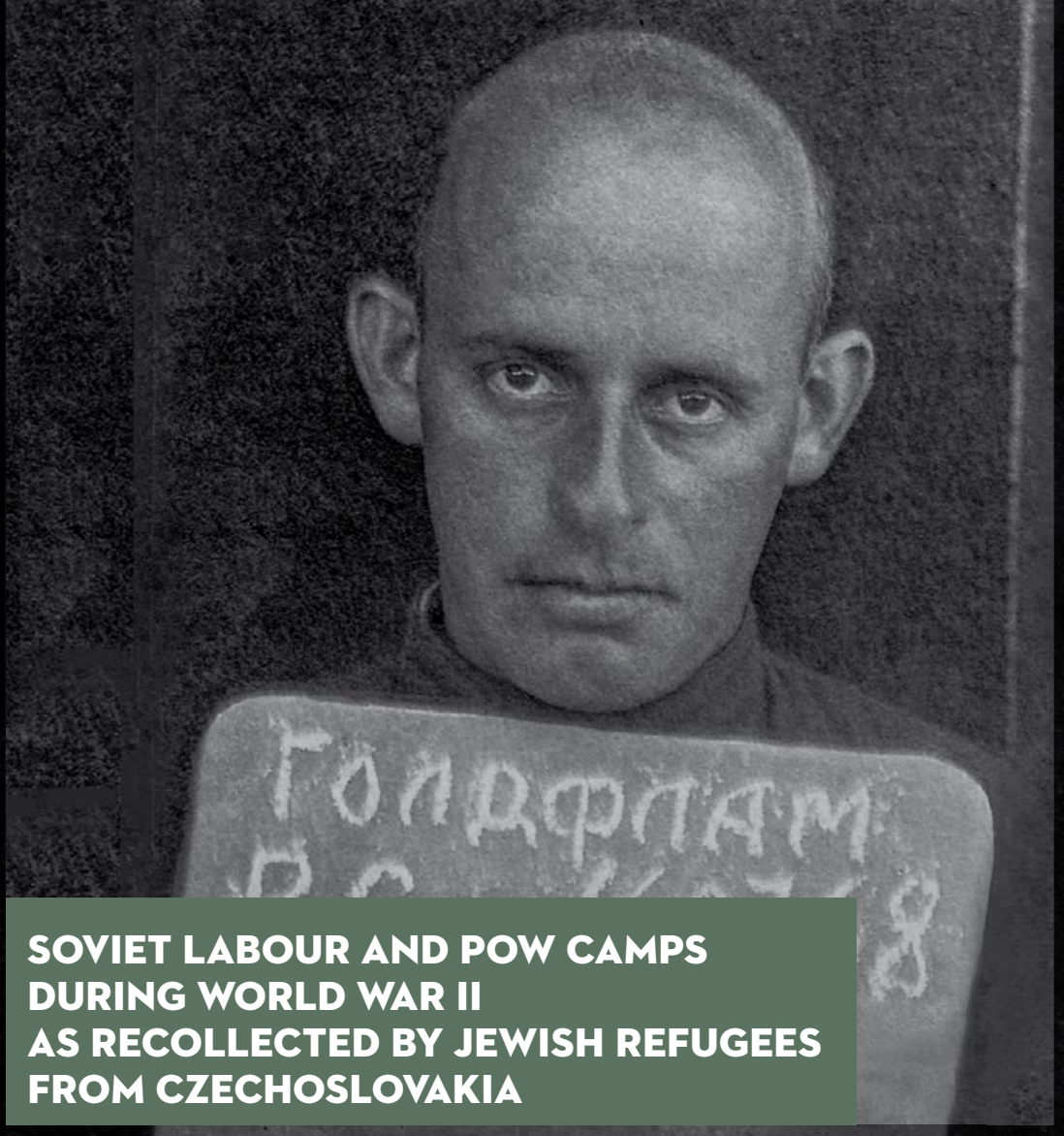
JAN DVOŘÁK
ADAM HRADILEK

CZECHOSLOVAK JEWISH REFUGEES IN THE GULAG



SOVIET LABOUR AND POW CAMPS DURING WORLD WAR II AS RECOLLECTED BY JEWISH REFUGEES FROM CZECHOSLOVAKIA

KAROLINUM — INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF TOTALITARIAN REGIMES

Czechoslovak Jewish Refugees in the Gulag
Soviet Labour and Pow Camps During World War II
as Recollected by Jewish Refugees from Czechoslovakia

Jan Dvořák
Adam Hradilek

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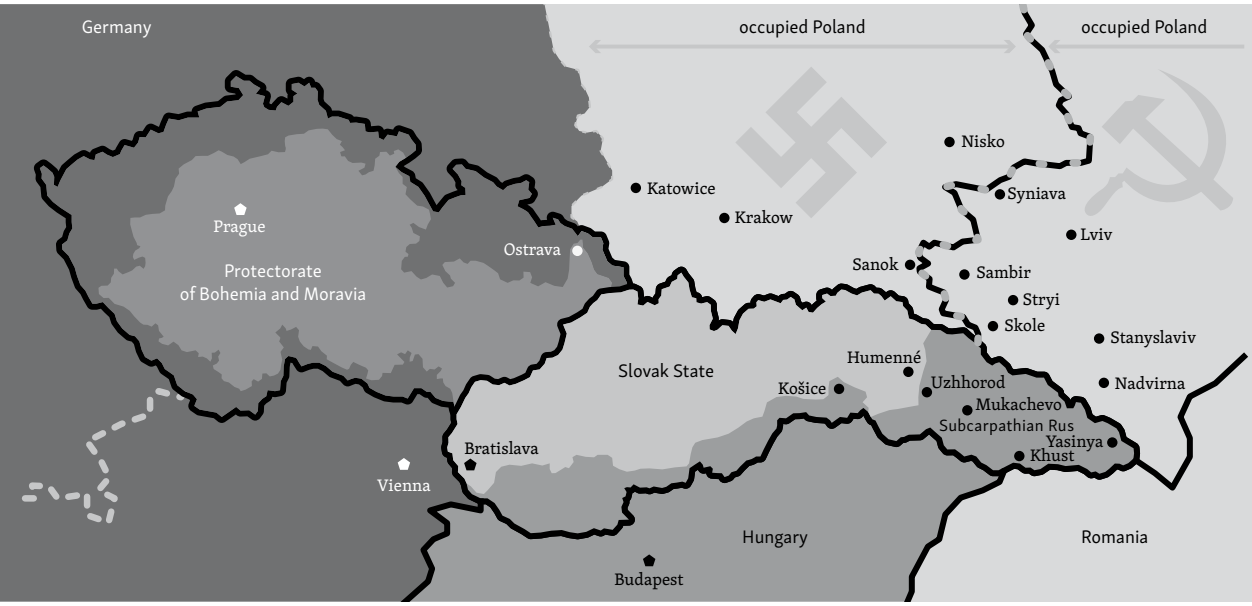
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In the gulags people were not systematically killed because they belonged to a particular race. On the other hand, membership of a certain class was there, too, something like a sentence of death. In all other respects, gulags and concentration camps were totally the same: here as well as there, detainees were used as slave labour. Here as well as there, was the kind of nutrition that must have been known to result in starvation. Here as well as there, were the same atrocious hygienic conditions, with epidemics causing men to die like flies. [...] Though Stalin might have argued that he had dispensed with systematic murder, nevertheless, in his unsystematic manner, he was responsible for the deaths of even more people than lost their lives in Hitler's concentration camps.

