

Nowogródek – The Story of a *Shtetl*

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Tracing the story of Jewish life and death in the small Jewish townships (*shtetlach* in Yiddish) in what is today's western Belarus and western Ukraine just prior to and during World War II is both challenging and complicated. As I have noted elsewhere, only very few monographic studies exist on these *shtetlach*,¹ other than those that I have published.² The need for monographic studies on East European *shtetlach*, beyond the obvious historical, cultural, and social importance of these townships, lies in the fact that a high proportion of the Jewish population in pre-war Poland – possibly between 30 and 40 percent – lived in *shtetlach*.

- 1 Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany: Poles, Jews and Ukrainians, 1919–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002). Professor Omer Bartov is working on a detailed monograph on Buczacz in eastern Galicia. See also: Rose Lehman, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence: Poles and Jews in a Small Galician Town* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2001), on Jaslicka in Western Galicia; Theo Richmond, *Konin: A Quest* (New York: Vintage, 1996); Jack Kagan, *Novogrudok: The History of a Shtetl* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2006); Peter Duffy, *The Bielski Brothers: The True Story of Three Men Who Defied the Nazis, Saved 1200 Jews, and Built a Village in the Forest* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), which also discusses Nowogródek; Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost: A Search for Six of the Six Million* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) on Bolechow in Eastern Galicia; and Anatol Reignier, *Damals in Bolechow* (Munich: Btb bei Goldmann, 1997).
- 2 Yehuda Bauer, "Jewish Baranowicze in the Holocaust," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 31 (2003), pp. 95–152; idem, "Buczacz and Krzemieniec: The Story of Two Towns during the Holocaust," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 33 (2005), pp. 245–306; idem, "Kurzeniec – A Jewish Shtetl in the Holocaust," *Yalkut Moreshet* (English edition), vol. 1 (2003), pp. 132–157. Another article, on Sarny and Rokitno (in today's northwestern Ukraine), has appeared in Steven T. Katz, ed., *The Shtetl: New Evaluations* (New York: New York University Press, 2004). Pp. 254–289. For a preliminary summary, see idem, "Ostpolnische Shtetlach während der Shoah," in Alfred Gottwald, Norbert Kampe, Peter Klein, eds., *NS-Gewaltherrschaft* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, 2005), pp. 290–306.

Elsewhere I have defined a *shtetl* as a township in which between 1,000 and 15,000 Jews constituted at least one-third of the total population; in which Jewish life was determined by the Jewish calendar; and in which the Jews had developed their typical network of social, religious, and economic voluntary organizations led by what was usually an oligarchic — albeit elected — body of representatives (the *kehillah*, or *kahal*). As it was impossible to describe and analyze the huge number of *shtetlach* in what is usually considered to be Eastern Europe, or even Poland, I chose to concentrate on the *shtetlach* in what were the eastern marches (*kresy*) of inter-war Poland. I attempted to describe and analyze Jewish life there in the 1930s and through the Holocaust years. Here I will concentrate on the old and famous *shtetl* of Nowogródek (Novogrudok) in what is now western Belarus.³

Sources for this research are very problematic. Little of the pre-war documentation of internal Jewish life has survived, and the Polish, and later Soviet and German, sources do not tell us much about the Jews, except for external facts, such as whether they were loyal to the Polish or Soviet regimes. But even these sources are scarce, and the Germans had, of course, no interest whatsoever in internal Jewish matters in these areas. Non-Jewish sources, therefore, can provide us mainly with the framework and the external circumstances in which Jewish life developed and, later, was destroyed. We are dependent to a large extent on oral testimony, as diaries and letters, too, are generally rare.⁴

Despite all the well-known problems concerning postwar oral testimonies, when there are fairly substantial numbers, as in the case of Nowogródek, cross-checking of testimonies (including videotaped ones) can provide more than reasonably accurate information. This is the main methodology used in the present article, although German postwar investigations and Soviet materials were also consulted.⁵

3 This article is the result, largely, of close cooperation between Dr. David Silberklang and myself. Together we conducted a seminar on Nowogródek at Hebrew University in the fall semester of 2005/6. I would like to express my sincere thanks to David Silberklang for all his help, as well as to Shlomit Shulchani, who translated Russian documents for us. Most importantly, too, Mr. Jack Kagan of London provided us with a great amount of material that made this article possible.

4 There is one diary from Nowogródek, by Beinish (Benjamin) Berkowicz; see below.

5 I wish to thank Mr. Jack Kagan for having made Soviet materials from Belorussian archives available for this article.

However, two points that I have dealt with elsewhere⁶ must be stressed. First, that there is no guarantee that the survivors — who, in the case of Nowogródek, are, according to testimonies, 6.7 percent of the original Jewish population — are representative of all the Jews, as here they consisted mostly of young people and a few children. Second, these were people who were relatively well off, as they came from families of merchants, traders, and, mainly, craftsmen. Very few survivors came from really poor families. The reasons are obvious: people with some, even limited, means, could buy more food, or exchange goods for food, or were able to pay peasants who hid them, even if after a time the money ran out. Again, this makes any conclusions that we may reach problematic.

Nowogródek (which means “new township”; Yid.: Navahredok, Belorussian: Navahrudok) was reputedly founded by the Kievan Prince Jan Mudry in 1044,⁷ in the very thickly forested area south of the Nieman River. Two very large, dense forests are within a relatively short distance from the town: the Naliboki forests to the northeast; and the Lipiczanski forests to the southwest. The town was on a trade route from Lithuania to Moscow. Jews settled there in the fifteenth century at the latest — but most likely much before that — when the Grand Duchy of Lithuania ruled the town,⁸ and more settled there after the unification of Lithuania with Poland in 1569. A demand by the townspeople to establish a Jewish ghetto (1563) was rejected, but the relations with the Polish burghers appear to have remained strained. As elsewhere in Poland, it was the aristocracy — in this case, the Radziwils (after 1772, the Wittgensteins) — that regarded the Jews as being useful to them. In Nowogródek some Jews lived in a special area of the town that belonged to the Radziwils and which was outside the jurisdiction of the burghers.

Most of the houses were built of wood, and, consequently, there were many fires; in addition, there were outbreaks of cholera (1630) and wars (in 1655, the Russians occupied the town, and when the Poles came back, there were pogroms). By 1765, there were 12,030 Jews in the whole county; in 1790, the town had 394 houses and 3,000 inhabit-

6 Bauer, “Buczacz and Krzemieniec,” p. 247.

7 Or perhaps it was by Yaropolk, son of Vladimir Monomach, in 1116. In any case, it was founded by the Kievan princes.

8 In 1252, it was the capital of the Duchy of Lithuania.

ants, and the majority were Jews. In the county as a whole, 27 percent of all the houses belonged to Jews. It is clear, therefore, that the Jews were a major element in the town even before the nineteenth century. As a result of the third partition of Poland in 1795, Nowogródek came under Czarist rule, and Jews fared very poorly. Internally, the old orthodox tradition prevailed, rather than the Hasidic one, and, at the end of the nineteenth century, many turned to the *Mussar* (ethical) variant of orthodoxy, which was propagated in neighboring Lithuania by Rabbi Israel Lipkin (“Salanter”). From 1906, the town boasted the Beth Yosef *mussar yeshivah* led by Rabbi Yosef Yoyzl Hurwitz.

In 1897, Nowogródek had 5,015 Jews, out of a total population of 7,887 (63.6 percent), but, as the economic situation was very bad, from 1882 on, a wave of emigrants left, mainly to the United States, to seek a better life. In 1914, there were 5,584 Jews out of 8,457 (66 percent). By 1924, when the strict quota system for immigration was established in the United States, an estimated 4,500 Jews had left the *shtetl*. In time their financial help was to make an important difference in the life of the Jews who remained behind.

During and immediately after World War I, Nowogródek changed hands several times — from Russians to Germans, Poles, Soviets, and again Poles — making life very miserable for all the inhabitants, including the Jews. After the Treaty of Riga between the USSR and Poland (1920), the township came under Polish administration. In 1921, there were 4,500 Jews out of a total of 9,230 (48.8 percent), and by 1931, 6,309 out of 13,252 (47.6 percent). The population grew, despite the economic crisis, and it is estimated that, by 1939, there were some 6,500 Jews in the town, who constituted roughly half the population.⁹ Nowogródek was also the county seat, with the Court of the Justice of Peace located there. This large building would serve as a ghetto under the Germans.

Jews developed the usual voluntary organizations: an elected *kehillah*, a branch of the Polish-Jewish health organization (TOZ), groups

9 *Pinkas Hakehillot, Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities, Poland*, vol. 8 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2006), p. 430; Jack Kagan and Dov Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust with the Russian Partisans* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1998), passim; *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, edited by Israel Gutman (New York and London: Macmillan, 1990), has 7,000 Jews in the town in 1939, but I believe this is exaggerated.

to aid poor brides and to look after the poor generally. There was a soup kitchen for most of the time, which met the needs of the poorest inhabitants. In addition, there was a sports organization (Maccabi), short-lived weekly papers, a trade school, a library, some choirs, a Jewish theater, an old-age home, a Jewish hospital (there was also a general one), and an orphanage. The JDC (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, or the Joint) supported a Free Loan Society (Gmiluss Chessed), and a Small Loans' Bank for the lower middle class. Much emphasis was put on education: there were traditional, religious *cheders*, mainly for the pre-school age, although some of these were more modern. There were three synagogues and quite a number of small prayer groups (*kloyzes*), organized according to trades. A middle *yeshivah* and a higher *yeshivah* engaged their students in Talmudic studies. Rabbi Meir Abovitz, an opponent of Zionism, led the Beth Yosef *yeshivah* in the 1930s, whereas the town rabbi, Meir Meiorowicz, was a Zionist.

