The Holocaust in Białystok: Urban, Rural, and Forest Environments as Spaces of Resistance, Survival, and Persecution

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THE HOLOCAUST IN BIAŁYSTOK: URBAN, RURAL, AND FOREST ENVIRONMENTS AS SPACES OF RESISTANCE, SURVIVAL, AND PERSECUTION

By

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B.A. University of Maine, 2019

A THESIS

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During the German occupation of Poland in World War II, thousands of Jews escaped city or ghetto life by seeking refuge within rural villages or fleeing to the forests. Numerous factors shaped individual survivor experiences within these spaces. In particular, gender, age or familial status, environmental factors like weather conditions or terrain, as well as personal politics and language or technical skills, all molded how one could act or was forced to react in these spaces. This study emphasizes the unique two-way relationships between experience and three kinds of environments found in the Białystok District: the city of Białystok, small villages in the surrounding countryside, and Białowieża Forest. Each space transformed through time, and many Jews often passed through one or more of these spaces between 1939 and 1945. Upon German occupation of the city, violence and ghettoization firmly delineated “Aryan” and Jewish Białystok. Białystok and the ghetto created within it exhibited fundamentally different uses of urban space. The ghetto necessitated new interactions within a confined urban space while also demonstrating remarkable continuity in Jewish life. In the countryside, the Germans rapidly altered the ethnic makeup of rural communities in the first months of the invasion of the Soviet Union, murdering and pillaging on their way to remake occupied eastern Europe according to
their vision. Especially in rural spaces, movement, displacement, and concealment were the norm for surviving Jews. The Germans likewise attempted to clear the rugged terrains of eastern Poland, as in Białowieża Forest, though this effort failed to alter the landscape as totally as in the city or countryside. The forests provided protection from German occupation, while also intensifying the violence experienced during the later years of the war. They simultaneously presented better living conditions for those forced to work within them, a destination for those seeking freedom from oppression, and physical duress. Forest spaces also created steeper learning curves for escaped urbanites and made that escape more difficult to accomplish. Thus, environments came to define much of the Jewish experience during German occupation of Poland in World War II.
DEDICATION

To my friends and family, for listening to me whine and helping me along the way. To Dr. Anne Kelly Knowles for shepherding me through the thesis process and providing much needed interest, mapping suggestions, and probing questions. And finally, to all those whose research was hobbled by COVID-19, I sympathize, I really do.
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I owe my advisor, Dr. Anne Kelly Knowles, my deepest gratitude. Without her guidance, I would never have considered undergoing a master’s degree, let alone a project like this. Working with her for more than three years as a research assistant led me ever so slowly down the path towards my current topic of study. I may never pursue a career in academia, but I recognize I would not be where I am writing about such a fascinating topic, without her guidance.
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**DEFINED TERMS**

**Countryside** – A broad term to describe the hundreds of small farming communities and farmland that dotted the Polish landscape. The majority of Poles worked on family farms in such communities.

**Family camp/unit** – Groups of Jewish men, women, and children who fled the ghettos or execution. These were much less exclusive than partisan units, as their goal was not normally active resistance or sabotage, but survival.

**Forest** – A sparsely populated, largely unorganized, wooded environment. Often named for the settlement they surrounded, the forests near Białystok blurred into several large protected spaces, mainly Knyszyń Forest and Bialowieża Forest.

**Ghetto** – The space within a village, town, or city designated as a “Jewish residential area” by the Germans. These spaces were often separated from the rest of the settlement, becoming a “closed” ghetto, though some remained “open,” i.e., the ghetto was never enclosed by a wall or fence. Some ghettos became “transit” ghettos during liquidation actions, where the Jews from several ghettos were brought to one place awaiting deportation to a concentration or death camp. “Remnant” ghettos, with much smaller populations, were often established after such actions to keep skilled workers and their families.

**Ghetto liquidation** – A contentious, businesslike term used by the Germans to describe the destruction of a ghetto and the deportation or murder of its inhabitants. In their records, ghettos were not officially destroyed but “liquidated.” Jews were not deported or killed, but “evacuated.”

**Nazi** - Literally, a member of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP). Practically, a term referring to German soldiers or officials actively participating in crimes against humanity or passively accepting them. The term is not entirely interchangeable with German, soldier, occupier, etc., as not all within the German armed forced supported the regime or its goals, though often there is significant overlap.

**Partisan** – Armed combatants working within a semi-organized unit or group. Partisans were lumped together with fugitives and refugees under the legal term “bandit” sanction the murder of those in the forests by conflating them all with armed combatants, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority were unarmed civilians.

**Refugee** – Displaced people compelled to move for fear of persecution or violence. Jews fleeing to Białystok from German-occupied Poland would classify as refugees, as would those who avoided deportation.
INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Holocaust in Poland upended the already tumultuous lives of Jews living in urban and rural environments. Poland had the largest prewar Jewish population in Europe, almost three and a half million, or ten percent of the total population. Jews’ lives before the war were marked by economic uncertainty and varying degrees of discrimination. By the end of the war, just under three million Polish Jews were killed by deportation to death camps, isolated killings and mass murders, or from starvation, illness, or exhaustion in a ghetto. This figure represented roughly 90 percent of the prewar Jewish population. In Bialystok, a city which once was home to 50,000 Jews, only a fraction survived, either by escaping to the Soviet interior, surviving concentration camps, fleeing to the forests, or hiding on false papers. A definite number, or even an estimate, is almost impossible to arrive at, though it seems likely that because of the volatility and violence in this region, fewer than 10 percent survived in the Bialystok district. Bialystok fell right on the dividing line of German-occupied Poland and the incorporated Ukrainian and Belarusian Soviet states, within what Timothy Snyder called the “bloodlands,” the regions that were occupied twice from 1920 to 1941, once by Soviet armies, then by German. This area experienced the most violence, the most upheaval, of any occupied territory. Here, both Nazi and Soviet policy attempted to mold spaces and people to fit their imperial ambitions, one colonizing its own country, the other expanding into new territories. Long-term German occupation of the eastern Polish city of Bialystok was brief, just three years and two months from June 27th, 1941, to August 1944, yet it had catastrophic results for Jewish lives.

My research was guided largely by environmental and spatial questions, such as: how central the different spaces Jews inhabited were to their experiences, how these spaces influenced the level of control Germans could exert on populations and physical environments, and conversely, how they provided Jews the means to control their own lives. I also wanted to understand the process of genocide at the local level and how the chaos and violence of war affected people and the landscapes they inhabited. I was most interested in how one’s identity factored into their relationships with space. To answer these questions, I framed my work within a distinct geographical area.