Simon Wiesenthal: Justice, not Vengeance: Recollections

I think with horror and shame of a Europe divided into two parts by the line of the Bug, on one side of which millions of Soviet slaves prayed for liberation by the armies of Hitler, and on the other millions of victims of German concentration camps awaited deliverance by the Red Army as their last hope.

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński: A World Apart



The former Czechoslovakia and part of occupied Poland, marking the places associated with the wave of refugees to the Soviet Union in the years 1939–1941. *Tomáš Říha*



Soviet labour and POW camps (or the places they were close to) in which the refugees from Czechoslovakia whose stories are published in this book were imprisoned. *Tomáš Říha*

INTRODUCTION

Historical research on political repression in the Soviet Union to date has shown that in the period from the 1920s to 1950s, this repression affected around 15,000 Czechoslovak citizens and Czech nationals settled in Soviet territory in various forms.[1] Much like the local population, so did both Czechs and members of ethnic minorities originally from Czechoslovakia become victims of the various forms of persecution and terror that flared up at various times with varying intensity over the existence of the USSR. Be it the fight against the anti-Bolshevik opposition during the Civil War, the subsequent Sovietisation of society, the forced collectivisation of the countryside, or the obsession with espionage, this repression always paralysed the whole of society for years at a time. To date it remains a little-known fact that the greatest rise in Soviet repression against Czechoslovaks occurred during World War II, when a considerable portion of the Czechoslovak population was severely affected by persecution from the Nazi occupiers, with its Jewish population even facing the threat of extermination. The tragedy of the war-time fate of the local Jews is amplified by the fact that they were the second largest group of Czechoslovak citizens affected by the repressive Soviet regime in the years 1939–1945. A large number of studies have been published on this topic, among them several scholarly publications.[2] This book aims to

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1 This approximate number of victims is based primarily on the research done by Professor Mečislav Borák and his colleagues from the Silesian University in Opava and the research team of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes. More on this topic BORÁK, Mečislav: *České stopy v Gulagu. Z výzkumu perzekuce Čechů a občanů ČSR v Sovětském svazu* [Czech Traces in the Gulag. From Research on the Persecution of Czechs and Czechoslovak Citizens in the Soviet Union]. Silesian Museum, Opava 2003; idem (ed.): *Perzekuce československých občanů v Sovětském svazu (1918–1956). Sborník studií. Část 1. Vězni a popravení* [Persecution of Czechoslovak Citizens in the Soviet Union (1918–1956). Collection of Studies. Part 1. Prisoners and Executees.]. Silesian Museum – Silesian University in Opava, Opava 2007; DVOŘÁK, Jan – FORMÁNEK, Jaroslav – HRADILEK, Adam: *Čechoslováci v Gulagu* [Czechoslovaks in the Gulag]. Czech Television – Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Prague 2017.

2 E.g. KULKA, Erich: *Židé v československé Svobodově armádě* [Jews in the Czechoslovak Svoboda's Army]. Naše vojsko, Prague 1990; BORÁK, Mečislav: "Československí Židé – oběti gulagů a popravišť v Sovětském svazu" [Czechoslovak Jews – Victims of Gulags and Execution Centres in the Soviet Union]. In: MACHAČOVÁ, Helena (ed.): *První pražský seminář. Dopady holocaustu na českou a slovenskou společnost ve druhé polovině 20. století* [First Prague Seminar. The Impact of the Holocaust on Czech and Slovak Society in the Second Half of the 20th Century]. Varius Praha – Spolek akademiků Židů, Prague 2008, p. 97–110; idem: *První deportace evropských Židů. Transporty do Niska nad Sanem (1939–1945)* [First Deportations of European Jews. Transports to Nisko

add to the existing findings with a collection of personal testimonies from those who experienced the events directly that were collected from various national and international archives.

IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF THE GESTAPO AND THE NKVD

At the end of the 1930s, refugees from many European countries threatened or occupied by the Nazis or their allies were seeking refuge in various countries around the world, where they met with varying degrees of sympathy and receptiveness. They encountered rather specific treatment in the Soviet Union, where society was paralysed by fear in the aftermath of the Great Terror.[3] In the years 1939–1941, the focal point of Soviet repression shifted from the interior to the newly occupied regions of Poland, the Baltics and Romania that the USSR had acquired on the basis of its agreement with Nazi Germany, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The main task of the Soviet security forces was to ensure the rapid Sovietisation of these territories. Repression not only targeted all opponents to the Soviet regime, "class enemies", and ethnic minorities, but also the hundreds of thousands of refugees that had found temporary refuge there from the oppression of authoritarian regimes, racial persecution and the advancing German army. Among these were refugees from Czechoslovakia, who came to the territory of the USSR in the years 1939–1941 in two main waves – from the Protectorate and from Hungarian-occupied Subcarpathian Rus. This totalled approximately ten thousand people, with the second largest group after the Ruthenians being Jews. According to current research, these numbered two thousand.[4] In comparison, refugees from the Slovak State only chose the Soviet Union as a destination in isolated cases (see the fate of Ernest Breiner on p. 210). Though these refugees escaped persecution by the Nazi and Hungarian occupiers or Slovak fascists by

(1939–1945)]. 2nd revised edition. Český svaz bojovníků za svobodu, Ostrava 2009; DVOŘÁK, Jan – HRADILEK, Adam: "Perzekuce československých Židů v Sovětském svazu za druhé světové války" [Persecution of Czechoslovak Jews in the Soviet Union in World War II]. In: *Historie – Otázky – Problémy* [History – Questions – Problems], 2013, No. 1, p. 105–120.