The town had several schools: the very popular seven-grade Hebrew school (Tarbut), founded in 1918, was part of a country-wide network of Tarbut schools; and there were also a Zionist religious school (Tushiya), a Yiddish school, a Polish gymnasium to which only a few Jewish children were admitted, and a trade school for both girls and boys. By the 1930s, orthodox establishments were declining. Jews spoke Yiddish, Russian, or Belorussian, while the younger generation used Polish and, increasingly, Hebrew. Much of Jewish organized life was kept alive in the late 1920s and early 1930s by the efforts of the emigrants from the *shtetl* in New York and their *landsmannschaft*. The philanthropist Alexander Harkavy, author of a commercially successful Yiddish-English dictionary, visited his hometown twice, the second time in 1931, and organized major financial help. Before his second visit he sent \$40,000, a huge sum in those days, and much of public Jewish life in Nowogródek maintained itself thanks to him. An additional \$15,000 was sent in the 1930s by other relatives in the United States.

The majority of the Jews were lower middle-class — small shopkeepers, a very large number of craftsmen, and merchants — while the poor included peddlers, the unemployed, and manual laborers (water-carriers, etc.). There was a close connection to agriculture, as most Jewish families owned or leased parcels of land on which they grew vegetables and fruits and maintained cows, goats, and poultry. The town

had almost no paved roads, and there were only a few stone buildings, most of them in the center of town.¹⁰ There were a few relatively rich people, as was the case in other *shtetlach*. There was no proper railway, and the nearest station was at Nowojelna, some 23 kilometers away.¹¹ During World War I, however, a local, military, narrow-gauge rail connection was built to Nowojelna. The *shtetl* served as a center for the villages and smaller townships around it, and twice-weekly market-days were held; most of the stalls were Jewish.

The Great Depression hit Nowogródek as it did all the *kresy*, and with it came ethnic tensions. The relationships with the predominantly Polish townspeople deteriorated, and antisemitism increased. No Jew could be a government official, judge, or policeman, and all over Poland the government encouraged Poles to boycott Jewish shops and traders. A more liberal local Polish majority prevented serious boycotts in Nowogródek, though extreme Polish nationalists caused some trouble. The Belorussian peasants were less hostile, and the Jews maintained fairly good relations with many villages and individual peasants. The Belorussian minority in the town, however, was less friendly.¹²

As in other *shtetlach*, the 1930s were a time of change. The influence of the religious leadership declined, and the younger generations veered toward secular movements; mainly the mutually hostile Zionist parties and the anti-Zionist and anti-religious socialist Bund; there was also a small but active group of underground Communists. Traditional customs continued to be observed, but the loyalties were changing. Young people educated in the Tarbut school and the Zionist youth movements — from the left-wing Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir (founded in 1927), which was very influential, through He-Halutz ha-Za'ir (founded in 1920, which united with the Freiheit movement in 1935), to the right-wing Betar, and all the other groups in-between — began speaking Hebrew with one another. The adult Zionists were mainly members of the General Zionist and Poalei Zion parties. In the 1935 elections to the Zionist Congress, Poalei Zion received 55 percent of

10 Yakov Berman, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education (SF), video 26224.

11 The railway was not available to civilians, but it was used by the military, including the Soviets in 1940/1.

12 Somewhat more than half of the non-Jewish population was Polish; less than half were Belorussians; and there was a small Tartar Moslem minority as well.

the local votes. The Bund (founded in 1902) was less influential in the town. Smaller groups of Seimists and Folkspartei adherents (middle-class movements hoping for a democratic Poland with Jewish cultural autonomy) also existed. It appears quite clear, however, that, contrary to the situation in western and central Poland, the decisive influence in Nowogródek was that of Zionism. Organized orthodoxy was definitively declining.¹³

Prior to World War II, Jewish influence in the town could still be maintained. The leader of the General Zionists, Avraham Ostashinsky, was the deputy mayor of Nowogródek (the mayor was a liberal Pole, Julian Malynicz). Other Zionists – David Ziskind and Notke Sucharsky (later a Bielski partisan) – were on the city council, while Abraham Malbin, also a Zionist, was head of the *kehillah*. Sucharsky served on the *kehillah* council as well. In early 1939, the Polish government dissolved the *kehillah*, and it is not clear who led it until the outbreak of the war. Polish attitudes became very harsh, and a subsidy for the local Jewish schools was abolished.¹⁴

Soviet Rule

As a result of the Soviet-German agreement of August 23, 1939, and the ensuing German invasion of Poland, Soviet troops entered the *kresy* on September 17. They arrived in Nowogródek on the same day and were welcomed by the Jews and, to a large extent, by the Belorusians. The latter seized the opportunity to attack the Polish landlords in pogrom-like fashion.¹⁵ For the Jews, the Soviets were obviously preferable to the Germans, as rumors about German atrocities against Jews had arrived with the first refugees from German-occupied areas. “The

13 A film made in the summer of 1931, on the occasion of Alexander Harkavy’s visit, was made on a Sabbath, showing people coming out of the synagogue, many of the women in sleeveless dresses, most of the men without head-covering; see in Yad Vashem Pedagogic Center, Nowogródek, V1060. The local weekly newspaper, *Navaredker Lebn* (Jewish National and University Library, PF1-289, and at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Library) reported on balls and dances practically in every issue.

14 *Navaredker Lebn*, March 31, 1939.

15 “Some aristocrats (*pritzim*) hid with Jews”; in Yehoshua Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto and in the Partisan Movement* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Beit Alim, 1988), p. 89.

Soviet Union was, in our eyes, the safest bastion against the spread of fascism.”¹⁶

As in all of the *kresy*, the Jewish community and its many organizations were dissolved, along with parallel non-Jewish organizations; the Poles were dealt with especially harshly. There was no order to close synagogues, but it seems that they ceased to function by their own accord, because the taxes on them and on the rabbis’ incomes became prohibitive. The Hebrew school was turned into a Soviet seven-grade Yiddish school (Soviet-style Yiddish), with the former Zionist principal¹⁷ now teaching in the Stalinist spirit; many Jewish children went to Russian- and Belorussian-language schools, as these promised preparation for higher studies (there were, of course, no Yiddish universities). In October 1939, all the shops were nationalized. There was no opposition to the dissolution of youth movements, political parties, and the like, and we do not know of any clandestine attempts to keep these institutions alive in any form. A problematic attempt by the Polish-German historian Bogdan Musial to celebrate Zionist resistance to the Soviets certainly cannot be applied to Nowogródek.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Jews managed quite well. Many got jobs in various offices, or as manual workers, and quite a number apparently identified with the new regime.¹⁹ Shopkeepers stashed away some of their goods

16 Benzion Yevnowicz, Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), O.3/2081; Eliahu Berkowicz, in *Pinkas Navaredok* (Yiddish), edited by Eliezer Yerushalmi (Tel-Aviv: Irgun Yotz’ei Navaredok, 1963), pp. 237–241; Andrzej Żbikowski, “Why did Jews Welcome the Soviet Armies?” *Polin*, 13 (2000), pp. 62–72.

17 Moshe Steinberg was his name.

18 Bogdan Musial, “Jewish Resistance in Poland’s Eastern Borderlands During the Second World War, 1939–1941,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2004), pp. 371–382. Musial trusts the Soviet secret service, who reported “anti-Soviet” activity, mainly by Betar, the right-wing Zionist movement, and also by the left-wing Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir and Dror (misspelt ‘Deror’). In fact, it appears that Jewish informers accused well-known Betar people who had been active before the war. There was little or no activity by Betar. The leftists did try to organize, mostly for educational purposes and to keep the movements alive somehow, with great courage and self-sacrifice. They certainly were not anti-Soviet. Their leaders were largely caught and tried, and Musial vastly exaggerates their influence. He misunderstands their ideology and the differences between them (Yitzhak Zuckerman [Antek], later the deputy commander of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, is misidentified as a member of Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir; he belonged to Dror).

19 Benzion Yevnowicz, YVA, O.3/2081; apparently, shops were closed even before the order to do so was issued: Eliahu Berkowicz, in *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 237–241.

before their shops were closed and then sold these stocks to supplement their insufficient earnings.²⁰ The Soviet system, with its inbuilt corruption, forced people to engage in black-market operations, usually on a small and personal scale. This was sufficient to keep going, despite the constant threat of severe punishment if one was discovered. In this atmosphere denunciations were common: “Informers fared best of all. If you didn’t like someone, you informed on them.”²¹

Refugees from German-occupied Poland arrived in late 1939 and early 1940. Their numbers are not clear but seem to have been around 1,000. They told stories about German brutalities, “but [we] refused to believe them.” Many of them were apparently deported to Siberia by the Soviets in the four deportations we know about: February 8–10, 1940; April 13–15, 1940; July 1940; and June 14–20, 1941.²² According to the figures of the Polish government-in-exile, 52 percent of the deportees from the *kresy* were ethnic Poles, 30 percent Jews, and 18 percent Belorussians and Ukrainians. Jews were about 10 percent of the total population of the *kresy*, while Poles were about 30 percent, so the number of Jews deported by the Soviets was disproportionately higher than even that of the Poles. However, it seems fairly clear that the treatment of the Poles was harsher, and indeed brutal, as compared to that of the others. All over the *kresy* there was a discernible pattern: among the local Jews, relatively few were deported, and these were usually political leaders and very wealthy families; most of the deportees came from among the refugees, first and foremost those who had responded positively to an announcement that they could return to German-occupied Poland.²³

20 Nahum Kushnir (YVA, O.3/3929) says that his father, who had owned two shops and was therefore considered “bourgeois,” organized a cooperative (*artel*) and did quite well. After the Soviets had left the town, he discovered that he had been on the next deportation list.

21 Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, pp. 136–137.

22 Kagan, *Novogradok*, pp. 129, 137. The quote is from page 36.

23 Jan Tomasz Gross, *Revolution From Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland’s Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 269. The figures are disputed; see Leonid Rein, “Local Collaboration in the Execution of the ‘Final Solution’ in Nazi-Occupied Belorussia,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2006), p. 386. In any case, it is clear that many more Jews were deported than their percentage in the population.

