Fundator, a native of Cherven’ and inventor of the famed T-34 tank. After the war, from his home in Moscow, he launched a fundraising effort among current and former Jewish residents of Cherven’ to construct a monument at the site where over 1,400 Jews, including Fundator’s parents, had been shot in early February 1942.

⁵²⁴ Aleksandr Litin and Ira Shenderovich, “Svideteli rasskazyvaiut,” Moe Mestechko Project, http://shtetle.co.il/shtetls_mog/krugloe/krugloe.html (accessed 1 June 2016).

⁵²⁵ Later, survivors from the *Krugloe* region also paid for Jewish victims from the villages of Khot’kovo and Teterino—two towns within a fifteen-kilometer radius of *Krugloe*—to be reburied in the *Krugloe* Jewish cemetery as well. See Testimony of Evgenii Savel’evich El’man. USHMM RG-68.186 Danill Romanovsky Collection, Folder 25 (*Krugloe*), 1-12. Teterino and Khot’kovo and were subsequently added to the monument, between the lines of the original inscription. See photograph by Aleksandr Litin, “*Krugloe – Commemoration of Jewish Victims*,” *The Untold Stories*, 2008, https://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/photos/251/Krugloe_kldbische_2.jpg (accessed 25 May 2016).

⁵²⁶ City executive committee.

Fundator corresponded extensively with the surviving relatives to gather the victims' names and collect funds. When Minsk Oblast officials became aware of Fundator's work, they sharply condemned his efforts, and the MGB launched an investigation against him for nationalistic and Zionist activism. Between 1949 and 1953, Fundator was fired twice and was relegated to work in a research institute.⁵²⁷ Given this political climate, it's no surprise that Fundator's project did not come to fruition, at least not immediately.

In the late 1960s, a new group of *landslayt* activists revived Fundator's project. Typed minutes from a 20 August 1967 meeting include a list of fourteen activists working to construct a monument at the mass grave in Cherven'.⁵²⁸ On 10 August, three of the activists had met with the *raikom*⁵²⁹ and the *raispolkom* and secured permission for the construction of a monument at the local mass grave. At this meeting, the activists had presented their effort as consonant with the Belarussian Communist Party Central Committee's resolution of 12 January 1966, which encouraged the commemoration of the "victims of fascism" in honor of the approaching 25th anniversary of the Soviet victory. The authorities approved the project, albeit on the conditions that the project would be funded at the expense of the victims' relatives and the monument's inscription would not mention the victims' Jewish nationality. At the activists' meeting on 20 August, attendees elected an action committee to oversee fundraising, landscaping of the mass grave, and the construction of a monument.⁵³⁰ E.S. Minkovich, one of the newly elected fundraising officers, sent an appeal letter to Cherven' *landslayt* across the Soviet Union

⁵²⁷ Smilovitsky, "Attempt to Erect Memorial."

⁵²⁸ An additional four individuals are mentioned in the minutes for their involvement in the project, but they were not present at this particular gathering.

⁵²⁹ District committee.

⁵³⁰ YVA 0.41/958.

“requesting financial support in fulfilling our duty to preserve the memory of our beloved relatives—fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, grandsons, and granddaughters—who perished at the hands of the fascists.”⁵³¹ Inna Katsap recalls how her father, Zal’man Sasonkin, received a letter from Minkovich, whom Zal’man had never met. Inna’s parents had moved from Cherven’ to Minsk before the war and returned to Minsk after the war. Her grandparents, aunts, and uncles had died in the Cherven’ ghetto though—some from hunger, some in the mass shooting. In response to Minkovich’s appeal, Inna’s father made two donations to the memorial fund and later received an invitation to the dedication ceremony on 25 August 1968. Due to poor health, he was unable to attend, so Minkovich mailed him a photograph from the ceremony.⁵³² As the local authorities had demanded, the monument’s Russian inscription made no reference to the Jewish nationality of the victims. Instead, it simply read, “Here lie the remains of more than 2,000 Soviet citizens shot by the German fascist barbarians on 2 February 1942.”⁵³³ Despite a delay of nearly twenty-five years, *landslayt* activists from Cherven’ eventually obtained official permission for the construction of a monument, albeit with familiar limitations on the inscription’s wording.

Cherven’s story underscores the longevity and geographic reach of *landslayt* networks and their central role in spearheading commemorative efforts. In the earliest postwar years, Red Army veterans and war heroes like Vladimir Fundator, Ruvim Masarskii, and many others

⁵³¹ YVA 0.41/958.

⁵³² Testimony of Inna Katsap, Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project, IRN #515903 (accessed through USC Shoah Foundation).

⁵³³ Yad Vashem Photograph 232FO4. After the 1968 ceremony, the action committee continued to oversee the upkeep of the monument and grave. In the 1970s, the committee seems to have been run out of Minsk by Isaak Borisovich Gel’fand, who had not been involved in the 1967-8 efforts. A receipt from September 1972, signed by Gel’fand, certifies that Mrs. E.S. Minkovich had donated 50 rubles to pay for the planting of fir trees around the monument (YVA 0.41/958).

commonly took the lead on commemorative projects, anticipating that their patriotic achievements would earn official backing for their projects. However, in the political climate of the late 1940s and early 1950s, their expectations were quickly shattered. In the post-Stalinist era, suspicions of Jewish nationalism continued to remain high. However, within strict limitations, there was greater space for civil activism, and as the 25th anniversary of Victory Day neared, local officials were increasingly willing to permit Jewish commemorative efforts.