3 The Great Terror – one of the phases of political repression in the USSR in the years 1936–1938, during which some 700,000 innocent people were shot and hundreds of thousands more incarcerated in work camps and prisons. For more see e.g., CONQUEST, Robert: *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1991; on the statistics of the Great Terror see ZEMSKOV, Viktor N.: K voprosu o masshtabakh represiy v SSSR. *Sociologicheskie issledovania*, 1995, no. 9, p. 123.

4 In his studies, E. Kulka estimates the number of Jewish refugees at five thousand, of which at least four thousand were taken to NKVD camps. Research at the archives of the former NKVD suggests however that the number was likely about half that. Cf. KULKA, Erich: *Židé v československé Svobodově armádě* [Jews in the Czechoslovak Svoboda's Army], p. 132.



In the years 1939–1945, the Soviets used thousands of refugees fleeing Nazism for slave labour in the Gulag. Construction of the Kotlas–Vorkuta railway, with the labour camp in the background. *Komi Republic National Archives*

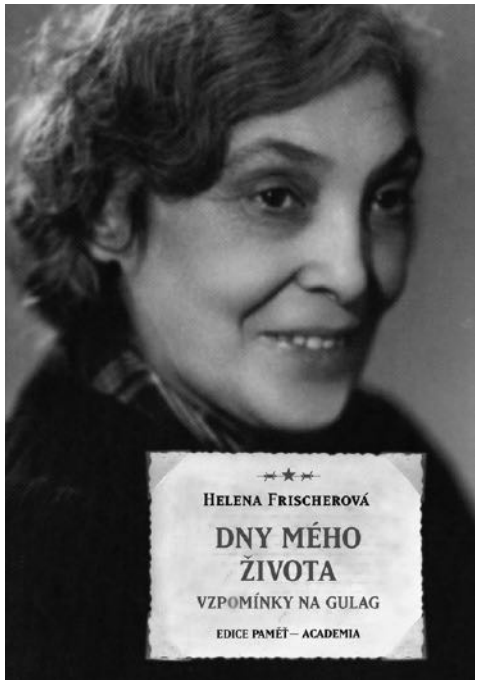
fleeing to the east, most of them were sentenced to years of forced labour in the Gulag[5] camps for illegally crossing the border, espionage and other fabricated criminal offences. A specific group was those Jews who had either deserted or been captured by the Soviets as members of the Hungarian army's labour units.[6]

Refugee's sentences were to be served at camps and work colonies run by the Soviet secret police, the NKVD,[7] all over the Soviet Union, but especially in the polar regions of northern Russia, the Urals, the Volga, Kazakhstan and Siberia. All these areas were home to large-scale extraction of mineral resources – lumber, coal, crude oil and gold – or camp complexes tied to the

5 Gulag – short for the Russian title Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei, in English Chief Administration for Camps, which fell under the NKVD (see footnote 7) and ran the hundreds of labour complexes through which millions of prisoners passed in the years 1930–1960.

6 A separate chapter is dedicated to this issue, *Deserters from the Auxiliary Labour Units of the Hungarian Army and Prisoners of War in Internment Camps.*

7 NKVD – short for Narodny komissariat vnutrennih del, in English the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, from 1934 the name for the central security service of the Soviet Union and the main instrument of repression, dealing with such things as internal security, intelligence and counterintelligence activities, guarding the borders, and running prisons and labour camps.



The written memoirs of Helena Frischer, born in Prostějov, a victim of the Great Terror and Gulag prisoner in the years 1937–1947, were not published in Czech Republic until 2017. *Reproduction by ÚSTR*

construction of railways or other gigantic industrial structures that required labour.[8]

At the site of their sentences, the incarcerated refugees usually encountered a broad range of other prisoners – real and imagined opponents of the Bolshevik regime, criminals, Soviet soldiers returning from Finnish captivity, or communist immigrants from Europe who had survived the Great Terror, but had been sentenced to long prison terms.[9]

Given that Jewish refugees were far from the only victims of the system of forced labour, the question arises as to whether and in what way their experience differed from that of others. Longtime Gulag prisoner and one of the icons of the Soviet dissident movement Alexandr Solzhenitsyn claims in his book *Two Hundred Years Together* that Jews lived better than the other

8 See KHLEVNIUK, Oleg Vitalyevich: *Historie gulagu. Od kolektivizace do „velkého teroru"* [History of the Gulag. From Collectivisation to the "Great Terror"]. BB/art, Prague 2008, p. 288–291. (English edition: *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror.* Yale University Press, New Haven & London 2004).

9 Among these were many Czechoslovaks. In 1937, for example, Helena Fischerová of Prostějov was arrested along with her husband Abraham, with whom she had lived in Moscow since 1935. While Abraham was executed not long after being arrested, Helena spent ten years in Gulag camps. She was not released until 1947. See FRISCHEROVÁ, Helena: *Dny mého života. Vzpomínky na Gulag* [Days of My Life. Memories of the Gulag]. Academia –Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Prague 2017.



Prison photograph of Helena Frischer. *Estate of Miroslav Kryl*

prisoners in the camps.[10] Vladimír Levora (1920–1999) from the village of Křížovice near Klatovy came to a similar conclusion, having also fled Gestapo persecution to the Soviet Union as a student. There he was sentenced to the Vorkutlag camp. In his autobiographical book *Ze stalinských gulagů do československého vojska [From Stalin's Gulags to the Czechoslovak Army]*, he writes: *"Jew – that word was an insult; you had to say Hebrew. Because they occupied the cushiest jobs, no one liked them, but everyone licked their boots."*[11]

Drawing on the available archival materials and the testimony of those who were there, however, it follows that Soviet security authorities and management of the individual camps generally treated the Jewish refugees from Czechoslovakia the same as other prisoners. One proof of this is the case of two Jewish defectors from Subcarpathian Rus, who received the highest known sentence of all – 15 years of forced labour in the Gulag for alleged espionage (see p. 135). How can Solzhenitsyn and Levora's claims be explained then?