German Rule

The German attack on the Soviet Union began on June 22, 1941, and Nowogródek was first bombed on June 24, and then very heavily on June 28. On that last day the Germans destroyed the central part of the town, where the Jews, especially the middle class, had their homes, by causing a firestorm. There were many casualties, and Jews had to find temporary shelters. The Soviets fled and took with them all the people they had sent in from the “old” USSR when they occupied the area, including Jews.²⁴ Just before the German attack, on June 19, they managed to deport to Siberia dozens of Jewish families, which, of course, saved their lives.²⁵

Jews attempted to flee the city, and one testimony talks about 200 people who succeeded to escape.²⁶ There were many more who tried, but they were stopped either by Soviet soldiers at the old Polish-Soviet border, who sent them back because they said they were spreading panic, or by the fact that the German advance overtook them, and they had to return to their homes. Before the arrival of the Germans, a Polish-Belorussian militia was organized, but, contrary to other places in the *kresy*, there were no anti-Jewish excesses, though there was looting of former Soviet stores, also by Jews.²⁷ It is not clear how many Jews were left in the town when the Germans arrived, but it was probably around 6,000.²⁸

The Germans occupied the town on July 3 or 4, apparently killed at least twenty-seven Jews, and established a Judenrat.²⁹ It is not quite

24 Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, pp. 99–100.

25 Yakov Kowlowicz, in *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 230–237.

26 Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 143. Due to the fact that the Germans reached Mogilev in eastern Belorussia later than they reached Bobruisk, people who fled in the direction of Mogilev reached safety, while the others did not (*Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 251–257).

27 Yakov Berman, SF-26224.

28 *Pinkas Navaredok*, Yehoshua Yaffe’s article, pp. 274–286, cites 4,000. Originally, there were some 6,500 Jews; then 1,000 refugees came, most of whom were deported by the Soviets. A few hundred managed to flee.

29 The date of occupation differs slightly in various sources, because it depends on whether the passing through of advanced units is considered to be occupation or not (Yehoshua Yaffe, *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 274–286) says that the first Germans came on July 2, and the occupation started a day later). On the first murder, see Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, pp. 101–103, who says seventy Jews, mainly intellectuals, were killed (which was probably a separate murder action). Also Kagan

clear who the members were,³⁰ as this first Judenrat was removed after a few weeks. A second one was established under the chairmanship of Henryk Ciechanowski, a lawyer and well-known and respected figure.³¹ Survivors' opinions of him are positive.³² The Germans also quickly organized a militia, largely of Poles, who collaborated with them fully in harassing the Jews.³³

On July 26,³⁴ the Germans collected some 200 Jewish men, and, after torturing them publicly in the town square, they publicly shot fifty-two of them. The perpetrators were probably members of Einsatzgruppe (EG) B, but this cannot be ascertained with certainty. Exactly a month later, on August 26, another fifty Jewish men were assembled and murdered.³⁵ The perpetrators would most likely have been, again, from Einsatzgruppe B, but no documentary proof has been found so far. Murdering Jewish men, and especially the intelligentsia, was clearly in line with the Einsatzgruppen policy at that time. Since Nazi ideology identified the Soviet regime with the Jews, killing Jewish men

and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, pp. 138–139. The killers were a commando of the SIPO and SD commander (*Kommandeur des Sicherheitspolizei- und SD*) of Lublin, who came to help Einsatzgruppe B (under Arthur Nebe), as Nebe's group was too small to do all the killing. The Germans appointed a Pole named Smolski to be the town's mayor (*Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 251–257).

30 Yaffe names Nahum Zeldowicz as the first Judenrat head (*In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, p. 106), and, although the name Zeldowicz appears in a list of members of the second Judenrat (along with Moshe Leizerowski, Yehoshua Ivnecki, and Shalom Butshanski; Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 153), Kagan, in a communication to me, thinks that this person was indeed the first head of the Judenrat. The Judenrat was selected by the Jews and confirmed by the Germans.

31 From Shmuel Oppenheim's reminiscences (*Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 251–257) it would appear that only part of the first Judenrat was murdered, and Ciechanowski, who also was a member, was then appointed as head.

32 "The head of the Judenrat was an influential person, blessed with great energy, courage and wisdom, who knew how to negotiate with the Germans and often succeeded in preventing evil actions on their part"; Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, p. 133. "The attitude of the Judenrat to the Jews was not bad, it was humane"; Raphael Shaffer, YVA, M.49.E/866 (author's translations).

33 *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 274–286.

34 At least two Judenrat members were among the fifty-two (Kagan, *Novogradok*, pp. 153, 154).

35 Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 154. There seem to have been these three murder actions, but documentary proof is lacking. *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, vol. 3, p. 1072, lists July 6 and July 11 for the first two. Mordechai Meirovitz (YVA, O.3/2106) cites August 20 for the third murder action.

would reduce the chance of rebellion by what the Nazis considered a most dangerous element and strike at the roots of Bolshevism.

Information about the murder of all the Jews in the nearby *shtetl* of Hancewicze reached the town in August; the murder of the Jews of nearby Horodyszczce followed on October 21. Jewish men were sent with a herd of cows to Baranowicze (some 50 km. away) and had to pass Horodyszczce on the way. They talked there with some of the Jewish inhabitants, but when they returned, the Jews had been murdered.³⁶ This news produced great fear in the community.

Conditions of daily life quickly deteriorated. Forced labor was introduced, and the Judenrat had to supply the workers. People toiled long hours with little or no food and no wages; they were maltreated and misused. They worked at repairing roads, in workshops, and in the German military barracks.³⁷ The daily ration was 300 grams of bread and potatoes. However, no ghetto had as yet been established, and people somehow managed to survive — albeit frightened and increasingly desperate.

Neither at this stage nor later is there any indication of the type of unarmed reaction that has been termed *Amidah* (Hebrew for “standing up against”). *Amidah* in the large Polish ghettos meant clandestine education, social and welfare work, organized food smuggling, protection of orphans, soup kitchens, cultural activities intended to boost morale, religious life, underground political activity, publication of underground newspapers, and the like. Nothing of this sort emerged in Nowogródek. Until the first massacre some help was provided for the elderly by Cantor Eliezer Rabinovich, a religious-Zionist activist. Some of the doctors continued their work. At first synagogues remained open, but it seems that they soon ceased to function; some Jews continued to pray in at least one prayer house.³⁸

36 Michael Zamkov, SF-23383; Shmuel Oppenheim, in *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 251–257.

37 According to Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 42, the Germans took 100 men on November 26 for labor, and they did not return. One of the many descriptions of forced labor is that of Sima Janus-Portnoy (*Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 259–263). This was the period when the Germans marched endless columns of Soviet POWs westward, and we hear an echo of that in Jewish testimonies (e.g., Haim Kravietz, *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 263–272, who says he threw some food to the POWs). Other POWs were freed by the Germans and put to work; one report tells us about POWs who beat and persecuted the Jews under their care, whereas other POWs fled to the partisans.

38 Nahum Kushnir, YVA, O.3/3929.

There is at least one credible testimony about two Jewish women who managed to thwart an attempt by German soldiers to rape them; violation of Jewish women by non-German police and civilians is mentioned in a number of testimonies.³⁹

Nowogródek lies only about 50 kilometers from Baranowicze, where *Amidah* activities such as those mentioned above did take place. This raises the question of why there was such a radical difference between two similar communities living in proximity to each other (see below).

The German military administration that followed the conquest was replaced by a civil administration on September 1. Nowogródek became part of the *Generalkommissariat Weissrussland*, under *Generalkommissar* Wilhelm Kube, which encompassed most, but not all, of Soviet Belorussia. Kube's realm, with Minsk as its capital, was part of the *Reichskommissariat Ostland*, with its seat in Riga, led by Hinrich Lohse. Kube's *Generalkommissariat* was subdivided into eleven districts, or *Gebiete*, one of which was Nowogródek. The *Gebietskommissar* there was *SS-Sturmbannführer* Wilhelm Traub, who had been loaned to the civilian administration by the SS. His expert on Jews was a man named (Wilhelm?) Reuter, about whom little is known.⁴⁰ The German forces in the town included the 260–280 men of the 7th Company of Infantry Regiment 727, which, in turn, was part of the Rear Army Command (“Korück”) commanded by Gustav von Bechtolsheim-Mauchenheim. The senior lieutenant in charge of the local force was Johann Artmann,⁴¹ and he appears to have served as the local military commander.

39 Nahum Kushnir, YVA, O.3/3929 (his daughter, Raya Kushnir, in this and a separate testimony, testified about the Germans). Malka Klein (YVA, O.3/11846) was raped by a Polish policeman, Litwinsky, in Zhetl (Żdzięcioł; Diatlovo). Yakov Berman (SF-26224) says that a German tried to find his sister, but she escaped.

40 Wilhelm Traub, born 1910, died in a POW camp in Yugoslavia, on February 18, 1946 (Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 196). He had studied at a university and was a member of the SD. Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 171, say that Reuter's first name was also Wilhelm.

41 Zentralestelle des Landes Justizverwaltungen, Ludwigsburg, File, 202 AR-2 94/e, quoted in Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, pp. 142–147. Artmann was put on trial in 1983, but released because no credible witnesses could be found to accuse him.

As Christian Gerlach has shown,⁴² the Germans decided to decimate the Belorussian Jewish population in a major wave of massacres in the late fall and early winter of 1941; in Nowogródek, the murder took place on December 8. The perpetrators were led by a SIPO force from Baranowicze, commanded either by Waldemar Amelung or one of his lieutenants, and included Artmann's Wehrmacht force, local gendarmes reinforced by a group of gendarmes from Baranowicze, a force of *Schutzmannschaft* militias raised by the Germans from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and local Polish and Belorussian town police.⁴³ But survivor reports unanimously cite Traub as the person in command. One report mentions the statement of a German perpetrator, that "Jews were partisans, and as partisans had to be finished off."⁴⁴ There were, in effect, very few partisans in the Belorussian forests at that time, so this was a rationalization for what was clearly an ideological motive.⁴⁵

By December 8, most of the Jews, save a few that hid,⁴⁶ had been concentrated in the town's courthouse area.⁴⁷ Women and children and

42 Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1996), pp. 105, 555–654.