The question arises, why study Białystok? Primarily, I became familiar with the region through my work on the Holocaust Ghettos Project, a subset of the Holocaust Geographies Collaborative. Extracting data found in *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, Volume II, demonstrated the peculiarities of this region both in local administration and in the destruction of the region’s ghettos. Białystok stood out in certain data visualizations from the encyclopedia, such as the uniformity of ghetto closures in the region, which made me curious to see what contributed to its uniqueness and how deeply it was felt by the few who survived in the area. The Białystok district also has remarkably different environments in close proximity of each other. Within 100 kilometers, the district’s urban namesake, the city of Białystok, numerous rural villages, and massive forests, demonstrated obvious differences as spaces of Jewish experience from 1939 to 1945.

In attempting to understand how different spaces affected Jewish experiences, I had to ascertain what a successful environmental history of the Holocaust might entail. Applying environmental history directly to Holocaust studies, a special issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research* by Tim Cole, Jacek Małczyński, Ewa Domańska, Mikołaj Smykowski and Agnieszka
Kłos presents a roadmap and sounds the call for future scholars to produce environmental histories of the Holocaust. They interpreted environmental Holocaust history as “…a field that is interested in how spaces of the Shoah (“catastrophe”) function as ecosystems while also exploring relations between and the mutual impact of human and non-human agents…within the environment.” Such a history also extends to the “various… meanings, and values associated with nature in the context of the Shoah.” This implies further interdisciplinary expansion of the field and an emphasis on the physical and interpreted spaces that Jews inhabited. My work presents an attempt at such an approach.

Geographic specificity came as both practical necessity and a desire to place my work within the existing focus on microhistory and local history that has come to permeate Holocaust studies. Something as diverse and expansive as the Holocaust necessitates at least attempted exploration at the local level. Scholars Geraldien von Frijtag Drabbe Künzel and Valeria Galimi contended “we employ microhistory…because it offers a gateway to a different dimension of analysis: that of emotions and feelings, perceptions and beliefs.” While this is my preferred lens through which to view this history, there are obvious flaws with it. Coined by Mark Mazower and later expanded upon by Tomasz Frydel, recent emphasis on local histories of the Holocaust has resulted in “encyclopedism,” the shriveling of analytical depth as a consequence of presenting as much detail as possible. Despite this, local history remains crucial in unearthing novel perspectives on the Holocaust.

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Recent Polish scholarship by a team helmed by Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski managed to convey the Holocaust in rural Poland as microhistory while remaining expansive in analytical scope, creating a middle point between what can sometimes be an overly conceptual or theoretical viewpoint seen in Timothy Snyder’s work and the troubling tendency of “encyclopedism.” Their gargantuan collaboration, Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski (Night without End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland) produced comparative microhistories of nine administrative regions, including Bielsk Podlaskie, a county (powiat) 40 kilometers south of the city of Białystok and directly adjacent to Białystok county. As the project by Grabowski and Engelking is not yet available in English, I consulted their previous individual works, Engelking’s Such a Beautiful Sunny Day…: Jews Seeking Refuge in the Polish Countryside, 1942-1945 and Grabowski’s The Hunt for the Jews, to contextualize the second and third chapters.

Thankfully, the turn in Holocaust studies towards microhistory also generated interest in forests and fields as spaces of experience. Few scholars have emphasized forest life so much as Suzanne Weiner Weber, whose articles, “The Forest as a Liminal Space,” and “Shedding City Life,” as well as her dissertation, “Life and Death in the Forest,” molded my understanding of Jewish survival in the forests. Additionally, Anika Walke’s Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia, looks at life in the Minsk ghetto and forest camps of nearby partisans and refugees. While not identical, life in the forests in western Belarus was comparable to that in the Białystok region.

Within each kind of environment I analyzed, age, gender, environmental conditions and climate, occupation, personal politics, and technical or language skills all influenced survivors’ experiences. Walke’s Pioneers and Partisan touches on a number of these factors of identity. In
Chapter 6, Walke discusses the blurring of distinctions between Jewish family camps and partisans in Belorussia, which is essential to understand the groups that cohabited the forest space. Occupied cities, the countryside, and forests were each gendered spaces in some way. Nechama Tec’s 1993 article “Women in the Forest” touched on factors such as age, technical skills, and gender that influenced one’s place in a forest camp, emphasizing the ways in which women in these camps held a tenuous position in the new social hierarchy that emerged. Tec’s 2003 book Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust provides further articulation of these themes.

Drawing on this scholarship, I use space to emphasize local variation, social interactions, physical environments, and change over time. The spaces I examine begin in the nucleus of Jewish life within the city of Białystok and spread outwards to the periphery from there, representing another progression from an ordered and built environment in the Białystok ghetto to a supposedly disordered and uninhabited “wilderness” in Białowieża Forest. Initially, I presumed Białowieża Forest was primeval wilderness, but that interpretation was soon complicated as I realized it was also the mistaken view of Nazi officials enforcing a colonial regime within the forest. In reality, Białowieża had been inhabited and adapted by people for many centuries; it was never some idyllic forest that required stewarded regression to the wild. This contradiction highlights that efforts to remake the forest were distorted from the start. Nazi colonial logic and how it related to different environments more broadly became central to my understanding of these spaces.

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Tim Cole’s *Holocaust Landscapes* offered a look into each of the kinds of spaces I observe: forests, ghettos, and fields. The framework Cole uses, thematic chapters based on the type of space within which individuals experienced the Holocaust, influenced my perspective, though I further emphasized the changes to each place over time. The transitions from city life before, during, and after ghettoization to life in hiding, and the staggering transformations made to spaces over time through war, occupation, and escalating measures of control all show the Holocaust as a process, rather than an event.\(^9\) The subsequent renegotiation of social, economic, and cultural life within such spaces demanded equal attention.

For primary sources directly pertaining to the Białystok ghetto, I was in some ways quite lucky. Several survivors provided interviews, now digitized, with the USC Shoah Foundation Virtual History Archive and Yale University Library’s Fortunoff Video Archive. Another online archive, the University of Texas’s Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, provides topographical maps of nearly the entire Białystok region. A 1938 Białystok city plan and aerial photography of the city collected by German reconnaissance planes rounded out my incorporation of historical geography. Many survivors, including Chaika Grossman, Michel Mielnicki, and Celina Friedmann, wrote memoirs on their experiences, either shortly after the war or later in life. Additionally, the Yizkor Book on Białystok,\(^10\) *The Białystoker Memorial Book* provided numerous first-hand accounts, archival documentation, and essays on the life of the city from the late 1800s to the end of the war.