10 SOLZHENITSYN, Alexander Isayevich: *Dvě stě let pospolu. Dějiny rusko-židovských vztahů v letech 1795–1995* [Two Hundred Years Together. The History of Russian-Jewish Relations in 1795–1995]. Academia, Prague 2005, p. 261–270. In original: Dvesti let vmeste (1795–1995). Ruskii puť, Moscow 2001–2002.

11 LEVORA, Vladimír: *Ze stalinských gulagů do československého vojska* [From Stalin's Gulags to the Czechoslovak Army]. Organised by Zora Dvořáková. Nakl. Josef Hříbal, Plzeň 1993, p. 96.

Undoubtedly, the ability to get by in the struggle with both the criminal prisoners and other internees was important for one's position in the camp and survival. They competed with each other for a place to sleep as close to the stove as possible, for higher food rations, for favourable work assignments, a spot in the infirmary, etc. As an individual, no prisoner could have much hope of success, which amounted to survival. It is evident from the testimony of those who were there that a vital role in successfully surviving the camp was played by friends, in particular fellow countrymen. Cooperation with others meant for example helping to fill another's quota if they were sick, sharing food, protecting one another from criminals, but also providing psychological support. Just like the Poles, Finns, Latvians, Estonians and Ruthenians, so too did the Jews manage to stick together and help each other in camps. Compared to other religious and certain ethnic groups, the Jews had the advantage that, during their internment, they could run into a Soviet official, NKVD investigator or guard who were of Jewish origin, who would certainly have had more empathy and understanding for Jews fleeing the Nazis than for, say, Poles or others whom the Soviets considered enemies.

Another advantage that led to a better standing was any special skill or profession that could be utilised in the camp. This was traditionally true of physicians, but also medical students, who obtained positions as camp doctors or nurses. Beyond that, those who knew foreign languages, accountants, musicians, engineers, mechanics, watchmakers and other specialists could be useful to the camp administration in helping to run the camp, repair equipment, translate, write up reports, etc. As the prisoners often mentioned in their recollections, even a short-term special task meant breaking out of the monotonous drudgery and allowed the prisoners to regain their strength. In this regard, the more educated urban Jews, or those who knew multiple languages or trades, had a clear advantage for example over the young, strong Ruthenian refugees from the poor agricultural regions of Subcarpathian Rus, whom the camp leadership tasked with the hardest jobs. This was naturally not just true of Jews. For example, even V. Levora himself obtained the "cushy job" of painting propaganda banners for a time. On the other hand, the prisoners used to doing farm work from an early age, such as the aforementioned young Ruthenians, or the Finns used to a harsh climate, these endured the rough conditions of internment much better than people from the cities or those who had made a living other than by manual labour when they suddenly had to work hard for days on end with minimal food.

There was no official distinction between Jews and non-Jews at Soviet correctional labour camps the way there was at Nazi camps. According to the recollections of some, however, anti-Semitic insinuations and verbal attacks of an anti-Semitic nature were not uncommon on the part of investigators, guards or fellow prisoners, in particular if they were easily identifiable

pious Jews. These were nevertheless more manifestations of "traditional" anti-Semitism stemming from the stereotypical prejudices about Jews or Soviet aversion to religion as such, rather than the racial version known from areas under Nazi rule. The Soviets often even punished expressions of anti-Semitism at the camps. Any religious ceremonies were prohibited, yet some prisoners still tried to secretly observe at least the most important holidays, and at some camps they even tried to uphold basic religious rituals.

Regardless of their origin, all those held at Soviet prisons and camps struggled to survive and faced essentially the same conditions.[12] The chances of surviving, however, whether at a camp or a labour colony, depended on a range of other circumstances as well – for example its geographical position, the organisational abilities of the camp leadership, the camp regime, the living and working conditions, the health care, the period of internment, and the willingness of the camp leadership to release amnestied prisoners. The death rates at camps were high. In this respect, the period from 1941 to 1942 was the most tragic in the history of the Gulag; during that time, approximately 25% of the total number of prisoners died.[13] Based on current research on refugees from Czechoslovakia that were sentenced to the Gulag in the years 1940–1942, we can speak of a mortality rate of roughly 20%. There would undoubtedly have been many more deaths, however, had the prisoners stayed at the internment camps longer. Paradoxically, many of them were saved by war breaking out between Germany and the USSR.

The German attack on the unprepared Soviet Union in June of 1941 forced the Soviet leadership to release a considerable portion of the able-bodied convicts from the camps and prisons. Some Czechoslovaks attempted to get out of internment immediately by applying to join the Red Army, but few were successful.[14] Mass releases only began after the creation of national military formations in the Soviet Union. The Polish were the first to start organising their international troops, in the second half of 1941. Many Czechoslovak prisoners (in particular those from the Ostrava and Těšín regions) took advantage of this and volunteered for what was called Anders' Army[15] due to the opportunity to earn release. The Poles often rejected them, however, much like Polish Jews, and for this reason amnesty for the imprisoned

12 ADLER, Eliyana R.: "Crossing Over. Exploring the Borders of Holocaust Testimony". In: *Yad Vashem Studies*, 2015, vol. 43, n. 2, p. 87.

13 BORÁK, Mečislav: *České stopy v Gulagu* [Czech Traces in the Gulag], p. 81.

14 idem: "Z nacistického koncentračního tábora do sovětských gulagů. Osudy ostravských Židů z transportů do Niska nad Sanem" [From Nazi Concentration Camp to Soviet Gulag. Fates of Ostrava Jews from the Transports to Nisko]. In: *Ostrava. Příspěvky k dějinám a současnosti Ostravy a Ostravska, sv. 25* [Ostrava. Contributions on the History and Present of Ostrava and the Ostrava region, Vol. 25]. Tilia, Ostrava 2011, p. 128–129.