While Cherven's community was particularly well-organized, the vast majority of *landslayt* activity centered on more informal fundraisers and commemorative gatherings, most of which remained undocumented.⁵³⁴ In the early postwar years, these efforts were primarily initiated by Jews who returned to their hometowns after the war and became *de facto* caretakers for mass gravesites. Through their network of family and friends, they were able to solicit the financial support and participation of *landslayt*. As time went on, networks of migrant *landslayt* increasingly supplanted local Jewish communities in sustaining the memory of the Holocaust, especially in smaller towns and villages.

Landslayt from former Jewish agricultural settlements played a particularly distinguished role in commemorative activism. In the early postwar years, the mass grave where Jews from Dobre (Bashtanka District, Mykolaiv Oblast, Ukraine) and Mykolaiv had been shot in 1941 was in deplorable condition—erosion and grazing livestock caused the bones of the victims to surface regularly.⁵³⁵ In 1955, relatives of the victims established a volunteer commission to preserve the memory of the victims. The commission was led by Lev Reznikov and his deputy, Moishe-

⁵³⁴ Oral histories and memoirs refer to “gatherings,” but they rarely provide pictures and or details on the content of the ceremonies.

⁵³⁵ Lazar Khait, “Eto zabyt’ nel’zia. Ekho katastrofy,” *Evol*, 13 June 2010, http://evkol.ucoz.com/l_khait.htm (accessed 2 Aug 2016). In September 1941, 389-560 Jews from Dobre had been shot at the edge of the village. 900 Jews from the city of Mykolaiv were also shot and buried there. In addition to Jews, Soviet POWs and gypsies were also shot at the site.

Chaim Gimpel'. Lev Reznikov's wife, Emil' Reznikova served as the commission secretary. Other members included attorney Grigorii Reizman, Samuil Golub'—a disabled veteran, and B. Verkholaz—a resident of the village.⁵³⁶ Reznikov and the committee established a special savings account so that *landslayt* from across the Soviet Union could make direct donations to the project. Over the course of 1955, the committee collected 41,922 rubles from 177 individuals.⁵³⁷ The committee also compiled a list of the victims' names and obtained permission from the *raispolkom* and the local sanitation-epidemiological service to exhume and transfer the bodies to a plot in the Jewish section of the district cemetery, which the local officials allocated for the reburial project.⁵³⁸

The exhumation itself began in 1956 and was completed by the early 1960s.⁵³⁹ A photograph from this period shows a group of five men digging up bones from the mass grave and placing them into wooden coffins.⁵⁴⁰ In mid-April 1960, over thirty survivors gathered for a ceremony marking the victims' reburial at the cemetery.⁵⁴¹ Once the grave was filled in, the survivors covered it with large memorial wreaths and a makeshift plaque that read, "The common grave of innocent victims, citizens, men, women, children, and elderly—900

⁵³⁶ Presumably all of the other participants had settled elsewhere after the war. GARF f. 7021, op. 68, d. 177, l. 74, copy YVA JM/19716. Yad Vashem 3916/2. Lazar Khait, "Eto zabyt' nel'zia. Ekho katastrofy." Yad Vashem, "Nikolayev region," *Online Guide of Murder Sites of Jews in the Former USSR*, http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/institute/killing_sites_catalog_details_full.asp?region=Nikolayev&title=Nikolayev%20region (accessed 12 May 2016).

⁵³⁷ Iakov Pasik, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemledeľ'cheskoi kolonii Dobraia," Evkol, 9 Feb 2007, <http://evkol.ucoz.com/dobraya> (accessed 8 Aug 2016). Khait, "Eto zabyt' nel'zia."

⁵³⁸ A photograph from the monument's unveiling shows the mass grave at the edge of the district's cemetery. See Khait, "Eto zabyt' nel'zia."

⁵³⁹ Pasik, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemledeľ'cheskoi kolonii Dobraia." Khait, "Eto zabyt' nel'zia."

⁵⁴⁰ Yad Vashem 3916/2. See also 3916/1.

⁵⁴¹ Yad Vashem Photograph 3916/3. Pasik, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemledeľ'cheskoi kolonii Dobraia."

individuals who fell at the hands of the German-fascist bandits. 10 September 1941.”⁵⁴² A few months later, the Dobre landmen erected a fence around the site and a permanent, concrete monument with a Russian inscription, “Here are buried the Soviet citizens [who were] shot by the German-fascist occupiers on 10 September 1941 in the village of Dobre, Bashtanka district. This monument was erected on 17 September 1960.”⁵⁴³ There were 30-40 attendees at the monument’s unveiling, including one individual who appears to have been a rabbi. Subsequently, every year on 10 September, survivors gathered at the monument to mark the anniversary of the Dobre shooting.⁵⁴⁴

The *landsmen* of nearby Novopoltavka (Novyi Buh District, Mykolaiv Oblast, Ukraine)⁵⁴⁵ employed very similar strategies to finance the construction of a monument at the mass grave where 1,000 of their loved ones had been shot in 1941. Immediately after the war, former residents of Novopoltavka began to visit the gravesite regularly. In 1959 or 1960, after years of leaving makeshift plaques and returning to find the grave in disarray, the *landslayt* of Novopoltavka established a fundraising commission, including N.P. Kriger, E.S. Min’kov, I.S. Atlas, to care for the grave and organize the construction of a permanent monument. The commission appealed to the Novyi Buh *oblispolkom* to complain that the site was unkempt and the grave pits so shallow that grazing livestock frequently unearthed victims’ bones. The commission also requested permission to transfer the remains to the cemetery, collect funds from

⁵⁴² Yad Vashem Photograph 3916/4. The plaque’s failure to mention the victims’ Jewish nationality was likely due to official policy, but also due to the fact that the bodies of Soviet POWs and Roma had also been discovered during the exhumation. See Pasik, “Istoriia evreiskoi zemledeľ’cheskoi kolonii Dobraia.”