43 A number of survivors testify to the presence of Estonians (e.g., Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, p. 130), who are not mentioned in non-Jewish sources. It seems unlikely that the survivors would have erred, as they knew how to differentiate between the various Baltic nationalities. A platoon (Zug) of gendarmes came from Baranowicze, as did a platoon of SS under an unnamed *SS-Hauptsturmführer*; YVA, TR.10/1849, vol. 2, pp. 171–256, investigation of Albert Schuster, Berlin, 1970–1972.

44 Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 145. If this is true, it is echoed in Himmler's note of his conversation with Hitler on December 18, 1941 (i.e., after the massacre in Nowogródek), "als Partisanen auszurotten"; see in *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42*, edited by Peter Witte et al. (Hamburg: Christians Verlag, 1999), p. 294. I am also indebted to Martin Dean of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, who let me have his mss. on the *kresy shtetlach*, including the one on Nowogródek.

45 See, for example, Yehoshua Büchler, "‘Unworthy Behavior’: The Case of SS Officer Max Täubner," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 17:3 (2003), pp. 409–412, which discusses the exceptional case of a SS officer who went beyond the Nazi norms of ideological killing.

46 Such as Yakov Berman (SF-26224).

47 One witness, Michael Zamkov (SF-23383), relates that he escaped into the forest on December 8, 1941, and hid first with a Jewish farmer (Wolf Kolditsky) and then with a local peasant. However, he could not stay there, and returned to the newly established ghetto. He escaped a second time, in the spring of 1942, and found some

men without a trade useful to the Germans were then separated and murdered in the area of Skrydlewo, near Nowogródek, as were a number of mainly older people who were first put into a former convent school in town (the Nazarene School). The number killed is estimated at between 4,000 and 5,100. Those who went to their deaths “were perfectly silent. Even the children didn’t cry.”⁴⁸

A remnant, about 1,300–1,500, were escorted by Wehrmacht troops and Belorussian and Lithuanian police and militia into a ghetto consisting of a number of run-down wooden houses in the suburb of Pereseika in conditions of overcrowding and starvation.⁴⁹ Some 250 Jews were put into military barracks not far from the execution site at Skrydlewo, where some shops were established. Rations for Jews were reduced to 200 grams of bread.⁵⁰

Testimonies and the only surviving diary relate that on or after Passover in 1942, the head of the Judenrat, Ciechanowski, was killed by the Germans. Some say this was punishment for some Jews having brought a cow into the ghetto, slaughtering it, and distributing the meat to the inhabitants — or, in another version, for smuggling meat into the ghetto;⁵¹ others say he was accused of contacts with the par-

Soviet officers who had escaped from captivity. They organized a unit of seventy men, he says, led by a Major Smirnov, and maintained themselves until liberation. He does not detail the area in which they fought, but it appears that this was the Lipiczansky forest. This clearly is the same group mentioned in note 66, below.

48 Raphael Shaffer, YVA, M.49.E/866, gives an exact figure for the murdered Jews — 4,370 — and says that 1,800 remained. According to Eizik Lozotker (YVA, M.1.E/476), an additional 3,000 were later brought in from the surrounding townships.

49 The Jews themselves had to build a wooden fence around the ghetto (Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 46).

50 Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, pp. 128–130, and elsewhere. The number of victims is unclear. The Judenrat is accused of preventing the rescue of a number of wives of craftsmen by denying them the life-saving yellow passes.

A series of very peculiar documents appears in postwar Soviet materials (in the possession of Mr. Jack Kagan), purportedly written by a rabbi named Rogatinski (who may have been from Karelicze, not Nowogródek) and signed between July 1941 and March 1942, before several witnesses, in part described as NKVD (Soviet secret police) agents, among them a man named Shelyubski (who appears in materials of the Bielski detachment as a [Jewish] partisan). The documents briefly recount the murder actions in 1941–1943, and are supposed to have been hidden in Nowogródek during the occupation. This is clearly a forged, postwar, document. In 1941–1942, there were no NKVD officers in the area, and the idea of a rabbi testifying to Soviet authorities at that time is obviously impossible.

51 George Lubow, *Escape: Against All Odds: A Survivor's Story* (New York: Universe, 2004), p. 28.

tisans (who at that time were almost non-existent).⁵² A new Judenrat was appointed, and its head was a former member of the council, Haim Isakovicz. Contrary to his predecessor, the opinions about him are largely negative.⁵³

In May and June, the Germans murdered a large number of the Jewish inhabitants of the small villages and townships near Nowogródek and deported the rest into the town.⁵⁴ These 3000–4,500 deportees increased the number of Jews in the Pereseika ghetto to 6,000–7,000.⁵⁵

The Pereseika ghetto was a terrible place, rife with hunger and an intolerable density of population. The Judenrat and the small Jewish police (*Ordnungsdienst*) tried to prevent Jews from escaping by constant surveillance and even by confiscating potential escapees' shoes. The first commander of the Jewish police was Meir Koppelman, a butcher and a good man, according to the testimonies. He was followed by a man called Kalinski, a refugee from Lodz, and he had some ten to eighteen men under him. Survivors generally do not accuse the police of wrongdoing, because they feel they were faced with the problem of collective responsibility: there was a credible threat that for any escapee the dozens of people who had been squeezed with the escapee in the overcrowded houses would be shot.⁵⁶

52 Shaffer, YVA, M.49.E/866; Kagan, *Novogradok*, pp. 50–57.

53 "He helped the Germans," according to Shaffer; YVA, M.49.E/866.

54 The townships were Zhetl (212 people came from there, after thousands had been murdered), Karelitz, Lubcz, Delatycz, Iveniec, Derevna, Vsieliub, Naliboki, and Ravishevits. Martin Dean (see above) quotes a Traub order of March 6, 1942, that ordered the deportations into Nowogródek.

55 Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust* (pp. 152–154), quote a German document about the liquidation of a large German SIPO patrol, which included Lithuanians as well, by a partisan detachment (the so-called "*Stalincy*" *otriad*) on June 9, 1942, near Lubcz in the Nowogródek district. This was undoubtedly the earliest major partisan success; the document does not mention the death of the new SIPO head of Baranowicze, Günzberger (Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, p. 697), but this is probably the same event. Amelung, who had been replaced by Günzberger, was recalled and continued to lead the Baranowicze SIPO Aussenstelle, which was responsible for most of the murder actions in Nowogródek. Mordechai Meirowitz claims he transmitted the information about the movements of the German force to the partisans, and this enabled them to ambush the Germans (YVA, O.3/2106).

56 On Koppelman, see Haim Kravietz, *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 263–272. Also, testimony of Jack Kagan at Hebrew University, December 28, 2005; Shaffer, YVA, M.49.E/866.

Forced labor was performed in special shops in the courthouse building, in the military barracks, and in workshops in town under the surveillance of Polish foremen and, of course, under German control. There was a Jewish Labor Office (*Arbeitsamt*) led by Daniel Ostashinsky. He had a mixed reputation, at least during that period (later, as we shall see, he was one of the resisters).⁵⁷ There was no medical help, as the only physician had been wounded and was unable to move. There was a dentist, who tried to help as best he could. However, other testimonies contradict this and say there was some medical help, but no medicines.⁵⁸

The Murder Actions and Flight to the Forest

The second massacre took place on August 7, 1942, at Litowka. According to a German source, the murderers were led by a SD unit from Wilejka (west of Nowogródek) commanded by Johann Förster, together with the Baranowicze SIPO under Amelung. They included, in the main, Estonian, and possibly also Lithuanian and Latvian, auxiliaries and the local militia,⁵⁹ but the initiator clearly was Wilhelm Traub. Between 3,000 and 5,000 people were murdered. These included most of the Pereseika ghetto inhabitants and some of the craftsmen employed in the military barracks. They were betrayed by a Polish foreman who had promised to rescue them (instead he helped with the selection); most of the craftsmen, some 500, were sent back to Pereseika.

57 But Nahum Kushnir (YVA, O.3/3929) and his wife Raya (YVA, O.3/3789) report that they were saved twice by Ostashinsky. Raya Kushnir adds: “He did good and bad things.”

58 See, for instance, the testimony of Nahum Kushnir, YVA, O.3/3929, whose son was severely wounded and burned, and who was nursed back to health. Yet Lyuba Rudnicki (Kagan, *Novogradok*, pp. 171–181) tells us, in a testimony that appears very reliable, that she escaped, on August 19, 1942, with a doctor (Mark Berkman) and her dentist husband, whereas another doctor, Sasha Ziskind, died in the attempt to reach them. The two physicians may have been forced to work for the Germans outside the ghetto, because one testimony talks about doctors who were allowed to remain in the town (Haim Kravietz, *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 263–272), and another mentions a German who was responsible for the hospital and rescued the two doctors (*Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 304–328). According to her testimony, Berkman and another Jew were murdered by drunken Soviet partisans who told her, on February 23, 1943, they would kill all the Jews they could.

59 YVA, TR.11/01249; there was a battalion of 600 Estonian police.

The Judenrat, except for its chairman, was killed; yet later Isakowicz is not mentioned anymore either. One testimony relates about an attack by some unarmed Jews on the Germans who were leading them to the murder site; they were, of course, killed immediately.⁶⁰ Many testimonies mention the murder of children who were hiding in the courthouse. This happened at the time of the massacre.⁶¹ The surviving Jews reportedly numbered 1,240.⁶² About half were concentrated in the courthouse building, where shops for the craftsmen had been established, and the others were in Pereseika (550 Jews, according to one witness). The ones in the courthouse were kept closed in a stable without food or water for three days before they were allowed to “settle” in their new ghetto.⁶³ Instead of a Judenrat, Moshe Burstein was appointed as the Jewish leader, and Salek Yakubovitz as the police chief.

The Jews were massacred openly, in front of the local population. “The Christians came out to see the surviving Jews. Friends sometimes threw some bread to their Jewish acquaintances, while secretly praying that they should finally get rid of them so there won’t be any heirs to the houses and the belongings.”⁶⁴ The *Kaddish* (prayer for the dead) was said, even by non-religious people.