15 Anders' Army – the informal name for Polish military units formed in 1941 and 1942 in the USSR,

Czechoslovaks was crucial, being successfully negotiated only at the start of 1942. At the same time, voluntary enlistment for a Czechoslovak military formation in the USSR began, both for Czechoslovak nationals and for Soviet citizens of "Czechoslovak" ethnicity. Enlistment was essentially viewed as a prerequisite for release.[16] Thanks to the amnesty, most Czechoslovaks earned their freedom, but by no means all those to whom it applied. To a considerable extent it depended on the whim of the commander for the particular camp. Thus many were still dying in Gulag camps at a time when their released compatriots were already fighting on the front, or even after the war was already over (see the case of G. Edelstein on p. 135). For many prisoners, the amnesty came too late. Sick and exhausted releasees died on the way to reach the Czechoslovak unit, or after arriving. "They arrived in Buzuluk and we were forced to immediately transport them to the hospital. Often there was nothing we could do for them though. They were in terrible shape. They arrived starved, careworn, emaciated. They had lived in horrible conditions. Every night shift I had, many of them died."[17]

Unlike the Jewish and non-Jewish refugees from Subcarpathian Rus, often considered by the Soviet authorities to be Hungarian citizens, Jews from the Czech lands tended to have the fortune that no one questioned their nationality. For this reason, at first Jewish prisoners originally from the Czech lands made up a significant portion (as much as 70%) of the 1st battalion of the Czechoslovak military formation in the USSR. Despite the fact that, over the following years of the war, the ethnic breakdown of the Czechoslovak military formation in the East changed considerably, the proportion of Jewish soldiers remained quite significant after the defeat of Nazi Germany and liberation of Czechoslovakia.[18] Many of those who survived the escape from Nazism and the hardships of the Gulag or incarceration then laid down their lives in the bloody fighting on the Eastern Front.

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primarily made up of released Polish Gulag prisoners. The name was in recognition of its commander, General Władysław Anders.

16 BORÁK, Mečislav: *Z nacistického koncentračního tábora do sovětských gulagů* [From Nazi Concentration Camp to Soviet Gulag], p. 48.

17 *Yad Vashem Archive*, interview with Chana Nagel recorded 3 January 1969 by Erich Kulka.

18 VALIŠ, Zdeněk: Ze sovětských gulagů do československé armády. Heliodor Píka v boji za životy Podkarpatorusů [From the Soviet Gulags to the Czechoslovak Army. Heliodor Píka in the Fight for the Lives of Subcarpathians]. *Historie a vojenství. Časopis Vojenského historického ústavu*, 2008, vol. 57, no. 1, p. 57–58. As of 5 February 1943, of 1,892 enlisted persons in the Czechoslovak military unit, there were 141 volunteers that declared Jewish ethnicity – of those 105 in the 1st field battalion, 3 in the reserve regiment and 33 in the reserve company. According to the statistics of 1 November 1944, 16,444 volunteers had signed up for the Czechoslovak military unit, of those 1,040 Jews (though not all Jews declared their Jewish ethnicity).

FORBIDDEN MEMORY

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, most Jews in the reconstituted Czechoslovakia did not have any space for public reflection of their war traumas. Not only was there no demand for it in the euphoric time of victory, but the Jewish war survivors themselves had to deal with a whole range of pressing issues stemming from the loss of relatives, often entire families, homes and property, and from the complicated post-war situation in Czechoslovakia. Those who came from Subcarpathian Rus, which was occupied by the Soviets at the end of the war, had to decide whether to accept Soviet citizenship or to move to Czechoslovakia. Some of them left to build a new home in Palestine, many participated with revolutionary fervour in building the communist establishment in Czechoslovakia, while others still emigrated to the West or tried to assimilate with majority society and forget about everything that had happened to them. What little was published on the topic of Nazi persecution of Jews in the post-war years[19] was gradually overshadowed by the communist interpretation of the events of the war. Remembrance of the war and the Nazi crimes was gradually stripped of its Jewish dimension and emphasis of the communist victims of Nazism and fascism and the resistance of the Communist Party predominated.

It is logical that these conditions in no way provided Jews returning from the Soviet Union with the opportunity to publish their recollections of what they experienced. Unless of course they were free of any information that cast a negative light on the "fraternal" USSR.[20] Sharing one's experience with Soviet reality, including Gulag camps, during conversations with co-workers at the workplace or lending friends one's unpublished memoirs could have serious consequences for returning prisoners in communist Czechoslovakia.[21] Gulag survivors could thus only share their repressed memories of Soviet interment publicly in exile. The same was true of survivors originally from other countries of the Soviet bloc. Many of their memoirs received international attention,[22] but those penned by Czech authors fell by the wayside. What did come out in print was the memoirs of Prague lawyer of Jewish origin and Gulag prisoner in the years 1939–1947 František Polák

19 E.g., the works of authors František R. Kraus, Erich Kulka, Ota Kraus, and Jiří Weil.

20 See the recollections of L. Kellner on p. 266.

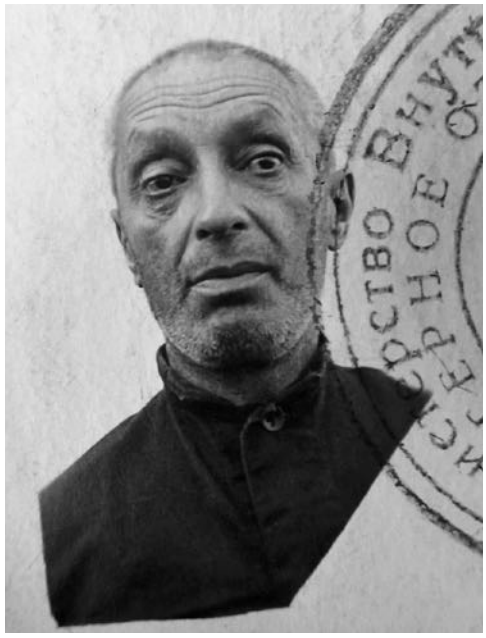
21 See the cases of D. Matik and V. Levora in: HRADILEK, Adam: *Perzekuce uprchlíků z Podkarpatské Rusi do SSSR v letech 1939–1945* [Persecution of Refugees from Subcarpathian Rus in the Years 1939–1945]. Thesis. Technical University of Liberec, 2017, p. 79—80.

22 E.g. GLIKSMAN, Jerzy G.: *Tell the West.* Gresham Press, New York 1948; MARGOLINE, Jules: *La condition inhumaine. Cinq ans dans les camps de concentration sovietiques.* Traduit par N. Berberova & Mina Journot. Calmann-Levi Editeurs, Paris 1949 or HERLING-GRUDZIŃSKI, Gustaw: *A World Apart.* Heinemann, London 1951.