As for secondary sources, Sara Bender remains the primary representative of literature in the English language on Białystok. Her translated book, *The Jews of Białystok During WWII and*  

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\(^10\) Yizkor is Hebrew for “remember.” Yizkor books were created by emigrant communities of a specific European locale. For example, the *Bialystoker Memorial Book* was created by the New York-based Białystoker Center.
the Holocaust was my main source for context and data specific to the city. Her and other historians’ contributions to entries within The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos pertaining to ghettos in the region were also indispensable. Evgeny Finkel’s Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival During the Holocaust compared Jewish action within three large urban ghettos, Minsk, Kraków, and Bialystok. His emphasis on resistance, compliance, and hiding was particularly insightful to see how the city space influenced Jewish agency. Other than Bender, much of the historical literature on the Holocaust in Bialystok is written in languages I cannot read, meaning the conclusions reached by Polish, German, or Israeli scholars asking similar questions, aside from a few translated texts, remain alien to me.

The shift towards a victim-centric understanding of the Holocaust has meant a newfound emphasis on survivor testimony and human memory. These sources present a variety of difficulties including the disputed meanings of language, uncertainty of recollections, source biases, and the intentions of any historian using. The languages spoken in interviews was often the survivor’s second, third, or even fourth language, and language is fundamentally an act of translation when describing memory or experience. Lawrence Langer’s Holocaust Testimony: The Ruins of Memory aptly described the many ways in which our own humanity clouds our understanding of the past. We memorialize or uplift based on the occasion, and these efforts often distort memory beyond recognition.11

The relationships between memory and history is an important one to unpack. Not only were some survivors children at the time of the war, others wrote in political climates that undoubtedly influenced what they said or remembered, such as the timing of Chaika Grossman’s

memoir coinciding with her involvement in nascent Israel’s political scene. While tremendously valuable as a eye-witness account of events in Bialystok, Grossman’s account was unabashedly opinionated. Parsing through praise and memorialization to get to the “truth” of testimony or memorial books presents a constant issue. Bialystok’s Yizkor book also evinced this distortion, as it often delved into glorification of life in the city before the war and unsubstantiated embellishments. While human memory is frail and prone to disruption and distortion, it is the most important source we can utilize to craft an understanding of the Holocaust. So many documents were destroyed, and so much official language manipulated to hide what happened, that often, only memory and eye-witness evidence exists. Survivor testimony, whether oral or written, allows us to understand the events as they happened while remaining focused on the people that those events affected. In my work, I excluded many excellent survivor interviews that were more than worthy of my attention for the sake of clarity and focus. In such a small project, I cannot hope to provide an unrestrained assessment of life in the city of Bialystok. With so many variables and so many potential themes, no single historian can offer a comprehensive analysis of the city, and many stories will remain unheard. That said, this is not an authoritative, encyclopedic assessment of the region, but a look at specific elements of the history of the Holocaust in Bialystok.

Chapter one looks at the city of Bialystok and the ghetto created within it in the summer of 1941. The city of Bialystok, which served as the focal point for Jewish life before and during the war, was rapidly and violently transformed under the German regime. After a period of intense violence, ghettoization made life temporarily safer for many, compared to the uncertainty and lack of support outside the ghetto. Despite being a place of material deprivation and slavery, the city and the space the Jews were forced to inhabit, a closed ghetto, also fostered resistance
activity. It was the site of one of only a handful of ghetto uprisings across Europe that only occurred because of the ghetto’s unique historical conditions. While ultimately being crushed, the revolt allowed for more than one hundred fighters to flee the city and join the partisans and refugees hidden in the nearby forests.

Moving beyond the ghetto, chapter two observes life for those in the city outside ghetto walls, where anonymity provided many a means to survive in plain sight. This chapter also brings in regional data from the Holocaust Ghettos Project, the impetus for this endeavor. The many small villages outside the city were simultaneously sites of indiscriminate murder and pillaging, done by Germans and locals alike, and of courageous families housing Jews, especially children, in hopes they would be spared. In the district, many settlements were ruthlessly gutted of Jewish life very early in the occupation. Additionally, most of the 63 ghettos in the region were closed simultaneously on November 2nd, 1942, marking a dramatic shift in Jewish experiences after this point. This coincided with a crackdown on escapees and intensified efforts to expose those in hiding. The rapidity of change and the severity of violence in this region remained a constant in every space.

While rural Poland and the forests within it shared similarities in terms of violence and the dangers faced by Jews on the run or in hiding, and could be analyzed as one space, they need to be distinguished. The Nazis distorted and reshaped every environment they came across as part of their colonial program for the east, but the Germans’ failure in the forest indicates that efforts to reorganize the physical environment could only go so far. Chapter three looks at Białowieża Forest, the many small villages within or around it, and survivors of slave labor, situating them within the German colonial project. The forests, arguably the least controlled space of all, housed a disparate group of people fleeing or resisting German occupation. Those in
hiding adapted to a new environment as a means to survive, while the Germans attempted to impose a colonial structure onto it because it was perceived as economically and culturally valuable. While the villages at the outer edges of the forest were fair game for German colonial efforts, inside the forest, that authority took a different shape. Just like in the countryside, day to day control was largely lacking. In the forests of eastern Europe, however, German anti-partisan activity became a unique guise for genocide. By 1944, efforts to reshape the forest were incomplete and only further instigated the resistance of people the Germans attempted to control. In each space, the city, countryside, and forest, the Germans increased their efforts to control the physical environment and the people within it, only in the end to abandon all hopes of success and seek their destruction instead.
CHAPTER 1

BIALYSTOK, REFUGE AND PRISON

Białystok underwent drastic physical and administrative changes from 1939 to 1945. It was occupied first by Germany, ceded to the Soviet Union under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, and later re-occupied by the Germans during Operation Barbarossa in 1941. Here, two empires influenced the lives of thousands of Jews and gentiles. The rest of this chapter discusses Białystok as a space and how Jews interacted with it under vastly different circumstances. It provides a brief analysis of the city before the war, looking to economics, demographics, and the built environment to understand the urban landscape and how it influenced the experiences of Jews during World War II. The chapter also highlights the physical violence of the German
invasion and occupation, which caused harsh changes to the city and the lives of its people. These necessitated new relationships to the urban environment, as Jewish homes were vacated, stolen, or burned, and Jewish-owned factories were appropriated for the war effort. The Bialystok ghetto, a contained urban environment in its own right, merited equal attention as the city as a whole. The chapter also assesses two major facets of ghettoization within the Bialystok ghetto: forced labor and resistance. Within the ghetto’s walls, a diverse cohort of people created a semi-stable existence, busying themselves through working or through defying the Nazi regime. Ghetto labor, as well as the large, organized resistance movement within the ghetto, were both influenced by factors such as diet and weather. Jewish experiences of both were grounded within the physical space of Bialystok.