⁵⁴³ Pasik, “Istoriia evreiskoi zemledeľ’cheskoi kolonii Dobraia.” Khait, “Eto zabyt’ nel’zia.”

⁵⁴⁴ Khait, “Eto zabyt’ nel’zia. Ekho katastrofy.”

⁵⁴⁵ In 1841, Novopoltavka was established as a Jewish agricultural colony. A century later, the Nazi occupiers brought Jewish life in the colony to an end when they shot the remaining Jewish residents of the colony near the local airfield on 10 September 1941.

the victims' relatives, to deposit these funds in a savings bank, and finally, to erect a monument. Unlike the Bashtanka *raispolkom*, the Mykolaiv *oblispolkom* rejected all four requests.

Despite these challenges, the Novopoltavka commission proceeded with its project. By 1960, it had collected 25,890 rubles from 173 individuals, which they used to commission a granite monument with the vague inscription, "To those who fell at the hands of the German-fascist occupiers during the years of the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945."⁵⁴⁶ Not only does the inscription make no mention of the victims' Jewish nationality or the date of the shooting, it doesn't even indicate that there had been a shooting in Novopoltavka. Given the local political climate, the commission clearly chose the most neutral inscription possible—one that could fit seamlessly into Soviet commemorations of the Great Patriotic War and the "victims of fascism." The commission likely chose this conservative strategy in hopes that the regional authorities would turn a blind eye and allow the project to proceed unhampered. They also seem to have abandoned any plans to transfer the victims' remains to the cemetery.

Despite these pragmatic concessions, in September 1960, when the monument was completed and brought to Novopoltavka, the Mykolaiv *oblispolkom* forbade the commission from erecting the monument at the actual shooting site. Instead, they proposed placing the monument at the grave of the 120 Jewish residents of Novopoltavka who had been killed in a 1919 pogrom.⁵⁴⁷ The *landsmen* rejected the *oblispolkom*'s proposal and, instead, appealed to Maksim Ryl'skii, a member of the Supreme Soviet of the UkSSR, and Il'ia Ehrenburg, a member

⁵⁴⁶ Pasik, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemledel'cheskoi kolonii Novopoltavka," *Evkol*, 24 May 2007, <http://evkol.ucoz.com/novopoltavka.htm> (accessed 12 Aug 2016).

⁵⁴⁷ The pre-war monument at this site had been destroyed during the Nazi occupation.

of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.⁵⁴⁸ It's unclear whether the surviving relatives ever obtained official permission for their project, but in 1962, the monument was finally erected at the 1941 shooting site along with a sturdy metal fence around the grave to protect it from livestock.⁵⁴⁹ In subsequent years, Novopoltavka *landslayt* continued to gather at the site for annual memorial ceremonies. Asia Aleksandrovna Matveiuk (nee Leikind) was born in Novopoltavka in 1920 and lived in cities across the Soviet Union after the war. She recalls how she and other former Jewish residents of Novopoltavka and descendants of the victims would travel from cities across the UkSSR and the greater USSR to visit the grave each year.⁵⁵⁰ Indeed, despite the relatively small population of this formerly Jewish, rural community, one photograph from 1965 shows approximately 50 attendees at a memorial gathering. Most of the attendees pictured are middle aged and elderly, but a few children are also present, indicating the transmission of local memory to the next generation of Novopoltavka *landslayt*.⁵⁵¹

Inhulets' (Dnipropetrovs'k Oblast, Ukraine) was another Jewish agricultural settlement in south-central Ukraine.⁵⁵² During the war, the Nazis used Inhulets' as a collection center for Jews

⁵⁴⁸ Due to his tenure as a member of the Jewish anti-Fascist Committee, his prominence as a Soviet Jewish war correspondent, and his role in penning *The Black Book*, Ehrenburg received numerous petitions from Soviet Jews until his death in 1967—asking for permission to emigrate, for food and clothing, for the return of their apartments, for the punishment of collaborators, and for assistance in gaining official approval for memorial projects. For examples of these petitions, see Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust, and Stalinism*. For a discussion of Ehrenburg's postwar role as an advocate for Jewish communities, see Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties*, 312-26.

⁵⁴⁹ Pasik, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemleled'cheskoi kolonii Novopoltavka."

⁵⁵⁰ USHMM RG-31.027*45. "Jewish Fates-Ukraine-20th Century" Project, box 13, testimony of Asia Aleksandrovna Matveiuk, 20.

⁵⁵¹ Yad Vashem Photograph 9350/1.