František Polák published his memories of the Soviet camps at his own expense in three volumes in the years 1955–1960 during his exile in the USA. *ÚSTR / Adam Hradilek, copy from ÚSTR*





In 1986, Karel Goliath's *Zápisky ze stalinských koncentráků* was published by the exile publishing house Index. Goliath was a Gulag prisoner in the years 1939–1955. On the left is his photograph from his Gulag release form. *Archives of National Museum in Prague, copy from ÚSTR*





During the recording of the interview with Eugen Libermann in 2012, handwritten memoirs of his time in a Soviet labour camp were found in his home in Tel Aviv, having been written for posterity in the 1960s in Czechoslovakia and then taken to Israel. On the right Libermann's photograph from his Gulag release form. *Czechoslovaks in the Gulag project collection (CVG collection) / Adam Hradilek*

(*Zrcadlo sovětského žaláře* [Mirror of a Soviet Jail], 1955, *Cestou ze sovětského koncentráku* [On the Way from a Soviet Concentration Camp], 1959, *Jak žili a umírali sovětští otroci* [How Soviet Slaves Lived and Died], 1960),[23] and many years later the memoirs of Jewish lawyer from Ostrava and Gulag prisoner in 1939–1955 Karel Goliath (*Zápisky ze stalinských koncentráků* [Notes from the Stalinist Concentration Camps], 1986).[24] In the meantime, Czech-Israeli historian Erich Kulka gave room for dozens of former prisoners to provide testimony on the Soviet camps at the end of the 60s and in the 70s, conducting personal correspondence interviews with them as an employee of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem as part of a research project focused on Jewish participation in the anti-Nazi resistance. Kulka used the testimony collected in Israel from Czechoslovak immigrants with Soviet experience to compile the publication *Jews in Svoboda's Army in the Soviet Union*, which first came

23 All these works were published by F. Polák in Czech at his own expense in New York. Fifty years later, they came out in a collected edition POLÁK, František: *Sedm let v Gulagu. Vzpomínky pražského advokáta na sovětské pracovní tábory* [Seven Years in the Gulag. A Prague Attorney's Memories of Soviet Labour Camps] (eds. Adam Hradilek – Zdeněk Vališ). Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Prague 2015.

24 GOLIATH-GOROVSKÝ, Karel: *Zápisky ze stalinských koncentráků* [Notes from Stalinist Concentration Camps], Index, Köln 1986.

out in 1977 in Jerusalem.[25] Aside from a detailed analysis of the participation of Czechoslovak Jewry in the fight against Nazism, the book also contains a chapter dedicated to the repression against refugees in the USSR and the conditions at labour and prison camps. The original audio recordings of the interviews, transcripts, and correspondence with witnesses and other documents are stored in the archives of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the Yad Vashem archives.[26]

After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, Anna Hyndráková and Anna Lorencová from the Jewish Museum in Prague could record recollections of Soviet persecution as part of an extensive oral history project by the museum, with nine of these stored in the archives of the Shoah Documentation Department of the Jewish Museum. The most extensive oral history project focused on memories of the Holocaust is the Shoah Foundation project[27], initiated by US director Steven Spielberg, which managed to procure nearly 52,000 recordings with witnesses from 56 countries in 32 languages in the years 1994–1999. Of these, 4,613 were conducted with people originally from Czechoslovakia. These include 31 interviews with survivors of Soviet repression, in particular prisoners of the Gulag and internment camps. Thematic recollections are also found in the archives of the Czech association Post Bellum (or rather its Memory of Nations archive) and the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes. In addition to unique interviews, in the years 2006–2015, employees of these institutions (among them the authors of this publication) conducted interviews with the people already interviewed by E. Kulka, but several decades later.

The presented publication contains twenty-one interviews obtained from the aforementioned collections. These represent a significant portion of Czechoslovak memories of both the Holocaust and political repression in the USSR. They supplement the already published memoirs of Czech and Czechoslovak nationals of Jewish origin affected by repression in the USSR in the pre-war period (e.g., the already mentioned memoirs of H. Frischer, see p. 12) and the post-war period (e.g., those by F. Polák, K. Goliath, see p. 18,

25 The first incomplete Czech edition came out in 1979 under the exile publishing house Sixty-Eight Publishers in Toronto. In Czechoslovakia the book was published shortly after the fall of the communist regime, in 1990, by the publishing house Naše vojsko.

26 *Yad Vashem Archives*, f. P 25 – Erich Kulka Archive. Testimonies collected by Erich Kulka regarding the war period; *Hebrew University in Jerusalem*, f. Holocaust Oral History Collection, "Jews in the Czechoslovak Army in World War II" (Project 72). Some of the interviews from the collection are available in audio recording and print form on the internet: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZEGL2eD5gA1q Ozp2EotujkmZzjgrAoIf (accessed 25 November 2017).

27 Today the archive of recordings is cared for by the USC Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California in the USA. Popularisation of the archives and access to them in the Czech Republic is provided by the Malach Centre.

or Blanka Rubinová,[28] as well as those by other Czechoslovaks, e.g. V. Levora, see p. 13, in particular Carpathian Ruthenians).[29]

In most cases, research on Soviet repression was not the primary objective of the aforementioned oral history projects under which the interviews took place. These were predominantly recorded with the goal of studying another historical topic or period, moreover by people who did not know a lot about the Gulag and the whole Soviet repressive apparatus. Erich Kulka, for example, focused primarily on the topic of the resistance, while the Shoah Foundation editors were collecting the memories of Holocaust survivors. Experiences from the Gulag were recorded as a kind of by-product. Some interviews thus only touch on the topic and hurry along to another, while others, generally where the survivor had a particular rhetorical talent or the interviewer's curiosity was piqued, delve into the issue of Soviet repression in detail. This disparity of resources was a particularly limiting factor in assembling this publication. Given the dearth of not only personal testimonies but also other historical sources, all of them nevertheless constitute a significant contribution to learning about Soviet repression against Czechoslovak citizens. Despite the fact that we can today reconstruct some life stories in quite some detail on the basis of declassified and accessible NKVD documents, the preserved testimonies of the survivors remain highly valuable for the study of the issue in question, as they provide a different, personal perspective on the subject, in contrast to the impersonal, cold and machine-generated investigation files of the Soviet security forces.

The interviews were selected based on several criteria. The main concern was their informative value, the details in their description of events, and the scope. Another determining criterion was the manner in which the person had found themselves in Soviet territory, with the goal of balancing as much as possible the main routes by which Czechoslovak Jews fled to the Soviet Union, according to which the book is divided into chapters.

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28 See the chapter "Race and Class Enemies. The Story of Blanka Rubinová and Other Czechoslovak Jews Taken to the USSR After the War", in: DVOŘÁK, Jan – FORMÁNEK, Jaroslav – HRADILEK, Adam: *Čechoslováci v Gulagu* [Czechoslovaks in the Gulag], p. 152–166.