In reaction to the early massacres, Jews began fleeing to the forest well before August. George Lubow relates that, soon after the first

60 Lubow, *Escape: Against All Odds*, p. 37.

61 Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 171; Lubow, *Escape: Against All Odds*, p. 38. The Pole, Moskalov, was hanged by the Soviets after liberation (Mordechai Meiorowicz, YVA, O.3/2106).

62 *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 304–328.

63 Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, p. 143; Yakov Berman, SF-26224. A diary was written in the ghetto by Beinish (Benjamin) Berkowicz recounts the events up to and including the second massacre. The diary, written in excellent Hebrew by someone who obviously had studied or maybe even taught in a Tarbut school, was given to Romuald Pielachowski, a local Polish man, in Nowogródek at the end of August 1942, who gave it to the Jewish Historical Commission in Warsaw in May 1946. It is now at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, and the copy I used is at YVA, M.49.E-5394, and M.49.P/192. Berkowicz was probably from Karelicze. The diary does not add much new information, but it is a document of great literary and emotional value. The author, an atheist, demands vengeance for the spilled blood. Documents from the Bielski partisans mention a Benjamin B. Berkovich (*Novogrudok*, p. 200), and it may well be the same person. The diary deserves separate treatment. I wish to thank Dr. Havi Ben-Sasson, who came across this material and gave it to David Silberklang and myself.

64 Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, p. 139 (author’s translation).

massacre, a group of Jews left to join a Polish underground group in the Naliboki “*pushcha*” (dense forest) but were disarmed and sent back to the ghetto.⁶⁵ One testimony relates the story of a group of fourteen people who were armed with one pistol from among the Jews from Zhetl (Żdzięcioł; Diatlovo) who were in Pereseika. They apparently fled a week after their arrival, probably in June. They had entered the forest near Zhetl and forced hidden Soviet arms from reluctant peasants. They also recovered abandoned Soviet rifles from the Szczara River and continued to the Lipiczansky forest, where they joined a Jewish unit. They later made it further west, into forests near Slonim.⁶⁶ Another early group was not as lucky; they were caught and murdered.⁶⁷

The Judenrat opposed flight to the forest and also thwarted an attempt to smuggle a rifle into the ghetto.⁶⁸ Yet the flight attempts continued. After August, people went different ways. Survivors from Zhetl fled to the Lipiczansky forests; others joined the Bielski group, which had sent emissaries (usually earlier escapees themselves) to the ghetto to take people out.⁶⁹ People escaped from the courthouse, too, despite close surveillance by the Germans and the police. In one instance eleven people managed to get away after they made a key to the courthouse gate.⁷⁰ Some people who fled found other Soviet partisan groups, some of whom accepted Jews and protected them.⁷¹

Rampant antisemitism among the Soviet partisans was a major problem. Many survivors, as well as a number of official reports by partisan commanders, relate instances where such partisans murdered

65 Lubow, *Escape: Against All Odds*, p. 30.

66 Eliahu Kowienski (YVA, O.3/2088), born 1904, who received the highest Soviet decoration, “Hero of the Soviet Union.” This may be the same unit that Mordechai Meirowicz talks about (YVA, O.3/2106), which was led by Mikhail M. Kuznetsov. It later became the Kotovtsy unit, probably in the Lipiczansky forest.

67 Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, p. 145. Yaffe claims that about 100 people fled. Mordechai Meirowicz (YVA, O.3/2106) relates the story of a number of young men, led by a Soviet Jewish major, Pinchas (Pinie) Slonim, who apparently joined a partisan detachment but were killed in a fight with the Germans. Benzion Yevnowicz (YVA, O.3/2081) and Shmuel Oppenheim (*Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 251–257) tell the same story.

68 Lubow, *Escape: Against All Odds*, p. 29.

69 Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, p.148. Yaffe himself fled to the Bielskis in the winter, together with twenty-six others. Three emissaries — Ishie (Joshua) Oppenheim, Leibke Wolkin, and Bernstein — are repeatedly mentioned.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

71 See, for example, Lyuba Rudnicki’s testimony, *Novogradok*, pp. 174–181.

helpless Jews wandering in the forest, or even overpowered armed Jews.⁷² After the establishment of a united partisan command in May 1942,⁷³ and the consequent establishment of military discipline among the partisans, these antisemitic occurrences abated somewhat. Yet an October 11, 1942 report by a non-Jewish partisan to Soviet commander Vasily Chernyshev says quite clearly:

The population here does not like Jews...if a Jew calls at a house and asks for food, the peasant says that he has been robbed by Jews. When a Russian comes together with a Jew, everything goes smoothly...There are detachments where Jews are not accepted.⁷⁴

The Bielskis

Many of the Jews who fled Nowogródek and other towns in the area joined the Bielski partisan group. This group's history has been told in great detail by Nechama Tec from a sociological perspective.⁷⁵ The four Bielski brothers — Tuvia (Anatoli in Russian), Assael (Alexander), Zusya ("Zus"; Sigismund), and Archik (Aaron), the youngest (he was just thirteen in 1941) — were the children of a mill-owner in a tiny village (Stankiewiczze, or Stankievichi). They knew the ways of the forest and refused to live in a ghetto. From the autumn of 1941, they lived as fugitives in the forests, hiding with friendly Belorussian peasants: "there were also Polish friends. Without them, we would not have survived the early times."

In early 1942, they acquired their first handgun, and then more arms and new members, largely from their own family.⁷⁶ By March

72 Rudnicki, *Novogradok*, pp.174–181; Raya Kushnir (YVA, O.3/3789). "Some partisan detachments take in Jews, some shoot or drive them away"; NARB, f.1399, inv.1, f.13, p. 99, courtesy of Jack Kagan. Many more similar reports can be quoted.

73 Officially commanded by Marshal Kliment E. Voroshilov and, in fact, by Pan-teleimon Ponomarenko, secretary of the Belorussian Communist Party, no friend of Jews. The Central Command was abolished in January 1944.

74 Quoted in Kagan, *Novogradok*, pp. 183–184 (NARB, f.3500, inv. 4, f.241/1, p. 98).

75 Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also Duffy, *The Bielski Brothers*, a good journalistic account, which, however, adds little to what is already known.

76 Shmuel Amaran, a historian who was a member of Bielski's group, writes that the brothers and some of their relatives escaped from their village "at the beginning of 1942. They wandered in the forests of Buszkowicz" (about 50 kilometers from No-

1942, there were seventeen people; in the summer they grew to twenty-five or thirty, and Tuvia, as the eldest brother, was chosen to be the commander.⁷⁷ It was only in the late summer that they became a real partisan detachment and began growing rapidly in numbers. They called themselves the Zhukov *otriad* (detachment).⁷⁸

The crucial facts are that the Bielskis, with Tuvia at the helm, saw their main task as rescuing any Jews that could find their way to them, and not as fighting the Germans – though they certainly did that as well. By very clever maneuvering, they managed to engage in both rescue – their priority – and armed action. Until mid-1943, the Soviet partisans generally viewed the rescue mission negatively, but, after the Soviet command issued orders to rescue civilians, the situation eased. The Bielskis managed to obtain the support of a number of Russians, which was a decisive factor in their success. They were helped at first by a partisan commander named Gramov (a Georgian); then came Viktor Panchenkov, a partisan commander with whom Tuvia established a common policy and a personal friendship, despite the Bielskis' view that the Panchenkov group consisted of escaped "POWs, bandits and antisemites."⁷⁹ Panchenkov in effect made it possible for the Bielskis to survive in 1942, and together the two detachments ambushed and attacked the Germans twice in September-October 1942, and captured arms.

Some Jews joined Panchenko's unit; others joined another detachment named Iskra. Late in 1942, when the Soviets had managed to reorganize and control the different partisan detachments, they appointed General Vasily Chernyshev, referred to as "Platon," as the commander of all the Soviet partisans in the area. Platon came to appreciate

wogródek); Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, p. 205. At first, only Asael, Zus, and Archik wandered about, and Tuvia joined "a month later" (Zusia and Sonia Bielski testimony, YVA, O.3/4156). Before December 1941, their two brothers, Avreiml and Yakov, were murdered, and then, in the course of the first massacre, their parents were killed as well. Their sister, Teivl, and her husband joined the group in early 1942. See, also, a document entitled "History of the Kalinin Partisan Detachment, Commander Bielski," dated September 15, 1944, Belorussian Archives (NARB), Fond 3500, List 4, File 272, in Kagan, *Novogrudok*, pp. 231–239. This is clearly the final report by Tuvia Bielski to the Soviet authorities, and much of what follows here is based on that document. See, also, Tuvia and Zusia Bielski, *Forest Jews* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1946), pp. 42–48.

77 Tuvia's relatives fled from Lida after the massacre there on May 8, 1942, and joined the brothers; Tec, *Defiance*, pp. 37, 40.

78 Zusia and Sonia Bielski, YVA, O.3/4156; Tec, *Defiance*, p. 43.

79 YVA, O.3/4156.

the Bielskis' contribution to the common struggle and defended them against accusations, mainly motivated by antisemitism. Ivan Vasilievich Shemyatovets, the communist commissar whom Tuvia Bielski had to accept into his unit in March 1944, as a concession to Soviet control, turned out to be married to a Jewish woman and became a tower of strength and support for the unit (when he was not drunk). However, Vassiliev, the commander of the Kirov brigade in the area where the Bielskis were before their move to the Naliboki "*pushcha*" (in July 1943), was an antisemite, according to Zus Bielski.⁸⁰

Antisemitism among the Soviet partisans was often a serious problem, and the Bielskis, and probably other Jews as well, sometimes dealt with the problem by force. Thus, Zus Bielski tells of a Jewish partisan, Gedalia Toker, whose horse and gun were taken from him by Soviet partisans. Zus and eight members of his unit surprised the Soviets and forced them to return the stolen items. The Soviets then tried to ambush the Jews, but Zus realized the danger and sent a small detachment behind the Soviets, who were then threatened with crossfire. When they realized that Zus was serious, they gave up their plans. This established reasonable relations between the groups.⁸¹

The Bielski unit moved around until the summer of 1943, because of German and militia attacks, first in the area of Khrapinievo, about 50 kilometers from Nowogródek, and then in other places nearby. A fair proportion of its members were refugees from the *shtetl*, who began arriving after the second major massacre on August 7. Escapees from the *shtetl* of Iwje followed the people from Nowogródek, and they were followed by escapees from Dworzec, not far from Lida. In the spring of 1943, and again after another massacre in Lida on September 18, 1943, additional refugees came from that town. In early July 1943, the Bielskis were ordered to transfer to the Naliboki "*pushcha*." Now some 750 strong, including about 200 armed fighters, they were made part of the Kirov Brigade, commanded by Feodor Sinichkin, although Tuvia Bielski maintained direct contact with the overall commander, Platon.⁸²

80 Ibid. I could not find Vassiliev's first name. See, also, Bielski, *Forest Jews*, pp. 102, ff.

81 YVA, O.3/4156.

82 Kagan, *Novogradok*, pp. 205–206. There were other high commanders in the forest who were friendly toward Jews, such as Grapayev ("Sokolov") and Gennady I. Safunov.