⁵⁵² The territory of Inhulets' has since been absorbed into Kryvyi Rih.

from Merezhene,⁵⁵³ Spas'ke,⁵⁵⁴ Kutsa Balka,⁵⁵⁵ Shyroke, and other settlements in the area; over the course of the war, there were several mass shootings in the region.⁵⁵⁶ Boris Minukhin was born in 1906 in Inhulets'. In 1938, he married and moved to Kryvyi Rih where he worked in a metallurgical factory. During the war, his father, mother, uncle, aunt, wife, and son had been shot in a ravine on the bank of the Inhulets' River. Just downriver from the mass grave was a beer factory, which utilized water from the river in its manufacturing process. After the war, the river steadily eroded the grave, and workers at the factory began to find human remains in the water they collected from the river. Boris and several other former residents of the area petitioned the *raispolkom* for permission to exhume the bodies and transfer them to the former Jewish cemetery. When the *raispolkom* refused permission, they drove to Dnipropetrovs'k to meet with the oblast's chief sanitation doctor who agreed to visit the grave in Inhulets'. After seeing bones protruding from the grave, he also appealed to the local *raispolkom*, which still refused to permit reburial. Instead, per Boris' testimony, the authorities ordered the closure of the beer factory.⁵⁵⁷

Finally, in 1956, a group of former Jewish residents from Inhulets', led by David Grigor'evich Rezhets, received permission to transfer the victims' remains to the old Jewish

⁵⁵³ Merezhene ceased to exist in 1986 after its inhabitants were resettled to the adjacent village of Zaporizhia.

⁵⁵⁴ Until 2016, known as Sverklovs'ke.

⁵⁵⁵ Until 2016, known as Kotovs'ke.

⁵⁵⁶ The first mass shooting occurred on 28 August 1941 in the nearby village of Lativka, followed by several smaller shootings. The largest shooting occurred in Inhulets' on 11 June 1942 when over 1,000 Jews were shot. See Sergei Marinenko, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemledel'cheskoi kolonii Ingulets," *Evkol*, 2005, <http://evkol.ucoz.com/ingulets.htm> (28 July 2016). According to some accounts, the number of victims exceeded 1,400. See Testimony of Mariia Evtukhova, USC Shoah Foundation VHA #30084.

⁵⁵⁷ Testimony of Boris Minukhin, USC Shoah Foundation VHA #49395.

cemetery in Inhulets'.⁵⁵⁸ At the time, a pork factory farm was under construction just outside of Inhulets'. A group of Jewish veterans and former evacuees from Inhulets' (including Minukhin, Borodovskii, Feyklekher, Roskin, the Fratkins, and the Gitins), reached an agreement with the farm's construction workers. In exchange for money, the workers would use their bulldozers to dig up the bones from the mass grave. The survivors provided the workers with gas masks and protective outerwear, as well as rubber boots and gloves. After the exhumation was complete, the victims' remains filled 66 wooden crates, each two cubic meters in size.⁵⁵⁹ The crates were then transferred to the former Jewish cemetery, which had been demolished by auxiliary police during the war.⁵⁶⁰

Having successfully secured the remains of their loved ones by 1961, the former residents of Inhulets' began work to erect a monument at the new gravesite. Rather than commissioning a new monument though, they repurposed an older monument. In Kryvyi Rih, Minukhin learned that a large black pedestal had been discarded in the municipal burial bureau's courtyard.⁵⁶¹ Minukhin, Borodovskii, and Feyklekher spoke with the director of the Kryvyi Rih *gorkomkhoz*, who, after some negotiation, agreed to give them the foundation in exchange for 1,200 rubles. To fund the monument's acquisition, its transfer to Inhulets', and the upkeep of the gravesite, survivors collected money from former residents of the settlement and descendants of the Jews

⁵⁵⁸ Marinenko, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemledel'cheskoi kolonii Ingulets." According to Marinenko, the actual exhumation was not performed until 1961.

⁵⁵⁹ Testimony of Boris Minukhin, USC Shoah Foundation VHA #49395. Another survivor, Mariia Evtukhova (b. 1913 in Inhulets') recalls that each crate held the remains of 10-15 individuals. Testimony of Mariia Evtukhova, USC Shoah Foundation VHA #30084.

⁵⁶⁰ Testimony of Mariia Evtukhova, USC Shoah Foundation VHA #30084. She remembers a total of 64 crates.

⁵⁶¹ According to Minukhin, the pedestal was granite and had served as the base for a bust of Lenin until the Nazis took down the bust during the occupation. According to Marinenko, the pedestal was a marble stele and had previously served as a base for a bust of Tsar Aleksandr II that once stood at the intersection of Nikolaevskaia (Lenin) Street and Pochtovaia (Karl Marx) Street in Kryvyi Rih.

who had been killed in Inhulets'.⁵⁶² Mariia Evtukhova (b. 1913 in Inhulets') recalls donations arriving from Dnipropetrovs'k, Zaporizhia, and beyond. One particularly generous donation of 600 rubles came from Moscow.⁵⁶³ In 1962, on the 20th anniversary of the massacre, the monument was erected at a memorial ceremony. Attendees included many former colony residents, their descendants, and current residents of Inhulets'. Subsequently, each year on 11 June, survivors returned to Inhulets' from Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovs'k, and other cities across the Soviet Union for a commemorative gathering.⁵⁶⁴

The stories of monument construction and commemoration in Beshenkovichi, Krugloe, Cherven', Dobre, Novopoltavka, and Inhulets' demonstrate not only the persistent affective ties between migrant survivors and their hometowns but also their active involvement in memorializing their loved ones. These stories also give us greater insight into the changing face of Soviet civil society and policy toward the commemoration of civilian victims of the Great Patriotic War. In the immediate postwar years, Red Army veterans and other privileged members of Soviet society often felt they were well-positioned to lead commemorative activities. Instead, they met with official resistance and, in some cases, sharp censure. In the post-Stalinist era, a broader swath of survivors became involved in commemorative efforts in their hometowns, regardless of their current city of residence. Networks of far-flung survivors created informal *landsmanshaftn* that vigorously petitioned officials, raised funds, performed grave exhumations, commissioned monuments, and convened memorial events, often without any remaining Jewish population in the hometowns to coordinate these efforts. Although such activism was not unique

⁵⁶² Marinenko, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemledelel'cheskoi kolonii Ingulets."