29 E.g. DEMČÍK, Jan: *Můj útěk do gulagu* [My Escape to the Gulag]. Literary adaptation by Karel Richter based on memoirs. Česká expedice, Prague 1995, 2nd edition Cody Print, Prague 2001; LUŤANSKÝ, Štěpán: *Pečorlag. Útěk do ráje (1939–1942)* [Pechorlag. Escape to Paradise (1939–1942)]. Argo, Prague 1999; PAVLIČ, Jiří: *Přežil jsem Gulag. Vyprávění po padesáti letech* [I Survived the Gulag. The Story Fifty Years Later]. MNP, Kruh v Podbezdězí 2000; KRIČFALUŠI, Michal: *Účtování s časem. Díl první – V náručí gulagu* [Settling Accounts with Time. Part One – In the Arms of the Gulag]. Literary adaptation by Karel Richter. Česká expedice, Prague 2004; IZAJ, Michal: *Příběhy mého života* [Stories of My Life]. Československá obec legionářská, Prague 2011; HAJDUR, Vasil: *Z gulagu přes Buzuluk do Prahy. Vzpomínky frontového vojáka*[From the Gulag via Buzuluk to Prague. Memoirs of a Frontline Soldier]. Futura, Prague 2011.

Due to the limited scope of the publication and its narrow focus, the interviews are not published in full here. Only passages that describe the circumstances of leaving for the USSR and the repression on the part of the Soviet security authorities, from arrest to interrogation and internment at camps through to release were chosen. The interviews are however presented in biographical vignettes summarising the life journey of the interviewees. These were drawn up on the basis of the information contained in the interviews and, where possible, with the help of findings obtained from surviving relatives or other sources. In particular the recently declassified documents and photographs made available from the NKVD archives are a source of important information and also supplement the interviews with images.

I.
REFUGEES FROM THE PROTECTORATE OF BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA

ROBERT SYLTEN (b. 1902 in Orlová), arrested in 1939 during an attempt to illegally cross the Soviet-Romanian border. Sentenced to five years in the Gulag. Interned at the Knyazhpogost camp (Sevzheldorlag) in 1940–1942. *DAZO* ▶


АНОВИЧ 1902

Up until 1938, Czechoslovakia was seen as a country in which, unlike many other countries of central and eastern Europe, anti-Semitism was not particularly prominent. The events of the following months would however show how quickly the situation could change.

The Munich Agreement came as a huge shock for all democratically minded citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic. It not only precipitated a deep domestic political crisis, but also indignation, disappointment and apathy. Proportionately to the deepening problems in society, nationalism and chauvinism began to flourish, with anger being increasingly directed against the Jewish refugees that were primarily coming in from the German-occupied border region, but also from Austria and Germany. Yet even local Jews, including those who had declared Czechoslovak nationality and been loyal to the republic, could no longer be sure of a carefree existence. The deepening sense of hopelessness forced many to consider the option of fleeing before the mounting threat. In light of the ever-deteriorating social climate in the Second Republic, emigrating to safety abroad was an increasingly relevant draw for Jews of all segments of society.

Jewish emigration posed a major problem for the already weakened state however. The number of refugees was considerable, while the options for emigration limited. Legal emigration abroad was hindered in general by the averse stance of most European countries, who gave priority to political refugees, with only a predetermined, limited number of Jewish immigrants accepted. Emigration to more exotic destinations, particularly South America or Africa, required significant financial resources that most lacked. Moreover, the preparations and formalities for Jewish refugees being accepted were generally quite lengthy. The departure date was therefore often repeatedly postponed and so most Jews did not manage to leave before the Nazi occupation in March.[30]

Due to these aforementioned problems with emigrating legally, illegal emigration began to intensify as early as October 1938. The main refugee routes led via Slovakia, Hungary and Romania to Palestine, and more notably through the newly delineated border region of Czech Silesia[31] to Poland. Over

30 For more on Jewish emigration and organisational issues of emigration, see e.g. BENDA, Jan: *Útěky a vyhánění z pohraničí českých zemí 1938–1939* [Escapes and Expulsions from the Czech Borderlands 1938–1939*]*. Karolinum, Prague 2013, p. 399–419; PRZYBYLOVÁ, Blažena: "Emigrace ostravského židovského obyvatelstva ve 30. a 40. letech 20. století" [Emigration of Ostrava Jewish population in the 1930s and 40s]. In: *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty Ostravské univerzity – Historie/Historica* [Collection of Works of the Ostrava University Faculty of Arts – History/Historica], 1995, No. 153, p. 63–65.

31 On the day the Munich Agreement was signed, 30 September 1938, Poland gave the Czechoslovak government an ultimatum demanding a significant portion of the Czechoslovak Těšín region (known as Záolží – Zaolzie, in English Trans-Olza). The Czechoslovak government gave its consent the following day. In the first days of October, Poland took over the majority of the eas-



EGON MORGENSTERN (1914), a native of Fryštát, fled to Poland in June 1939 with his brother and sister. During a Polish police raid against illegal refugees however, he was arrested and jailed at a Krakow prison. He was only released when the war broke out in autumn 1939. He had been left without documents though, and thus decided to go to Lithuania with the goal of getting to Sweden. In the city of Dvinsk (today Daugavpils), he was detained by the Latvian gendarmes and didn't get out of prison until the Soviet occupation of the Baltics. Later he was transferred to a prison in Vilnius, where he was sentenced to 5 years. He served his sentence at one of the Pechorlag camps in northern Russia, being transferred to Karlag in Kazahkstan in 1943. He was only liberated in 1945. He never returned to Czechoslovakia and lived in Vilnius, Lithuania until his death in 2016.

CVG collection of interviews, interview with Egon Morgenstern recorded 20 February 2011 by Jan Dvořák; POSKOČIL, Stanislav: Egon Morgenstern. Přežil jsem peklo gulagu [Egon Morgenstern. I Survived the Hell of the Gulag]. Nakladatelství P3K, Prague 2015.

the several following months, hundreds managed to flee Czecho-Slovakia, and not only Jews.