**The city of Bialystok before the war**

The city of Bialystok, located in the present-day Podlaskie Voivodeship (Province) in eastern Poland, lay at the edge of the ethnically Polish and Belarusian parts of the Second Polish Republic, far from the economic heartland around the Vistula River. Prior to the Second Polish Republic’s inception in 1918, Jews were not allowed to own farms in Russian Poland and were subjected to frequent evictions and relocations within the Russian Empire. This created stark demographic divisions, with Jews concentrated in town or city centers and Poles largely in the countryside. At the regional level, Bialystok represented an industrial core surrounded by small rural communities and ancient forests. Outside its cities, much of Poland was overwhelmingly populated with Christian Polish peasant farmers who relied largely on small-scale agriculture for commerce. Despite economic hardships before the war such as frequent layoffs and shakeups

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in the 1920s and early 1930s, ghetto survivor Joseph Dobryman recounted that many urban Jews depended on the textile industry as a source of semi-stable employment.\textsuperscript{14} Because of the Jews’ concentration into urban centers, many of Białystok’s factories was owned and operated by Jews, mainly producing metals and textiles.\textsuperscript{15} By 1936, Białystok was the second largest textile producing city in Poland, with a Jewish population of roughly 44,500 in a city of around 100,000 people.\textsuperscript{16}

Yet having a large industrial sector did not equate to material prosperity for all the city’s inhabitants. Leon Marcus and his family moved in 1937 to Białystok, in a house near the great synagogue in the center of the city, lacking electricity or running water and sharing a bedroom with five people.\textsuperscript{17} As the eldest child, it was determined that thirteen-year-old Leon would not receive further schooling in the new city, saving that for his two siblings. He instead trained as a tailor until the war broke out.\textsuperscript{18} In Białystok, as in any city, wealth and development were stratified. The factories could only employ so many, and “except for the textile industry, there was nothing else to do.”\textsuperscript{19} The city itself was “half proletarian and half provincial,” as Białystok native Chaika Grossman described it, a remote city in the Polish periphery in the midst of a modernizing phase.\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{16} Sara Bender, “Białystok” in \textit{The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945}. 866.


\textsuperscript{18} Leon M. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 6:54).

\textsuperscript{19} Joe D. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 5:30).

Figure 1.2 A 1938 Bialystok city plan. An area of importance for Jewish life in the city, which included the Great Synagogue and Rabbinic cemetery, is marked in yellow, and the ghetto boundaries are marked in blue. Teacher's bookstore in Białystok, “Plan Miasta Białegostoku (City Plan of Białystok).” 1:10,000. 1938. Mapster. http://igrek.amzp.pl/appendix.php?idapp=1759884&idmap=1763172
Figure 1.3 Two photos of prewar Białystok. Above, wooden houses line a street in the crowded Jewish area, with the great synagogue’s roof glimpsed behind them. “View of a street with wooden houses in prewar Białystok.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives #48323. Courtesy of Tomasz Wisniewski. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 1939.

Below, a more modern, developed section of the city with wide boulevards, stone, brick, and plaster buildings, as well as the smokestacks of Białystok’s textile industry. “View of prewar Białystok.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives # 48318. Courtesy of Tomasz Wisniewski. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 1939.
Violence and ghettoization: controlling city space

While Białystok fell under the lands intended for the Soviet Union through the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Germans first occupied the city from September 16th to the 22nd of 1939 before ceding it to the Soviets. In under a week, “the Germans killed more 100 Jews and vandalized and looted more than 200 Jewish factories and homes.”21 This initial foray into antisemitic violence gave the Jewish population a strong impression of what German occupation could entail. Irene Shapiro, who grew up in Grudziądz, near Gdańsk, and moved to Białystok in 1938 as a teenager, remarked that the German soldiers’ violent conduct later impelled some to “(give) [the Germans] a sendoff… (throwing) rocks at the [departing] German Army (and) (screaming) at them like one man.”22 While this incident may have been cathartic at the time, Irene Shapiro felt that it was not forgotten by the Germans on their return to the city, and influenced German behavior at that later moment.

The imposition of violence and disorder on urban spaces and people represent at the local level what Trevor Barnes and Claudio Minca called “deterritorialization.”23 While their analysis looks more to the large-scale implementation of Nazi spatial theory in eastern Europe and the brains behind that process, the term itself describes what happened at the community, or even the individual level. The German invasions of Poland and later the Soviet Union brought with them massive upheavals of both people and the environment. Thus, a more physical understanding of the processes of genocide and ghettoization is necessary. Large swaths of settled space were violently seized and emptied of their inhabitants one town at a time in hopes of transplanting

21 Sara Bender, *The Jews of Białystok During World War II and the Holocaust*, 50.
National-Socialist order onto an emptied environment. As Tim Cole put it, “ghettoization was both an act of creating spaces of Jewish absence—literally making parts of the urban and rural landscapes judenfrei—and an act of creating spaces of Jewish presence within the walls of the ghetto.” To see their colonial ambitions through, the Nazis rearranged thousands of villages, towns, and cities along ethnic lines.

While Soviet policy was not aimed at exterminating the Jewish population, the Soviet administration attempted to organize the flow of people entering Białystok and consequently altered Jewish life within the city. With an influx of more than 30,000 refugees and an unknown number of Soviet officials, teachers, and workers, the population rose to more than 150,000, perhaps even 200,000, with fewer buildings available to house the newcomers, leading to an acute housing crisis in the city. To counteract these conditions and ease the housing crisis, a few months after the Soviets entered the city, they began deporting refugees further into the Soviet Union and turning new ones away at the border. This was both a result of the closing of the German-Soviet border and occupation policy designed to increase support for the Soviet regime.