⁵⁶³ Testimony of Mariia Evtukhova, USC Shoah Foundation VHA #30084.

⁵⁶⁴ At some point during the late 1960s or 70s, the local authorities insisted that they change the date of these annual gatherings to May 9, Victory Day. Marinenko, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemledelel'cheskoi kolonii Ingulets."

to former residents of Jewish agricultural colonies, these one-time colonists brought with them a legacy of state-supported (albeit secular) Jewish education and communal life. Furthermore, as Jonathan Dekel-Chen argues, until the late 1930s, these colonies had enjoyed significant autonomy, and, before their closure, Jewish colonies had suffered comparatively less repression than their non-Jewish counterparts.⁵⁶⁵ After the war, I argue that this history of autonomy empowered former residents of these colonies to pursue independent commemorative projects. Furthermore, and perhaps counterintuitively, the vulnerability of these rural colonies to Jewish outward migration (both before and after the war)⁵⁶⁶ may also have boosted the commemorative activism of migrants. Knowing that there was no substantial Jewish community left in these colonies to protect the graves and construct monuments, migrant *landslayt* took these tasks upon themselves. These factors, combined with affective ties to the mass graves, ensured that *landslayt* from formerly Jewish agricultural colonies were particularly active in commemorating and maintaining the mass graves in their hometowns.

During the postwar decades, an ever-growing number of Soviet Jewish survivors found themselves geographically separated from the graves of their loved ones. Like dispersed survivors around the world, they adopted creative commemorative strategies, both in private and in public. In their new home cities, migrants could certainly participate in Victory Day parades to celebrate the heroic aspects of their family histories (e.g. service in the Red Army, the underground, or the partisans). However, universalized Soviet narratives of the Great Patriotic

⁵⁶⁵ Jonathan Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 207-8.

⁵⁶⁶ Young Jews began to migrate away from these colonies into new industrial cities in the 1920s and 1930s. See Dekel-Chen, 204. For example, in Novopoltavka, in 1926, there were 2,180 residents, of whom 1,877 (86.1%) were Jewish. By 1941, the number of Jews remaining in Novopoltavka was less than 800. Pasik, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemledel'cheskoi kolonii Novopoltavka." In *Inhulets'*, the demographic balance in the colony also shifted. After the Civil War and the famines of 1921-22 and 1932-33, many more Ukrainian peasants from the Mykolaiv and Kherson regions moved to *Inhulets'*. Marinenko, "Istoriia evreiskoi zemledel'cheskoi kolonii Ingulets'."

War offered no time, space, or community in which to mourn the more tragic aspects of Soviet Jews' experiences during the war. Instead, local memory, landscape, and community remained the primary framework through which migrant Soviet Jews could understand and, thus, commemorate the more tragic aspects of their families' wartime experiences. In this context, Soviet Jewish *landsmanshaft* offered survivors meaningful outlets for communal commemoration and guaranteed that local memory would continue to play an enduring role in the identities, finances, and ritual calendars of Soviet Jews, even as they migrated away from their ancestral hometowns.

For a range of reasons, many survivors were unable to return to their hometowns to participate in memorial gatherings. Ill health kept Inna Katsap's father from attending the dedication ceremony in Cherven'.⁵⁶⁷ Academic and professional obligations prevented many others, especially young adults, from participating in such events. For others, emotional distress played a large part in limiting direct participation in commemorative events.⁵⁶⁸ For example, Leonid Goldbraikh (b. 1931) temporarily returned to his hometown of Beshenkovichi in 1946 but refused to visit the grave where his relatives had been shot in mid-February 1942.⁵⁶⁹ Leonid's postwar stay in Beshenkovichi was quite brief, and he quickly settled in Leningrad. When Leonid finally did visit the mass grave in Beshenkovichi in 1958, the traumatic events of 1942 were still fresh in his memory. Upon returning to Leningrad, he remained abreast of fundraisers and efforts to build a monument at the grave in 1965. However, in his testimony, Leonid does

⁵⁶⁷ Testimony of Inna Katsap, Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project, IRN #515903 (accessed through USC Shoah Foundation).

⁵⁶⁸ Some post-war migration was undoubtedly driven by survivors' inability to re-acclimate to life in their hometowns.

⁵⁶⁹ The shooting occurred sometime between 11-15 February 1942 (accounts vary, the 11th seems the most widely accepted).

not indicate whether he was directly involved in these efforts or whether he ever attended subsequent commemorative gatherings.⁵⁷⁰ Leonid's avoidance of Beshenkovichi's mass grave is an important example of the emotional barriers that many survivors faced to commemorative participation, even if they were fully aware of the commemorative efforts of their fellow survivors.