The tendency to leave logically rose manyfold after the Nazis occupied the rest of the Czech lands in March 1939. After this, the largest wave of emigration the country had seen arose, with Jews, who were rightly afraid of the occupiers' anti-Jewish policies, clearly predominating. At the start of the occupation, the option for Jews to emigrate abroad through official channels was still open, but after Poland was attacked and World War II broke out in September 1939, legal Jewish emigration from the Protectorate ceased to be pertinent.[32] Most of those interested in emigrating thus had practically no option other than choosing illegal emigration. The illegal routes that refugees

tern territory – i.e., the Czechoslovak part of Těšín Silesia. Czechoslovakia retained the smallest part of the Silesian territory – a truncated Frýdek region and part of Silesian Ostrava.

32 KREJČOVÁ, Helena – BEDNAŘÍK, Petr: "Emigration after the Munich Agreement". In: *Exil v Praze a v Československu 1918–1938/Exile in Prague and Czechoslovakia 1918–1938*. Pražská edice, Prague 2005, p. 206—207; ROTHKIRCHENOVÁ, Livie: *Osud Židů v Čechách a na Moravě v letech 1938–1945 [The fate of Jews in Bohemia and Moravia in 1938–1945]*. In: ROTHKIRCHENOVÁ, Livie – SCHMIDTOVÁ-HARTMANNOVÁ, Eva –DAGAN, Avigdor (eds.): *Osud Židů v Protektorátu 1939–1945* [The Fate of Jews in the Protectorate 1939–1945]. Trizonia, Prague 1991, p. 61.

had been taking in the previous months did not change after the Protectorate was established. There was still the option of fleeing via Slovakia and then by the Balkan route to Palestine, but most refugees once again chose the relatively simplest route to neighbouring Poland, this despite the fact that the Polish state had long not been providing any refugees, let alone Jewish ones, almost any possibilities for long-term stay and livelihood. The maximum concession was a short transit stay with the condition that the emigrant would soon depart for another country. Yet nor did the Jewish refugees from occupied Czechoslovakia generally plan to connect their future with Poland. They themselves also believed that it would be but a mere transfer station on their way to the West, particularly to the USA or UK, or potentially Palestine. The activity of support organisations in Katowice, Krakow and Warsaw ended up facilitating emigration for a small number of Jews, but most of them did not manage to obtain the required departure permit in time.[33]

There were no longer many options for them other than emigrating to the West: one of these was voluntarily entering the Czechoslovak military unit that started being formed at the end of April 1939 in Krakow (only officially recognised as the Czechoslovak Legion after the invasion of Poland). This variant could really only be considered by young men however. Despite the initial reluctance of the Czechoslovak military authorities to admit Jews, in the end Jewish volunteers made up a significant portion of the formation.[34]

The option of leaving for the countries neighbouring Poland was also still in play however: south to Romania, north to the Baltic countries, or east to the Soviet Union. The willingness of Soviet authorities to admit Jewish refugees at that time was not strong though. On the contrary, the immigration policy of the USSR was highly restrictive. At the end of the 1930s, the USSR was the only major power to refuse Jewish refugees threatened by Hitler, on the grounds that they were primarily representatives of the middle class who would have a hard time adapting to Soviet society and for whose critical situation the Soviet Union bears no responsibility, as it was a conflict amongst capitalist states.[35] This was also reflected in the Soviets' negative attitude towards the League of Nations High Commission for Refugees, underpinned by concerns that the activities thereof could include support for anti-Soviet refugees.

33 KULKA, Erich: *Židé v československé Svobodově armádě* [Jews in Svoboda's Army in the Soviet Union], p. 18–31; BORÁK, Mečislav: *První deportace evropských Židů* [First Deportations of European Jews], p. 38–39.

34 KULKA, Erich.: *Židé v československé Svobodově armádě* [Jews in Svoboda's Army in the Soviet Union], p. 35–38. Members of the Czechoslovak military group in Poland later became members of three Czechoslovak foreign military units (in France, in the Middle East and in the USSR). Czechoslovak Jews played a major role in all of these.

35 BORÁK, Mečislav: *Z nacistického koncentračního tábora do sovětských gulagů* [From Nazi Concentration Camp to Soviet Gulag], p. 110–111.

It also adopted a negative stance on the international conference in Évian, France that took place in July 1938, where there was discussion of the fate of the persecuted European Jews and Jewish emigrants. It called the conference a conspiracy to encourage sabotage activities by "Trotskyist" emigrants.[36]

For refugees from Czechoslovakia, the conditions for emigrating to the USSR were further complicated after the definitive collapse of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. The privilege of legal emigration and admittance to the USSR continued to only apply for a limited circle of selected communists, pre-selected in Moscow. Even more significant complications arose after the signing of the German-Soviet Treaty of Non-Aggression in August of 1939 (known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), one of the results of which was limitation of the diplomatic relations between the Czechoslovak government-in-exile and Soviet representatives.[37]

Getting into the USSR legally was thus nearly impossible after 1939, not only for Jews but also for the majority of Czechoslovak citizens. For this reason they had to resort to illegally crossing the state border. Up until the war broke out, however, this was mostly just individuals or small groups, generally left-wing people influenced by Soviet propaganda. Others were hardly interested in emigrating to the USSR, but in several months they would no longer have a choice.

When the Soviet-German coalition was formed at the end of summer 1939, Poland ceased to be taken as an independent state. On 1 September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the west, and seventeen days later the Soviets would enter Poland from the east. The partitioning of Poland between the Third Reich and USSR was soon complete.

Even though no one could yet imagine in 1939 how far the Nazis would go in their terror against the racially and ideologically "unsuitable" population, the question of fleeing from further persecution became pressing, especially for Jews. In autumn of 1939, however, both the locals and the refugees still lingering in the western parts of Nazi-occupied Poland (including Czechoslovak Jews) suddenly found themselves at a dead end. The option of leaving for the West became essentially unrealistic, and thus the only viable solution seemed to be going east – meaning to the areas controlled by the Soviets.[38] Though there was still the option of going south to Romania or north to the Baltics, as

36 POLONSKY, Antony: *The Jews in Poland and Russia. Volume III: 1914 to 2008*. The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, Oxford – Portland, Oregon 2012, p. 396.

37 BORÁK, Mečislav: *České stopy v Gulagu* [Czech Traces in the Gulag], p. 78.

38 From the first days of the German invasion of Poland, hundreds of thousands of Jews (estimates range around 300,000) began to flee the Nazi-occupied zone, rightly fearing possible arrest, anti-Jewish attacks or other persecution. After the German-Soviet demarcation line was established 28 September 1939, the wave of refugees was further fuelled by the Jews driven out of the border areas by the Germans.