Łódź native Marc Sobotka witnessed firsthand the poor living conditions within Soviet Białystok. After paying to be smuggled eastward across the Bug River, which delineated much of the new border between the Soviet Union and Germany, Sobotka “found a place to live,”

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27 Sara Bender, The Jews of Białystok During World War II and the Holocaust, 53.
28 Sara Bender, The Jews of Białystok During World War II and the Holocaust, 53.
which amounted to a bunk for him and his brother, rented out by a local elderly couple.\textsuperscript{29} Though he quickly found employment and was safe from Nazi atrocities in Soviet-controlled Poland, Sobotka realized living within the Soviet Union had its share of disadvantages, primarily the feeling that his presence in the city was temporary. Thousands of people were being sent, whether by force or through strong encouragement, to factories across the Soviet Union to reduce the population strain and make productive citizens of the large refugee population.\textsuperscript{30}

Especially among refugees, no one was guaranteed stable employment, housing, or living conditions. Because of these conditions, traffic in the region did not flow one way. Thousands of refugees crossed through Białystok headed towards the interior of the Soviet Union, but many others left the Soviet Union for German-occupied Poland.\textsuperscript{31} For Sobotka, without most of his family and chafing under a grim Soviet lifestyle, the dangerous path back to German-occupied Poland became his only option. By the time he left Białystok in January 1940, the Bug River was frozen solid, making his return journey to Łódź considerably easier.\textsuperscript{32}

While many refugees found conditions in Soviet Białystok intolerable, some locals found them significantly improved from before the war. As Joseph Dobryman noted, antisemitism all but disappeared from the city. Further, he was able to attend night school free of charge to become a mechanic, something that later proved instrumental in his survival.\textsuperscript{33} Irene Shapiro also felt a reduction in antisemitism, observing that Jews became something of a “trusted minority at that time.”\textsuperscript{34} Soviet resources, while limited, were made available to all regardless of previous class or ethnic distinctions, assuming one was not labelled a dissident by the new regime. Life

\textsuperscript{29} Marc S. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-0176). Fortunoff Video Archive For Holocaust Testimony. Yale University Library, 1982. (Tape 1, 14:20).
\textsuperscript{30} Awrom Zbar, “The Rise and Fall of Białystok,” 54.
\textsuperscript{31} Awrom Zbar, “The Rise and Fall of Białystok,” 53.
\textsuperscript{32} Marc S. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 15:30).
\textsuperscript{33} Joe D. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 8:25).
\textsuperscript{34} Irene S. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 23:54).
might have been better for many, but the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland was just that, an invasion. The Soviet state imposed its own will upon the newly conquered people and deported thousands of political or class enemies to Siberia, often Poles.\textsuperscript{35} The mass movement of those caught between two empires was thus commonplace in eastern Europe.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union compelled many Jews to flee Białystok in hopes of safety behind the fast-retreating Soviet lines. As the conflict neared her city, Irene Shapiro fled the coming attack with some friends, leaving behind her parents and sisters who were unwilling to go. Shapiro estimated she travelled over 100 miles in the time between the German invasion on June 22nd and their arrival in Białystok five days later. She planned to make it behind Soviet lines, facing bombs and machine gun fire from planes overhead, not to mention the “masses of humanity” making similar journeys as they took to the roads and fields on foot, only to be forced to return to Białystok by German forces.\textsuperscript{36} Like Shapiro, Michel Mielnicki felt compelled to flee the fighting when the Germans came. He fled to the countryside surrounding Białystok to hide from the violence, returning to his home in Wasilków after a night spent in the open air and sleeping in a water-filled ditch to avoid patrols and checkpoints.\textsuperscript{37} Though these escapes rarely resulted in permanent relocation, brief flights away from the invasion show how the deliberate imposition of chaos and violence onto a space affected the people within it both physically and psychologically. Despite its brief occupation and sporadic violence, Białystok was largely spared from damage in the first German invasion. During the German advance in late June 1941, however, the city was physically devastated.

\textsuperscript{35} Timothy Snyder, \textit{Bloodlands}, 130.
\textsuperscript{36} Irene S. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 36:54).
\textsuperscript{37} Michel M. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-3072). \textit{Fortunoff Video Archive For Holocaust Testimony}. Yale University Library, 1984. (Tape 1, 26:00). 
25-year-old Abraham Okun, a native of Białystok, recalled the murder of over 1,000 Jews, mostly men, in the Great Synagogue on June 27th, the first day of the Nazi occupation of the city. They were marched into the synagogue, with the doors sealed from the outside and the building cordoned off by the Germans, and burned alive. Another witness, Leon Marcus, heard the grenades thrown into the synagogue’s windows and saw the fire grow through the night. As Marcus recalled, “that fire consumed the old street where we lived… (stopping) maybe four or five houses from us.” The Marcus family’s household at 44 Suraski Street was spared the flames. Others were not so lucky. Many buildings in the Jewish quarter were wooden and tightly packed, so when the synagogue burned, the fire spread throughout the neighborhood, ultimately razing several streets, though the complete extent of the damage remains unknown. The Germans murdered around 2,200 Jews that day. Death on such a scale was previously unthinkable, but as time went on, it became commonplace.

In Abraham Okun’s mind, the reason he and other Jews on the streets near the Great Synagogue were not also murdered at that time was that the killing action was a symbolic attack, an attack on the center of the Jewish community. At least from the understanding of many who witnessed or heard of the killing action, the Germans chose their target deliberately as revenge for their unflattering exit from the city in 1939. Michel Mielnicki did not witness this atrocity firsthand, but he aptly described the target of the attack: “it was a Shule, a higher synagogue, it was kind of new, one of the newest buildings in Białystok. It was built with help from money

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38 Abraham O. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-0189). Fortunoff Video Archive For Holocaust Testimony. Yale University Library, 1980. (Tape 1, 2:10).
39 Leon M. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 22:19).
41 In survivor interviews, some gave numbers as small as a few hundred victims, while others thought thousands were killed. In the secondary literature, Sara Bender noted that roughly 2,000-2,200 Jews were killed on the first day of occupation, 800 of whom were burned alive in the synagogue. Sara Bender, The Jews of Białystok During World War II and the Holocaust, 93.
42 Abraham O. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 2:44).
from America because the population of Jewish people in Białystok was growing.” The new building, built in the early 1910s, was a bright and decorated building in the heart of the city. In some ways, it represented the future of the Jewish community in Białystok. It was an investment in a growing population, and its destruction paralleled the fate of Jewish life in Białystok. By acting so brutally, the Germans terrorized Jews living in the city and sent a clear message of hostility towards them.