Another migrant, Mikhail Fel'berg (b. 1928) moved to Moscow from his hometown of Bar (Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine) immediately after the war to become a surgeon. During the war, in 1942, his mother and four-year old sister had been shot at a mass grave in Ivanovets'ke, a village near Bar. In the late 1940s, on an anniversary of the 19 August 1942 shooting, survivors from Bar organized a memorial gathering in Ivanovets'ke at the site where 2,000-2,800 Jews had been shot in five large pits. Mikhail was not able to attend, but his surviving sister, Polia, who still attended school in Bar, sent him a picture of 20-30 survivors gathered near the mass grave. In oral history testimonies collected in 1993 and 1996, Mikhail does not indicate whether he ever personally visited the mass graves in Bar. However, he emphasizes that he and many other migrant survivors sent donations each year to help the remaining Jews in Bar care for the graves.⁵⁷¹ For Mikhail and survivors like him, photographs, letters, and donations played a crucial role in sustaining their connection to the mass graves where their relatives were buried. Such correspondence also reinforced Jewish interpersonal networks and migrants' connections to their prewar Jewish identity.

⁵⁷⁰ Testimony of Leonid Goldbraikh (b. 1931 in Beshenkovichi), USC Shoah Foundation VHA #42481.

⁵⁷¹ Testimony of Mikhail Felberg, Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project, IRN #515853 (accessed through USC Shoah Foundation). JFCS Holocaust Center #53176. Testimony of Mikhail Fel'berg USC Shoah Foundation VHA #12828.

The Next Generation

The emotional ambivalence of some survivors toward mass graves was also apparent in the ways they transmitted the memory of mass gravesites to the next generation. While some prioritized bringing their children and grandchildren to visit the mass graves where their relatives had been killed, many others avoided doing so. This reticence stemmed from three major factors. First, the gruesome nature of these sites' history likely discouraged many parents from bringing their children to visit. Also, traditional Jewish taboos against bringing children to cemeteries easily transferred to these mass graves, regardless of whether they were located within a cemetery. Death was simply not considered an appropriate topic for children. Finally, fear of educating children about Jewish history and shame over Jews' fate during the war also discouraged many survivors from transmitting this history to the next generation in more than a cursory manner. Of the numerous photographs taken at annual commemorative gatherings, a significant majority of images show only survivors—increasingly elderly and few in number as the decades progressed. Their children and grandchildren are noticeably absent from these images.⁵⁷² Only a small percentage of such photographs include children or young adults. For example, a photograph of a memorial gathering from the mid-1980s shows a group of 14 attendees, including one young child, standing next to the monument.⁵⁷³ Such involvement by the young was hardly universal and depended on individual survivors' decisions regarding which elements of Jewish history and personal experience to pass on to the next generation.

⁵⁷² While it is possible that these pictures were formally staged to include only survivors, thereby relegating younger family members to the sidelines, testimonies confirm that many survivors were reluctant to expose their children to the mass graves where multiple generations of their relatives had perished in a single shooting.

⁵⁷³ Raisa Gurevich, USC Shoah Foundation VHA #45312.

Thanks to their geographic separation from the graves of their relatives, migrants could easily curate the aspects of their life stories that they wished to share with children and grandchildren. For example, Emma Krymskaia (b. 1923), a survivor from Bar, returned to her hometown only briefly after the war and settled in Zin'kiv (Khmel'nits'kyi Oblast, Ukraine)—a town approximately 56 kilometers west of Bar. In 1947, she gave birth to a son and named him in honor of her father, Chaim, who had been shot just outside of Bar. In a 1996 oral testimony collected by the USC Shoah Foundation, Emma explains that she made periodic visits to the mass grave where her father was buried, but she never took her son to visit his grandfather's grave.⁵⁷⁴ Instead, an intangible name was the only link connecting grandfather and grandson.

This silence within families regarding the Holocaust had significant implications for the Jewish identity of younger Soviet Jews, especially those who grew up without access to the towns where their parents had lived before the war. Children who grew up in their ancestral hometowns encountered the mass graves of their relatives as part of daily life, with or without their parents' direct involvement. For them, the war's impact on their family history was tangible and immediate. By contrast, Chaim and other children who grew up outside their ancestral hometowns were cut off from their family history in certain basic respects and, by extension, from one of the most fundamental building blocks of Jewish identity. Given the larger culture of shame and silence that surrounded the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, the impact of migration on the transmission of memory was greatly amplified.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷⁴ Testimony of Emma Krymskaia, USC Shoah Foundation VHA #25316.

⁵⁷⁵ While there is currently insufficient data on second generation Holocaust survivors in the Soviet Union, further research needs to be done on the impact that internal migration and contact with mass graves had on young Soviet Jews' political leanings, emigration paths, intermarriage rates, and communal involvement.

Still, as we saw in Chapter II, family history could also be transmitted in the domestic sphere through names, stories, and photographs. While direct access to physical landmarks and commemorative markers is often helpful, it is not mandatory. For example, Rakhil' Moiseevna Frumkina (nee Al'tshuler) was born in 1919 in Bobr (Minsk Oblast, Belarus) and settled in Borisov after the war. In October 1941, just before a mass shooting that killed her parents, sisters, nieces, and nephew,⁵⁷⁶ she had escaped from the Bobr ghetto and joined an underground group where she survived the rest of the war. After the war, in Borisov (Minsk Oblast, Belarus), she and her husband raised three children. A picture from the early 1980s shows Rakhil' and two of her surviving siblings, Ziama and Riva, standing at the mass grave in Bobr. Clearly, Rakhil' maintained a connection to her hometown and to the site where her relatives had been murdered. However, it's unclear whether she ever took her children to visit the site. Instead, according to her son, Slava, she recounted her family's history to her children in great detail, explaining the fate of each of her siblings and the location of their burial.⁵⁷⁷ For families like Rakhil's, mass shooting sites remained the exclusive domain of survivors. Nevertheless, parents found alternative strategies to convey the fate of their extended family during the war, often through narratives and photographs of the deceased.