Another Jewish partisan group, commanded by Semyon (Shalom) Zorin of Minsk, was part of the Stalin brigade in the same area. The Zorin group also received a number of escapees from Nowogródek.⁸³ There were other Soviet detachments to which Nowogródek Jews also fled, and for a time there was a Jewish detachment in the Lipiczansky forests led by Israel Kaplinski, which accepted Jews from Nowogródek and other *shtetlach*.⁸⁴

Several testimonies tell us about revenge exacted by Jewish partisans on local collaborators who were responsible for murdering Jews. This extended to the families of the collaborators as well. Thus, at an early stage, the Bielskis took bloody revenge on a Belorussian family that had betrayed two Jewish girls to the Germans; they killed all of the offender's family — approximately twelve people.⁸⁵ In one case, reported by Haim Kravietz,⁸⁶ Jews hid with a man called Ivan Tzwirkes, who had a Jewish wife who had converted to Christianity. Tzwirkes betrayed Jews to the Germans, whereupon the Bielskis caught him and told him to say goodbye to his wife as he was going to be shot. As a result, they squeezed the names of more collaborators out of him, and then killed most of the people he had named. Tzwirkes was permitted to return to his family (probably because of his Jewish wife).

On July 13 (or August 1, depending on whether one includes the preparations for the action or not) 1943, the Germans started a major operation, “Hermann,” commanded by SS-*Birgadeführer* Curt von Gottberg, to liquidate the partisans in the Naliboki forests. A total of 52,000 soldiers, police, and auxiliary troops (including a Latvian and several Ukrainian battalions) participated. Tuvia Bielski led his group in a mass escape into the depths of the swamps, and they survived unharmed. Afterward they went back to their first bases in the Nowogródek area. In September, Platon — or the commander of the Kirov brigade, to which the Bielskis were now attached — divided the Bielski group into

83 Nahum Kushnir, YVA, O.3/3929.

84 Benzion Yevnowicz, YVA, O.3/2081.

85 Yitzhak Boretzky (YVA, O.3/8620), who killed a woman whose brother had betrayed Boretzky's brother to the Germans. Zus and Sonia Bielski's testimony, YVA, O.3/4156, about the two Jewish girls and the revenge. In *Forest Jews*, Tuvia and Zus relate a fairly large number of stories of bloody revenge taken against local collaborators, their families, and their property, which they burned down (pp. 94–97, and elsewhere).

86 *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 263–272.

two. The first was a fighting detachment named after Ordzhonikidze (a famous Georgian Communist of the Soviet era), originally composed of 180 Jewish partisans, with a couple of non-Jews as well (including the commander, Lyushenko). The rest, which quickly grew into a large band of 800 people, including some 160 armed defenders, was named after Kalinin. They were sent back to the Naliboki, and provided services to all the partisan groups in the forest, as well as participating in sabotage and diversionary actions.⁸⁷ Other groups and individuals also joined from Mir, from the concentration camp of Koldyczewo near Baranowicze, and other locations. On April 1, 1944, the group was officially renamed to become simply the “Bielski *otriad*.”

Relationships within the Bielski group were not always smooth. Many survivors recall one particular person who fought the Bielski brothers — Israel Kessler, a one-time thief from the *shtetl* of Naliboki, who was rescued by Tuvia from the wrath of Panchenkov and then joined the Bielskis with his group. Apparently, he wanted to supersede Tuvia as commander and created alliances with several top Soviet commanders, accusing Tuvia of disloyalty to the communist cause and of accumulating gold and other treasures. Platon supported Tuvia, and the relations were somehow patched up. After “Operation Hermann,” Kessler asked to remain in the Naliboki forest with thirty-six people, who soon grew into a force of more than sixty. They harvested potatoes, grain, and some vegetables from the villages that had been destroyed and abandoned during the German blockade, and acquired cattle as well. When the Bielskis returned there a few months later, he rejoined them, but again tried to replace Tuvia. In the end this amounted to crass insubordination, and a death sentence was pronounced. Tuvia killed him with Platon’s approval.

One can view this incident from several perspectives: Tuvia fought off a number of unsavory challenges before his patience gave out, but the end result was that a Jew had been killed by a Jewish commander. (There were two other such cases, one of them immediately after the liberation.) In light of the circumstances and given the military and moral code of the Soviet partisans, it seems that the killing was justified.⁸⁸ There were other instances of insubordination and opposi-

87 Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, pp. 199–200, document from December 5, 1943.

88 Tec, *Defiance*, pp. 76, 123, 178–180, and other sources.

tion, and Tuvia handled them with considerable sensitivity, but when they got out of hand, he took stern measures.

A final reflection on the Bielski group, armed resistance, and their impact relates to a most peculiar story about Nowogródek, which was published in March 1942, in the underground press of the Warsaw ghetto. First published in the paper of the Gordonia youth movement by its leader, Eliezer Geller,⁸⁹ the story said that only in Nowogródek had Jews shown how to die with honor: they resisted and killed sixteen local gendarmes. This story was then copied by the underground papers of Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir and Poalei Zion-Left,⁹⁰ which reported 200 Jewish youngsters rebelling and twenty gendarmes killed.

Nowogródek thus became a model for the Warsaw Zionist youth to follow. One of the slogans of the Warsaw Jewish underground that later organized the ghetto rebellion was “Nowogródek calls,” which served as an inspiration and a challenge. Of course, nothing like a rebellion ever occurred in Nowogródek. The tremendously courageous escape of the last Nowogródek ghetto inhabitants through a tunnel happened some seventeen months later, on September 26, 1943. The escapees knew about the Warsaw ghetto rebellion from their secret radio. Paradoxically, we have an invented rebellion in Nowogródek encouraging the Warsaw resisters, whose very real action then encouraged the Nowogródek Jews to escape. Most of them then became partisans fighting the Germans.

How did the false information reach Geller and his comrades? Geller was a member of the *Oneg Shabbes* underground archive organized by the historian Emmanuel Ringelblum, which received and tried to preserve information from all over Poland. Could a false rumor have been brought to Warsaw by a Polish source from the area? This appears to be possible,⁹¹ but the basis of such a rumor remains a mystery. The story could not have been based on a rumor regarding the Bielskis, since, prior to March 1942, the Bielski brothers were still hiding with friends.

89 In *Słowo Młodych* (“The Voice of the Young”), no. 9–10, February–March 1942, in *The Jewish Underground Press in Warsaw* (Hebrew), edited by Josef Kermish (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1993), vol. 5, pp. 249, 283–284.

90 *Jutrznia* (“The Morning”), no. 7, March 28, 1942, *ibid.*, pp. 419–420; *Yugent Ruf* (“The Call of the Young”), no. 5, March 1942, *ibid.*, p. 433.

91 Kagan and Cohen, *Surviving the Holocaust*, pp. 67, 69.

Rescuers

Information spread in Nowogródek that there were two families, one Polish and one Belorussian, with homes not far from the town, who would help Jews trying to join the Bielskis. One was the Polish family of Franciszek Bobrowski; they were very poor people who made a living by catching stray dogs, skinning them, and selling their skins. They were known as “the dog-catchers.” They helped dozens of people before they were caught by the Germans shortly before the Germans left the area. Except for one daughter, the whole family was killed; some of them were burned alive, and their home, a shack, was burned down.⁹² The others were the Belorussian family of Konstanty Kozłowski, whose isolated farm was situated some 13 km. from the town. He and his family helped very many Jews, who were taken from his farm by the Bielski partisans. They were never caught.⁹³ Both men and their families were recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

In addition to these outstanding cases, several others can be noted. According to one testimony, some Jewish children were hidden by local people who refused to give them up after the war; but there is no confirmation of this story anywhere else.⁹⁴ There were a few other cases in the town itself; this help was specifically mentioned by survivors and included several Germans.⁹⁵ In fact, some testimonies insist that

92 YVA, M.31/7599.

93 YVA, M.31/5927 and 6457.

94 Mordechai Meiorowicz, YVA, O.3/2106.

95 Sarah Lieberman was rescued by her Polish teacher, Kazimierz Cibulsky (YVA, O.3/7215). Yehoshua Yaffe was protected by a German foreman in his working place, “a man with ethical values, in whom human feelings had not yet disappeared”; *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, p. 111 (author’s translation); see, also, *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 274–286. Yakov Berman (SF-26224) and Shule Rubin-Wolshinsky (*Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 272–274) mention a German, a gendarme by the name of Wolf, who apparently had served in Nowogródek during World War I, and who helped their families. Rubin’s father was a dentist and had treated Wolf, who, she says, had a Jewish wife and a son who had fled to Britain. Wolf’s deputy, Beid (?), was also involved. Another German is mentioned anonymously as having rescued the family of Isaac Lagatkier during the first massacre (Lubow, *Escape: Against All Odds*, p. 25). Non-Germans included Hanna Swiatkowska, obviously a Pole, who was also honored as a Righteous Among the Nations for having rescued a couple and their baby in Nowogródek itself (YVA, M.31/3596), as was the family of Konstantin Pendo, of the neighboring village of Vseljub, who rescued a mother and a daughter from Nowogródek (YVA, M.31/6929). Others are mentioned in passing in various testimonies; Kagan, *Novogradok*, pp. 176–177; and *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp.

occasionally the Germans were the (relatively) good ones, while the local collaborators were the “bad guys.”⁹⁶ All the rescuers were simple, often poor, people.⁹⁷

The villagers in the area were quite a different story, though the testimonies are contradictory. Some say the villages were hostile and relate stories of betrayal by local peasants.⁹⁸ Others say that there were fairly large numbers of peasants who were willing to help. Clearly, all survivors had to be helped at one point or another by peasants, and the fact that there are hundreds of survivors would indicate that there were a fairly large number of people willing to engage in rescue. However, not many names of the rescuers are known.⁹⁹

The Final Stages

A third massacre occurred on February 4, 1943, when some 510 people in Pereseika were murdered; there were only two survivors. This left only the courthouse — workshops were housed there in two tall buildings, and a third served as living quarters. The daily food ration was cut to 125 grams of bad bread a day. The Germans clearly wanted to eliminate all the Jews, but they still needed the best of the craftsmen, and so they divided the Jews by giving some of them more food than the others. In the end they murdered 298 people in a fourth massacre,

246–250, 263–272. Another Righteous Among the Nations was the Polish farmer Jan Jarmolowitz, with his wife Josefa and his maid, Magdalena Cimoszko, who hid five Jews on their farm for over a year (Lubow, *Escape: Against All Odds*, passim).