Figure 1.4 A German air force reconnaissance photo of Białystok, taken five days before the Germans captured the city and burned the Great Synagogue. The Rabbinic cemetery is marked in the larger box, and the Great Synagogue in the smaller box. National Archives and Records Administration. “Aerial photo of Białystok.” Collection of Foreign Records Seized (Record Group 242). German Luftwaffe Aerial Reconnaissance Photos 1939-1945. June 22\textsuperscript{nd} 1941. https://jewish-heritage-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Luftwaffe-Bagnowka7-Synagogue-Old-Cemetery-1941-06-22-scaled.jpg

\cite{MichelM} Michel M. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 10:30).
Further traumatizing the population, a mass selection of 1,000 Jews, eventually narrowed to 300 Jewish intelligentsia, occurred on July 1st, mere days after the occupation. The Jews selected were brought to Pietrasze Forest, just northeast of Białystok, and shot. The selection of a forest space or field on the edge of a town or city as the site of murder occurred frequently.

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44 Sara Bender, *The Jews of Bialystok During World War II and the Holocaust*, 93.
across eastern Europe. According to Andrew Charlesworth, it was convenient to bury bodies in “places of secrecy,” “camouflaged from prying eyes.”45 But at the same time, forests at the edge of a community were still close enough that everyone in the community was well aware of what happened to the victims.46 While the mass murder site could be obscured to the eye, the “sound of gunshots echoed through the visual screen presented by the trees.”47 Witnesses were also conveniently available to help bury the bodies or sort through valuables left on them.48

After the initial violence of the invasion subsided, German officials immediately began curtailing Jews’ rights and organizing what remained of the city to isolate the Jewish community. While a city is a built environment, a Jewish ghetto in many ways represented the extreme of human intervention onto an urban space. The transformation was rapid, thorough, and brought irrevocable changes to the city. While ghettoization in western Poland was often a drawn out affair, in eastern cities like Białystok, the first major events leading to the ghetto’s establishment came in a matter of weeks.49 On July 26th, 1941, Białystok’s Jews were told they had five days to relocate to the ghetto. They were then “ordered…to construct a 2.5-meter-high wooden fence, topped with barbed wire, around the ghetto.”50 On August 1st, the ghetto gates were closed.51 The ghetto wall that separated Białystok’s Jews from the “Aryan” side codified into the physical world what was once a more tacit divide. Ghettoization also brought with it the seizure of Jewish homes and property outside the ghetto area: “those who found themselves outside the designated

46 Doris Bergen, War and Genocide, 154-155.
49 Martin Dean, ed., The Unites States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945, Volume II: Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012, as analyzed by the Holocaust Ghettos Project. Data used in my analysis will be published online in 2022.
50 Sara Bender, “Białystok,” 867.
51 Sara Bender, “Białystok,” 867.
boundaries of the Jewish neighborhoods, lost their entire life’s possessions, including property that had accumulated over generations.” Through mass murder, deportation of locals, and bringing in thousands of Jews from the surrounding region, the Germans orchestrated the fragmentation of prewar community ties to divide the ghetto population.

The Jews’ forced relocation into the Białystok ghetto could have been harsher. Ephraim Barash, a skilled bureaucrat and de-facto head of the Judenrat (Jewish council), convinced German officials to enlarge and relocate the planned ghetto space to somewhere more productive. Normally, the worst, poorest sections of cities were chosen for ghettos. Białystok’s ghetto ended up in an industrial, middle-class part of the city, surrounded by a rail line and major streets. Because of the change, however, many were forced to abandon their homes and possessions in exchange for sharing smaller spaces with numerous other families. No matter how much of an improvement the new area was over the original planned ghetto, in mere months, the economic progress made by Jews in the city was wiped away and replaced by deprivation, overcrowding, and slavery.

Ghettos, especially closed ghettos like in Białystok, were analogous to prisons, though these prisons were designed to slowly murder their inmates. In Białystok, the ghetto wall came to represent anxieties or opportunities for different people. This is not to say the wall was impermeable or that the ghetto was shut off from the other side. Made out of simple materials, “wood and wooden planks, whatever they (could)…” find, it was never the wall itself that presented the danger for Białystokers. For Irene Shapiro, the perpetual danger on the outside was

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54 Witold Wojciech Mędykowski, Macht Arbeit Frei? 103.
55 Michel M. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 27:30).
the real threat; “[the walls] (weren’t) restrictive. (they were) just ordinary wood. It was what was on the other side.” The Germans restricted movement between the ghetto and the outside world to those working outside the ghetto. Though immeasurably dangerous, many ghetto inhabitants slipped outside the ghetto to trade, conduct underground activities, or to escape the ghetto entirely. Yet fundamentally, the line between Jewish and gentile Bialystok was no longer hazy.

**Labor, weather, and disease in the Bialystok ghetto**

Among the restrictions placed upon the ghetto, as both a space and a community of people, slave labor and the conditions surrounding it often determined one’s survival. Bialystok was not unique in that Jews were forced to work for the Germans for little or no pay. This was a demand made upon Jews in just about every ghetto that existed; “Jews capable of physical labor would work somewhere in the conquered Soviet Union until they died.” Many sought employment, however coerced, degrading, or poorly compensated it might be, not just to afford additional food, but “also because work offered protection from deportation.” It was rightly perceived that any Jew “who could not [or did not] work would be made to disappear.” Those with factory jobs were largely safe from deportations, whereas the unemployed or those without technical skills were the first to be forced out of the city. During occupation, the Germans requisitioned Bialystok’s textile factories to produce winter clothing and outfit the German Army. Within the ghetto, a large, productive workforce assembled winter gear, boots, and other wartime essentials, and according to Ephraim Barash, workers in the ghetto crafted 300 full sets of military clothing daily, including hats, gloves, and boots. As in some other regions like East

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56 Irene S. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 2, 4:47).
57 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 188.
59 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 188.
Upper Silesia, Bialystok’s industrial output undoubtedly contributed to the longevity of the ghetto, as the city’s administrators had a vested interest in seeing their plunder continue to roll in. In addition to this, the Judenrat redirected some of the revenue it received from ghetto inhabitants to bribe German officials to prevent the worst demands from being enforced.

Forced labor, an ever-present aspect across occupied Europe, varied as a result of weather conditions, location, or season. Labor detachments, under armed guard, were sent beyond the ghetto, and even outside the city, to dig peat from bogs, to fell trees, or build infrastructure. In the ghetto, Jews worked for Germans and Poles in their homes or in workshops and factories within or near the ghetto. Jews clearing streets of snow in wintertime became ubiquitous with the Holocaust. This task naturally exposed those working in the streets to the cold and weather when they otherwise might not have been. The winter of 1941-1942 was noted for its heavy snowfall and brutal conditions, but Jews in Bialystok withstood two winters in the ghetto. Chaika Grossman, living in the Bialystok ghetto through the winter of 1942-1943, observed that particular “winter was cold, and wet. Snow turned to slush in the streets, and the dampness penetrated into our bones. Even the beggars looked for better locations.” Extreme heat in summertime, as well as extreme cold in winter, reduced ghetto inhabitants’ strength and increased their susceptibility to diseases.