Other survivors prioritized bringing their children and grandchildren to visit sites where their relatives had been murdered. For example, Bella Arons was born in 1930 in Mykolaiv (Mykolaiv Oblast, Ukraine). During the war, she was deported to the Salaspils camp in Latvia and later to labor camps in Germany, and after the war, she settled in Latvia. In 1974, when her oldest daughter, Sof'ia, was 12 years old, Bella accompanied her daughter on a class trip to visit

⁵⁷⁶ On 10 Oct 1941. The death toll was 961 killed, including eight of Rakhil's relatives.

⁵⁷⁷ Slava Frumkin, "Moia sem'ia," Moe Mestechko Project, http://shtetle.co.il/shtetls_minsk/bobr/bobr.html (accessed 18 May 2016).

Salaspils. A photograph shows them standing together in front of the large Soviet monument that had been constructed at the camp.⁵⁷⁸ Although the class trip was undoubtedly intended to convey official, Soviet narratives regarding war, Bella's decision to accompany her daughter on this trip reveals a willingness to acknowledge her personal experience in the camp as a Jewish woman.

Among my interviewees, most of whom were born in the mid-1930s or later, I struggled to find individuals who had any significant contact with mass graves. Many of them encountered famous sites such as the Yama in Minsk and Babyn Yar in Kyiv as spaces for political activism, but they had little knowledge of when or how mass shooting sites had been memorialized. Nevertheless, a small number of second-generation survivors were able to witness their parents' efforts to construct memorials at mass graves. Lev Frumkin, for example, was born in the Jewish shtetl of Petrovichi (Smolensk Oblast, Russia). In 1934, he, his parents, sister, and brother moved to the 23rd Settlement of the Emes kolkhoz, which was part of the Stalindorf Jewish National District of the Dnipropetrovs'k Oblast, Ukraine. In 1940, he was mobilized and served at the front during the war. After the war, Lev eventually settled in Baku. Over the decades, he persistently sought out information on his family's fate but received little concrete information. According to Lev's 2011 testimony, he and his son, Vladislav, set out on a road trip in 1987 to search for the grave of their relatives. When they reached the former 23rd Settlement, they met two Ukrainian women who had lived with Lev's family before the war and who remembered what happened to his relatives during the war. After the fall 1941 harvest, Lev's parents, along with 2,000 other Jews from the surrounding region, had been taken to Chkalove. Over the course of a month, they were shot near the local orphanage. After Lev returned to Baku from his 3,000-kilometer road trip, he wrote to the head of the Nikopol' *raispolkom* requesting that a monument

⁵⁷⁸ Testimony of Bella Arons, USC Shoah Foundation VHA #33118.

be built at the mass grave in Chkalove. In August 1988, Lev, his wife, and Vladislav returned to the mass grave to find that a small wooden obelisk with a wooden fence had been built at the site⁵⁷⁹ with a Russian inscription that read, “Here, at this site, 1941-1943, peaceful residents of the surrounding villages were brutally shot by the fascist occupiers.”⁵⁸⁰ Lev’s son, Vladislav, was not only an observer of his father’s commemorative efforts, he was a direct participant—listening as villagers conveyed the fate of his own grandparents. While uncommon, these sorts of direct encounters with family history were a powerful opportunity to maintain family ties to an ancestral hometown and to preserve the memory of specific landmarks.

In some families, third generation survivors also developed relationships with these mass murder sites and the monuments. For example, a photograph from May 1988 shows Dmitrii Zil’berman (b. 1930) and his grandson, Leonid, standing next to a monument in Uman’ (Cherkasy Oblast, Ukraine) that was dedicated to the memory of the 20,000-30,000 Jews who were shot in the forest there. Leonid appears to be around 10 or 12 in the photograph. He and his grandfather stand with their heads covered, each resting a hand on the monument.⁵⁸¹ Dmitrii, as a survivor of the Uman’ concentration camp, likely brought Leonid’s father or mother to visit this same grave and now was bringing his grandson to learn about the history of his ancestors in Uman’. Alternatively, perhaps, Dmitrii had avoided bringing his own children to the site, but in the looser political climate of *perestroika*, felt it was important to bring his grandson to visit this landmark in their family history.

⁵⁷⁹ Lev Frumkin, “My zhili v 23-m posiolke,” Evmol, http://evkol.ucoz.com/l_frumkin.htm (accessed 10 July 2016).

⁵⁸⁰ Yad Vashem Photograph 3314/31.

⁵⁸¹ Yad Vashem Photograph 3310/3.

Among migrants and those who returned to their hometowns after the war, the transmission of memory varied greatly from family to family. For those who wished to obscure their experiences during the Holocaust, distance from the mass graves of their relatives certainly simplified their efforts. However, many other survivors sustained an active connection to these sites and even conveyed the history of these graves to subsequent generations, whether by bringing their children and grandchildren on annual pilgrimages or simply conveying the history of these sites through stories and photographs.

Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this chapter, Soviet Jewish survivors developed a wide range of commemorative responses and relationships toward the mass graves where their relatives had been murdered during the Holocaust. In large part, this diversity of responses was due to the unofficial nature of Soviet Jewish memory during the postwar decades, which precluded the emergence of a hegemonic Holocaust discourse. In fact, the very notion of the “Holocaust” was a post-Soviet import that had little relevance for Soviet Jews’ understanding of their families’ fates during the war.⁵⁸² Instead, Soviet Jews recalled their history primarily in reference to local experience, local landscapes, and local communities. As a result, they developed distinct commemorative cultures that could nimbly respond to varied economic and administrative conditions.