⁹⁶ Mordechai Meirowicz, YVA, O.3/2106.

⁹⁷ One particularly harrowing story is related by Yaffe (*Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 304–328). A girl was hidden in the town by her nanny. The Germans came and, trying to discover whether she was Jewish, showed her a picture of her dead father. When the girl cried out — my father! — they killed her, the nanny, and her family, and burned their house.

⁹⁸ *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 304–328. An unnamed peasant family kept a fifteen-year-old boy with them until his relatives had no more money to pay for him; they then called the Germans, who came and murdered him.

⁹⁹ A few more names are mentioned by Nahum Kushnir (YVA, O.3/3929) and Raya Kushnir (YVA, O.3/3789). Yitzhak Boretzky (YVA, O.3/8620), who was fourteen, fled from Pereseika armed with a pistol that he had stolen, and begged for food from peasants: “they treated me well.” Tec (*Defiance*, p. 38) tells of a Polish peasant named Kot who tried to rescue Asael Bielski’s mother-in-law and two relatives, was caught and tortured, but did not betray anyone; he died as a result of the torture.

in Hardzilowka, very near the courthouse, on May 7. This left only 232 Jews alive.¹⁰⁰

Before the fourth massacre, a resistance committee was organized led by a Dr. Kagan from Baranowicze, which included other activists. Some of them had been members of pre-war parties and youth movements.¹⁰¹ They decided to make a copy of the key to the main gate and then rush the guards and break out of the courthouse camp. The date was set for April 15, 1943, but when the day came, the wife of the wounded doctor threatened to inform on the resisters. She feared her husband would be left behind and then killed by the Germans.

The plan was aborted. The Germans seem to have gotten wind of what was being prepared, and they tried to smuggle in a survivor of the massacre of the Pereseika ghetto whom they persuaded to inform on the others.¹⁰² His behavior, however, aroused suspicions, and members of the resistance group killed him before he could do any harm. It seems that it was after the third massacre that the Germans removed Moshe Burstein and tortured him in order to find out about any possible resistance. Burstein did not betray anyone but was killed. Ostashinsky was appointed as *Judenältester* in his place.¹⁰³

In the summer of 1943, the resistance group smuggled in a radio, which apparently fortified their resolve to find a way to escape, as more news of Soviet successes reached them. They also heard about the Warsaw ghetto uprising.¹⁰⁴ Some weapons were smuggled in: five rifles, six handguns, and five hand grenades.¹⁰⁵ Already in May 1943, they had

100 Yaffe, *In the Nowogródek Ghetto*, p. 164.

101 The organizers appear to have been members mainly of Poalei Zion and the Bund. Martin Dean (mss., USHMM) and Jack Kagan mention Berl Joselewicz as the chief organizer.

102 His name was Haim Lantzman (Kagan, *Novogradok*, p. 70). For the story of how the attempt at a rebellion was foiled, see, i.a., *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 237–241.

103 YVA, TR.11/1290. There is a problem there, because Ostashinsky's first name was Daniel, whereas in the German trial record he appears as Chaim. There is a Jewish custom to call someone "Chaim" (life) when he is threatened with mortal danger or has overcome a major illness. However, there is no proof that this is the reason in this instance. According to Mordechai Meirovicz, both Burstein and Isakovicz, the former Judenrat head, were "very fine, good people" ("*zeher feine, gute Menschen*" [Yiddish]), YVA, O.3/2106. As to Isakovicz, he contradicts other testimonies.

104 See YVA, TR.11/1290; O.3/2106; and *Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 287–293.

105 *Pinkas Navaredok*, *ibid.*

begun to discuss a new plan:¹⁰⁶ to dig a 100-meter tunnel under the fence of the courthouse ghetto into the adjoining fields. Work probably started in early July, and, despite tremendous technical difficulties, was carried on each day by volunteers. The plan's execution was made possible because of the presence of a number of well-qualified craftsmen. The earth from the tunnel was distributed mainly in the lofts and then into garbage containers, which were emptied each day. As the work progressed, electricity was installed by sapping the main line unobtrusively. Electricians prepared to put the light projector out of action by short-circuiting the line. A primitive trolley line was installed, and a trolley to carry out the earth was built and was pulled by a rope made out of strips of material.

The breakout was planned for August, but the Germans cut the wheat in the fields, so that there would have been no place to hide during the escape. The tunnel was extended from 100 meters to about 250, and that took another month. Had they broken out in August, they would have probably been caught in the “Hermann” operation against the partisans in the area. In early July, Traub indeed wanted to liquidate the camp, but he had to ask the SIPO in Minsk to do it, and the commander there, *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Arthur Wilke, explained that if he liquidated the Jews in Nowogródek, the Jews in Lida, still 2,000 strong, would no doubt hear about it and rebel. The Lida Jews would have to be murdered first.¹⁰⁷ This saved the Nowogródek camp.

Still, there was internal opposition to the breakout, and the committee decided to put it to a vote: 165 voted in favor, 65 against, but those who voted against also participated in the escape. On September 26, 1943, at night, 232 Jews — all the camp inmates except for a few who preferred to stay and hide — escaped. Many were caught, but about 170 managed to get away, most of them joining the Bielski group.¹⁰⁸

106 Kagan, *Novogrudok*, p. 78. Nahum Kushnir (YVA, O.3/3929) reports that his daughters heard from a Russian woman working for Traub that Traub had decided to liquidate the Jews, leaving only twelve expert craftsmen alive. This may well be true and may have contributed to the decision to escape.

107 Report by Wilke, July 11, 1943, in Kagan, *Novogrudok*, pp. 195–196. See, also, YVA, TR.10/566, indictment against Alfred Renndorfer, Munich, 1970; Wilke was sentenced to five years in jail in Germany in 1962.

108 There are quite a number of testimonies from survivors of the escape. See, for example, Kagan, *Novogrudok*, p. 190. The five who had hidden also escaped, a week later (*Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 237–241). Of the many accounts by escapee survivors, one tells us about a peasant who refused to help because he said they were Jews who had been punished by God (*Pinkas Navaredok*, pp. 294–295).

On June 22, 1944, the German front in Belorussia was broken, Minsk was liberated, and the Germans were in retreat. Groups of Germans made their way to the west through the forests. On the day of liberation, July 9, just before the Soviets arrived, a group of some 100 Germans penetrated the Bielski camp while the armed detachment was away and killed nine people. However, the armed detachment, alarmed by the sound of shooting, quickly returned and killed all the Germans in the group. Generally, partisans, and most certainly the Jews, took no German prisoners. They were all shot in retaliation for the same treatment meted out to partisans captured by the Germans. By July 16, Nowogródek was liberated by the Soviet army, and the Bielskis, with 1,230 people, entered the town. After that some were recruited into the army — many of them died at the front, including Asael Bielski — and the rest stayed on for a while. Most of the survivors made their way to Poland, and from there via the American Zone in occupied Germany to either Palestine/Israel or Britain and the United States.

It is estimated that about 300–400 Jews returned to the town, and another 300 or so returned from the Soviet Union; these were expellees from 1940–1941, and soldiers of the Red Army.¹⁰⁹ If these figures are even approximately correct, then the survival rate of those who were caught by the German occupation was about 5 percent, and the total survival rate was about 10 percent, which is higher than for most, if not all, places in Belorussia. The reason for the 5 percent survival rate of the Nowogródek ghetto is obvious: they were mostly saved by the Bielski partisans.

Conclusions

Nowogródek before the war was not much different from other places in the *kresy*. It had the usual internal structure, was supported by emigrants from the township living in the United States, and consisted of craftsmen, traders, and peddlers. By the 1930s it was largely controlled by Zionists, and both political orthodoxy and the Bund were of secondary importance. Zionist youth movements were very popular. Yiddish was still the main language, but Hebrew was making inroads, and, of course, most Jews had some degree of knowledge of Polish, Russian,

¹⁰⁹ Kagan, *Novogradok*, pp. 128, 257.

and Belorussian. Most Jews owned small plots of land; cultural life was very well developed; and almost all Jews maintained basic religious traditions. Yet despite the fact that most Jews managed to eke out some kind of material existence, the feeling of being hemmed in and having no future made many yearn for an opportunity to emigrate – although that was not a realistic option in the 1930s.

There is no doubt that the Jews, generally speaking, welcomed the Soviet occupation because the alternative was the Germans. They were not alone; many Belorussians (and Ukrainians, contrary to some of the literature) welcomed the Soviets, too, out of hatred of the Poles. The Polish population regarded the Soviets as their enemies. Young Jews now had, for the first time, a possibility to pursue advanced studies, and Jews could get government civil service jobs that had been closed to them in pre-war Poland. This, however, considerably increased Polish antisemitism. On the other hand, during the Soviet occupation, all organized Jewish life was destroyed by the new regime, with the exception of a few religious traditions.