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62 Chaika Grossman, The Underground Army, 63
63 Sara Bender, “Bialystok” In The Unites States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945. 867.
64 Witold Wojciech Mędykowski, Macht Arbeit Frei? 88.
65 Chaika Grossman, The Underground Army, 146.
Diseases and ghettos were all but synonymous in occupied Europe. Drastic reductions in food quality and quantity, poor housing and sanitation, large influxes of displaced people, and
exposure to harsh winter conditions all contributed to the proliferation of diseases.\textsuperscript{66} In fact, “it is hard to imagine a system of mass population dislocation and confinement that was more calculated to degrade human health than the Nazi ghetto system of World War II.”\textsuperscript{67} In the Białystok ghetto, the daunting task of providing for the ghetto population’s physical needs was, at least temporarily, met. Although many disagreed philosophically or practically with Ephraim Barash’s strategy of creating an indispensable workforce and building “something from nothing,” few denied the effects this had on the wellbeing of ghetto inhabitants while the ghetto existed.\textsuperscript{68} By June 1942, almost 9,000 people were employed in factories and workshops in the ghetto. There were also 4,000 employed directly by the Judenrat. Rather than serve the German war effort, many created farms and gardens within the ghetto to help sustain the population.\textsuperscript{69} Dairy cows, vegetables, and cereals all contributed to a more nourishing diet, so much so that “the Białystok ghetto did not suffer from starvation.”\textsuperscript{70} In addition to this, the Judenrat created an orphanage, old-age home, and hospital to meet the needs of ghetto residents. While there was still a housing shortage from before the war, the Białystok ghetto’s housing troubles were nowhere near as dangerous as in other ghettos. For instance, by August 20, 1941, the Judenrat announced that “almost 95% of the ghetto’s Jews had been provided with permanent housing.”\textsuperscript{71}

However, this state of relative calm was not permanent, nor was it universal. Like life in prewar Białystok, conditions in the ghetto were stratified. Those who did not have to leave behind their possessions or who already had a home were much more fortunate than those forced to relocate. Some felt life in the ghetto provided for them, while others felt compelled to leave in

\textsuperscript{67} Matthew Smallman-Raynor and Andrew D. Cliff, “Theresienstadt.” 635.
\textsuperscript{68} Sara Bender, “Białystok.” 867.
\textsuperscript{69} Sara Bender, “Białystok,” 867.
\textsuperscript{70} Chaika Grossman, \textit{The Underground Army}, 99.
\textsuperscript{71} Sara Bender, \textit{The Jews of Białystok During WWII and the Holocaust}, 107.
search of better conditions. When the Germans deported around 6,000 Jews to Pružana to work in the forest, many were optimistic that the conditions would improve and even volunteered to leave.\textsuperscript{72} After most ghettos in the region were liquidated on or after November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1942, those who could not find their way to forest partisans or find someone to hide them in the countryside often made their way to Białystok.\textsuperscript{73} Making matters worse, the ghetto entered a strict lockdown for three weeks following November 2\textsuperscript{nd}. The Nazis later forced the Judenrat to surrender several acres of ghetto territory to them even while the population swelled with displaced Jews.\textsuperscript{74} In a moment, all the relative comforts of the Białystok ghetto, a largely employed population, food supplies from outside the ghetto, and space to house the population, were put under extreme stress.

The next several months were tumultuous for those living in the ghetto. A deportation action in February 1943 caused panic and roused the ghetto underground to action. Among the many reasons Białystok had a large resistance movement, the ghetto provided a space for organizing and preparing. It was large enough to hide underground activities from prying eyes, and it was well supplied enough to direct materials towards arms production. Residents purchased and stored arms and ammunition, created rudimentary grenades, and people trained with them in a park within the ghetto.\textsuperscript{75} Also, though Barash did not support an armed uprising, he did support the underground, supplying them with funds and information about the Germans’ plans as it came to him.\textsuperscript{76} Political scientist Evgeny Finkel suggested that prewar experiences of marginalization of Zionist youth groups like Hashomer Hatzair, Hanoar Hatzioni, and Dror,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Sara Bender, \textit{The Jews of Białystok During WWII and the Holocaust}. 109.
  \item Dr. Szymon Datner, “Białystok Region in Ruins,” in \textit{The Białystoker Memorial Book}, 78.
  \item Sara Bender, “Białystok,” 867.
  \item Chaika Grossman, \textit{The Underground Army}, 258-262.
  \item Sara Bender, “Białystok” 868.
\end{itemize}
directly influenced the kinds of operations these groups conducted and their successes.\textsuperscript{77} Communist groups were outlawed in prewar Poland. In places annexed into the Soviet Union however, like Bialystok, this policy was reversed, meaning a wide array of political groups developed vital experience in conducting anti-government activities. Armed with this experience, they were much more successful than their counterparts in places solely occupied by Germany.

The Germans denied Jews information as a means to control them. In ghettos that were cut off from the outside world, such as the extreme example of the Łódź ghetto, no real resistance was ever, or could ever have been, attempted.\textsuperscript{78} Information served the Bialystok underground to know what the Germans were planning and thus build support for their movement. Upon Chaika Grossman’s return to her home city in January 1942, after being in Vilnius, Lithuania, for several months, she met with members of communist and Zionist youth organizations, telling them of the deportations and killings that occurred in Vilnius since the Germans invaded, and of the real intentions behind Nazi ghetto policy.\textsuperscript{79} Grossman and the nascent underground built a sizeable movement that acted on its convictions by organizing and mounting an armed uprising and conducting other underground activity beyond the city. This movement, however, never fully galvanized the rest of the ghetto behind the planned uprising. Barash’s perceived success in keeping the ghetto productive, and thus valuable, made many hesitate to disrupt the status quo. Historian Rachel Einwohner emphasized two factors that played into such failure to accept the truth: the “credibility” of information provided and the presence of “cultured ignorance.”\textsuperscript{80} Simply put, the widespread disbelief that genocide was even


\textsuperscript{79} Chaika Grossman, \textit{The Underground Army}, 50-59.

\textsuperscript{80} Rachel L. Einwohner, ““The Need to Know,” 423.
a possibility made many refuse to accept ideas of resisting it. Instead, in the Białystok ghetto, most trusted Barash and felt they were indeed too valuable to be killed. The Germans happily played along, until the very last day of the ghetto’s existence.