Although their efforts to commemorate Jewish suffering conflicted with the Soviet state’s narrative of military heroism and universal suffering, Soviet Jews did not necessarily reject Soviet narratives of war. In fact, they fully embraced Victory Day and enthusiastically

⁵⁸² See Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 229-31.

participated in patriotic activities surrounding May 9th. This should come as no surprise since many had lost relatives at the front or themselves served in the Red Army or Soviet partisans. As a universal, triumphant narrative of the war, Victory Day and heroic Soviet commemorations genuinely reflected important facets of these survivors' wartime experience. However, it was not sufficient to encompass the entirety of their personal histories, particularly the tragic events of the Holocaust. Thus, these "competing" narratives—one locally-produced and another centrally-determined—coexisted within the memories and commemorative practices of individual Soviet Jews,⁵⁸³ each corresponding to specific segments of individual identity and experience.

From the earliest postwar years to the final months of the Soviet era, locally-rooted memory profoundly shaped Holocaust commemoration in the Soviet Union. Despite the tremendous destruction and dispersal precipitated by the Second World War, fundraising, constructing monuments, and memorial gatherings actively sustained vibrant networks of Ukrainian and Belarusian Jews, often around a shared, *landsman* identity. These activities are a testament not only to the enduring power of shtetl history and identity, but also to the power of gravesites to rebuild and sustain a sense of community among the living.

⁵⁸³ Like most Soviet citizens, Soviet Jews existed in an ideological and experiential grey zone. They frequently embodied a dual consciousness and a dual set of practices without any sense of internal contradiction. See Margaret Paxson, *Solovyovo*.

CONCLUSION

Over the postwar decades, Soviet Jews found numerous creative strategies to rebuild communal life and to sustain Jewish identity. Central among them were mourning and commemorative practices. Observers of cultures around the world have noted that mourning is a uniquely resilient aspect of cultural life, outlasting other traditional cultural practices. Even in the face of rapid urbanization and secularization, the notion of fulfilling one's duty to the dead in ways that the deceased would have wanted has exerted a powerful hold on individuals, families, and communities. Of course, mourning practices are never static. Instead, they dynamically adapt and evolve in response to societal, communal, familial, and individual circumstances. In the Soviet context, full Jewish observance was virtually impossible, and mourning rituals were no exception. I have argued that, rather than abandoning traditional customs altogether, Soviet Jews' secularization was complex and non-linear, particularly in the realm of mourning. As religious observance became increasingly selective, bereavement remained one of the strongest motivations for continued engagement with traditional practices and funerary spaces. In turn, mourning, even in its adapted forms, played a crucial role in allowing Soviet Jews to sustain a sense of intergenerational continuity and communal cohesion.

Given the scale of demographic decline and geographic dislocation facing the Soviet Jewish community after the Second World War, one would hardly expect to find widespread or

persistent efforts by Soviet Jews to engage in traditional mourning rituals, to maintain burial sites, or to respond to the tragedies of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, immediately after liberation Jewish individuals and communities across Belarus and Ukraine worked energetically to renovate local Jewish cemeteries, conduct religious memorial services, and erect monuments at the sites of mass shootings. In the process, they revived and adapted pre-war mourning rituals to reflect wartime experiences and postwar realities.

In the absence of a centralized Jewish religious authority and in the absence of a unified Holocaust narrative, Soviet Jewish mourning and commemoration remained deeply rooted in local experiences and local memory. Furthermore, postwar Jewish mourning was situated within four local landscapes—the home, the cemetery, the mass grave, and the synagogue. Each of these sites occupied a distinct legal status within the Soviet Union, which profoundly shaped the kinds of practices that could be enacted within them and the personal risks that individuals assumed by participating. Even though these sites were vulnerable to surveillance, closure, and demolition, overall, their architecture, language, symbols, and associated “conceptual pathways” remained relatively fixed. As a result, they had the power to sustain and even revive ritual practices that were otherwise endangered.

The traditional mourning customs that survived best in the Soviet Union shared one or more of the following features: they did not interfere with regular work schedules; they were performed infrequently and surreptitiously; and they could be “outsourced” to elderly, observant community members. Practices such as sitting shiva for a full seven days or reciting kaddish for eleven months had fallen into obscurity even before the Second World War. Instead, locally-chosen occasions in the Jewish calendar became focal points for Soviet Jewish individuals and communities to give public expression to both their grief and their Jewish identity. In particular,

commemorative holidays—including Yom Kippur, the month of Elul, and Tisha b'Av—gained added layers of significance in the wake of the Second World War, and a new set of anniversaries entered local Jewish calendars.

Within these locally-specific spaces and occasions, Soviet Jews, including young, middle-aged, and otherwise secular individuals, demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness as they maintained and adapted traditional mourning practices. In the process, many remained engaged in fundraising, construction efforts, and annual memorial gatherings. Through these activities, mourning served to sustain Jewish communal networks and local memorial cultures, which proved remarkably resilient even as Soviet Jews migrated away from their hometowns. Thus, as I have argued, mourning and commemorative activities are a testament not only to the enduring power of shtetl history and identity but also to the power of mourning to revive and sustain communities of the living.

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D.: Delo

F.: Fond

L.: List (page)

MDV: Mobile Digital Video

Op.: Opis'

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