In Nowogródek, there was no clandestine resistance to Soviet oppression, and people simply sought their own economic survival. The disillusionment of most Jews with the new regime quickly became obvious, but found no open or clandestine organized expression. The very speedy and unopposed collapse of a Jewish way of life that had been developed over centuries, both in the “old” USSR and now in the *kresy*, was an ominous phenomenon. Not enough attention has been given to this development. Can a totalitarian regime such as the Soviet, effectively eliminate Jewish culture at one fell swoop?

Economically, most Jews managed quite well, largely due to the corruption of the regime, but many, if not most, of the refugees who had fled from German-occupied Poland were deported to Siberia, together with some local political and economic activists. Relatively more Jews were deported from the *kresy* than Poles or Belorussians, but with less brutality than was exercised against the Poles. In all the above, there is no great difference between Nowogródek and other Belorussian *shtetlach* during that period.

However, during the German occupation, Nowogródek’s fate differed in many ways from that of other *shtetlach*, and certainly from its nearby neighbor, Baranowicze.

There were three Judenräte in Nowogródek, headed by Zeldowicz, Ciechanowski, and Isakowicz, respectively. The first one had no

time to show its character; the second one was judged positively by the survivors; and the third was regarded negatively, not unlike many other “third” Judenräte in the *kresy*. However, unlike in other places, the Nowogródek Judenrat does not seem to have had any great impact on the life of the Jews. It was clear to the Jews that the orders came from Traub and that the Judenrat had no choice but to obey. No lists of Jews were demanded by the Germans, except, apparently, partial lists, twice, for specific groups of workers (November 1941 and July 1943, from Ostashinsky). But lists of Jews according to their occupations had been handed over at the beginning of the occupation and were then used throughout the period, largely for work assignments. No lists were demanded or given during the selections for murder prior to or at the time of the four massacres committed by the Germans.

After the liquidation of the third Judenrat, following the second massacre, two individuals (Burstein and Ostashinsky) were appointed in succession as *Judenälteste*. Burstein was viewed positively by the survivors; Ostashinsky much less so. Both had little influence on Jewish lives, merely serving as conduits for German orders. They were not involved in selections, and Ostashinsky in the end participated actively in the underground and the preparation for the breakout. This goes against most of the stereotypes of Judenräte as described in the historical literature.

There was no *Amidah* as defined above, with the exception, during the first few months, of remnants of religious life. Soon even that remnant disappeared. Contrary to Baranowicze and Kurzeniec, there was no social work, no education, no cultural life, probably no medical help, no resistance movement, no underground political work, no organized smuggling of food. The communal structure, founded in the late Middle Ages — and, again, contrary to Baranowicze and Kurzeniec — was atomized and ceased to exist. Families stuck together; that was about all. Yet at the same time, there was a relatively large number of escapees who made it to the forests, largely but not solely to the Jewish partisan detachment of the Bielskis. One could argue that the escape, in part organized from outside by the Bielskis, came instead of resistance in the ghetto (with the exception of the final breakout through the tunnel), there being no practical possibility for any local effort in that direction.

During the last year in the forest, the Bielskis created a very large family camp, ultimately numbering some 1,200 people, which sup-

plied necessary services to the surrounding Soviet partisan groups. Elements of *Amidah* absent in Nowogródek did develop in the Bielski forest *shtetl*. There was singing; there was some religious life; there was even a dramatic circle that presented plays; and a dance group. Under a charismatic leadership that imbued people with a minimal sense of security, Jewish *shtetl* life was revived outside the destroyed *shtetl*.¹¹⁰

There can be no doubt that the fact that there were hundreds of survivors was due to the Bielskis, whose close links to Nowogródek and their policy of accepting every Jew regardless of gender or age made all the difference. The analysis of the Bielski detachment conveyed by Nechama Tec in her book is valid for the last seven or eight months only, from the fall of 1943 until the liberation in July 1944. Before that there were two periods: during the first, from June 1941 until late spring 1942 (about a year), the three adult Bielski brothers were fugitives hiding with their non-Jewish friends in villages and beginning to acquire their first weapons. The second, from the summer of 1942 until the summer of 1943 (another year), was marked by the slow growth of the detachment from a few dozen people to a few hundred. However, the destruction process taking place in Nowogródek, Lida, and other places reached a peak in the late summer of 1942, when the Bielskis were a small group of some eighty people. Before that only very small groups could escape, and there were no groups of any significance that could receive them in the forest. This probably explains the lack of an organized underground. The liquidation of the ghettos, which occurred when the partisan movement had already made itself felt, brought a significant number of escapees to the forests.

The Bielskis survived as a result of alliances — at first with the small non-Jewish detachment of Viktor Panchenkov, and then with a friendly brigadier-general of the Soviet partisans and commander of the area, Vassily Chernyshev, and a few other relatively friendly Soviet commanders. The diplomatic and leadership qualities of Tuvia Bielski were the decisive factor. There were other units that accepted refugees from Nowogródek, but they were less significant. Survival was the result of the presence of groups that could receive and absorb survivors from the township.

110 Tec, *Defiance*, pp. 195–196.

The relationship with the non-Jews in the area was checkered. There was enmity, especially in the town itself, albeit with a few exceptions. There was much more openness among the peasants, though there, too, great danger lurked for Jewish escapees, especially during the first year of German rule. Positive change occurred as a result of three developments: fear of the Bielski partisans (and others), who killed collaborators who delivered Jews into German hands; the growing realization that the Soviet regime would return; and the murderous oppression of the peasant population at German hands. There is substantial evidence to show that many Soviet partisans were radical and murderous antisemites. This was true especially before the organization of a military Soviet structure in the forests in May 1942, but even after that as well.

There were helpers and rescuers — Belorussian, Russian (Soviet), German, and Polish. Their motivations were varied. It seems that with some it was a natural humane instinct; with others, hatred of Germans; with others again, friendship toward acquaintances from before the war; and some hopes for material gain. Religious motivation appears to have been very marginal. Generally these motivations were mixed. In the Nowogródek area, all the rescuers were simple people, sometimes desperately poor, who in some cases shared their last piece of bread with the rescued.

The difference between the townships' fates cannot be explained by examining the German perpetrators, as the differences between them were minimal. The murder, motivated essentially by ideology, with the important addition of temporary economic considerations, was executed in much the same form everywhere, and largely at the same times. The fact that in Nowogródek it was the civilian administrator who initiated the actions (as in Baranowicze, but probably not as in Kurzeniec) and who acted in full cooperation with the SS and the Wehrmacht, whereas in other places it was the other way round, made little difference. The different attitudes of the surrounding populations, however, were crucial. But, again, the stereotypes do not always hold true. Contrary to many survivors' testimonies from the *kresy*, there was an important minority of Ukrainian peasants and a relatively much larger minority of Belorussian ones who did help. Most Jewish survivors were rescued at some point by non-Jews; they could not have survived otherwise. The same people were then usually saved by other Jews (the Bielskis). Internal developments, it turns out, important as

they were, were less so than external relationships. And one agonizes over the question why the same types of peasants helped in one place and not in another.

Can we reach some conclusions regarding all the *shtetlach* that have been examined until now? First and foremost, we need to beware of generalizations: each *shtetl* was different from every other one in many respects, as has been shown here and elsewhere. Arguably, each *shtetl* had at least a slightly different Judenrat from every other *shtetl*. At one extreme stands the Judenrat of Baranowicze, which, in the eyes of *all* survivors, was made up of upright individuals who sacrificed themselves for the community – and we are talking of three successive Judenräte. The other extreme is best represented by Krzemieniec (Volhynia), where two traitors headed the Judenrat for most of the time. The Buczacz Judenrat was similar. The Judenräte in Rokitno and Sarny (Ukraine) and the one in Kurzeniec were somewhere in the middle. The survivors neither admired nor condemned them because they said that they had no choices and acted in the best way they could. But they certainly did not help in the survival of those who finally made it.

In Buczacz, Nowogródek, and Krzemieniec, the Jewish community was totally atomized by the oppressors' actions. Not so in Baranowicze, Rokitno, Mir, Zborów, or Sarny. There was some – or, in the case of Baranowicze, a great deal, of *Amidah* in these places, but none in the first three. There were some attempts at armed resistance in almost all the *shtetlach* that I have examined (the exceptions are Nowogródek and Kosow Huculski [Eastern Galicia]), but with widely differing results. In some, as in Krzemieniec, these attempts were utterly marginal. In others, such as in Kurzeniec, Rokitno, or Baranowicze, armed resistance, flight to the partisans, or both, were significant.

I would suggest that there are some elements that might help explain the differences between the Jewish reactions in the different *shtetlach*: the character of the leading individuals; the physical and human environment, such as forests or their absence, and a local peasantry with whom the Jews had developed both positive and negative relationships; and finally, sheer luck, or lack of it. Charismatic personalities and their influence on historical developments certainly belong to those factors that are woven into historical analyses. In our case, however, they become fairly central, and so-called “real” factors – economic, social, political – pale by comparison. The “luck” factor is usually ignored, and the research on the *shtetlach* indicates that it should

be reintroduced into the overall calculation when one deals with a genocidal situation.

Jewish reactions to the disaster that befell these townships show both the vulnerability of Jewish existence and some internal strengths. However, Nowogródek is an extreme case. The community disintegrated, not just organizationally, but socially as well. There was no organized mutual help, no social care. Had it not been for the Bielskis, the story would have been even more dismal than it was in any case. Traces of an influence of Jewish traditional values can be seen, but they are few and weak. This is actually one of the main issues: does the past culture of a community whose existence is threatened have any influence on the behavior of its constituent members? Jewish culture and civilization is ancient and deep, yet its effect on the behavior of the Jews under the threat of collective death is questionable. Families stuck together, but socially there were vast differences between the *shtetlach* in the extent of mutual help, as we have seen. And who will say that non-Jewish families stuck together any less than Jewish ones?

These are temporary and partial conclusions, and I hope to carry on investigating more places in order to obtain a wider and more thorough picture of Jewish life and death in the *kresy*.