The Białystok ghetto ended with one final, chaotic week. On August 15, 1943, Barash was informed by the Gestapo that the ghetto was to be destroyed the following day and its inhabitants were to be brought to Lublin.\(^81\) This gave the underground almost no time to react, but plans to fight hurried into motion. Hundreds resisted with guns or improvised weapons, though quickly running out of ammunition. As a member of the underground, Irene Shapiro took part in this rebellion, but her experience ended abruptly when a German soldier saw her with a Soviet grenade. He asked her, “‘what are you doing, mein Kind?’ (disbelieving) that a pipsqueak of a girl with a grenade in her hand was a guerilla.”\(^82\) Indeed, Shapiro’s own thoughts echoed the soldier’s: “how would a high school girl know how to use a hand grenade?”\(^83\) Completely untrained and not keen on dying for the sake of history or pride, as the underground’s leadership had urged,\(^84\) she handed over the weapon and was then deported to the Majdanek concentration camp with her family.\(^85\) Of the more than 30,000 Jews in the ghetto in August 1943, most were sent directly to Treblinka, though many like the Shapiros went first to the Lublin district as slave laborers and later to Auschwitz-Birkenau.\(^86\)

While much more could be said about ghetto resistance and the brave, though largely symbolic, stand made by the Białystok underground, as well as the speed with which ghettos were destroyed, because the vast majority of those who fought died during the several-days-long

\(^81\) Sara Bender, “Białystok,” 869.
\(^82\) Irene S. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 2, 16:52).
\(^83\) Irene S. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 2, 16:35).
\(^84\) This is in reference to the urgings of Mordecai Tenenbaum, the leader of the underground, to ‘defend…Jewish honor and…human dignity…fall like heroes, and in our death—we will not die!’ Found in Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival during the Holocaust*, 184.
\(^85\) Irene S. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 2, 16:40), (Tape 3 11:37).
\(^86\) Sara Bender, “Białystok,” 869.
uprising, little testimony is available to examine the conflict in great detail. For the Bialystok district, more testimony on resistance and hiding relates to spaces outside the ghetto. Much of the underground’s actions involved the movement of people beyond the wall to communicate between ghettos or to purchase arms from local Poles. Leaving the ghetto was the only possible way to accomplish either mission. Attention naturally came to those in the underground hiding on the other side of the ghetto’s walls after its destruction.
CHAPTER 2
HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Jews outside the Białystok ghetto, whether hiding inconspicuously in the city or escaping into the many small communities that dotted the countryside, experienced a fundamentally different occupation from those who remained inside the ghetto. The restrictions placed on occupied cities made life for Jews in hiding volatile. On the “Aryan” side, cities and towns posed constant dangers for those in hiding; any slip-up or denunciation by a gentile could spell death. This chapter begins by looking at those who survived immediately outside the Białystok ghetto, as well as the primary means of transportation available to those outside the ghetto working as part of the ghetto underground, a combined resistance effort of several leftist and Zionist groups.

Leaving the city, the experiences of Jews hiding in the countryside, like Celina Friedmann in the village of Osipy-Lepertowizna, offer insights into a part of the Holocaust that is only beginning to be studied. Moving from the urban core of Jewish life outwards to the rural periphery reveals a steady decline in German control of daily life, alongside a sharp increase in the scale and intensity of physical violence.

Also looking at rural Białystok, this chapter incorporates regional data from the Holocaust Ghettos Project to demonstrate the region’s relatively uniform ghetto closures. During these ghetto closures, people fled to large cities seeking anonymity in numbers. They fled to the countryside seeking refuge despite the difficulties in blending into a small community. This was in part because they had nowhere else to go, but also because the German presence was considerably weaker in rural Poland after the first months of violence. Movement, hiding, and displacement feature centrally in the experiences of those in rural Poland. As Jews fled to rural villages after the mass ghetto liquidation of November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1942, they entered spaces already
altered by German occupation. Many villages were completely destroyed early in the occupation, through war, terror, or opportunism. This chapter ends with brief observations on the *Judenjagt*, the “hunt for the Jews.” The Germans systemized complicity, rewarding Poles who exposed Jews in hiding and punishing those caught helping them. Consequently, most who fled to the countryside could not depend on long-term assistance from local Poles.

**The other side of ghetto walls**

Jews hoping to escape German control did not always need to go much farther than the other side of a ghetto wall. For many, presenting and passing as “Aryan” or Polish offered an appealing, albeit dangerous escape. In all of occupied Poland, across every city and village, perhaps 50,000 people survived by hiding on the “Aryan” side, while another 200,000 perished in the attempt.¹ The choice to escape in this manner was often dependent on one’s physical appearance and gender. It was generally made by women, as Jewish men, whether secular or practicing, could be subjected to a humiliating but effective “trouser test,” whereby a German or Pole could instantly recognize one’s Jewish heritage through their circumcision.² The most frequent threat to detection for any Jew, however, was the local gentile population, since most Germans could not differentiate between the two groups just by speaking to them. They instead relied on local gentiles to point out their Jewish neighbors.³ Polish Jews who spoke Yiddish as their primary language were particularly vulnerable, as they normally spoke other languages with a distinct accent.⁴ One’s appearance, religious upbringing, education, and the language spoken at

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home came to determine the ability to “fit in” at a time when sticking out was the last thing one wished to do.⁵

Jewish-gentile relations more broadly is the subject of several historians’ work. In detailing the Polish-led mass murder of two towns’ Jewish populations, Jan Gross’s Neighbors touches on something deeply unnerving but necessary to understand the tragedies that occurred across eastern Europe.⁶ Gross’s book came out twenty years ago, but questioning the scale of Polish complicity in the Holocaust remains as relevant today, if not more so, than when Gross first shook the field. Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking’s detailed study, Night without End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland, assesses motivations behind complicity and the degree to which gentiles actually betrayed their Jewish neighbors, both broadly and at the local level.⁷

Despite the numerous Righteous⁸ non-Jewish Poles who risked their own lives and their families to hide and protect Jews, a perhaps equally large, though still unknown, number denounced their neighbors, exposing the whereabouts of Jews in hiding to the German occupiers, or actively murdered them, whether out of fear of reprisals, promise of material rewards, or

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⁵ Evgeny Finkel, Ordinary Jews, 130.
⁷ This remains a contentious issue in contemporary Polish politics and academia. Gabrowski and Engelking were themselves ordered in a libel suit to apologize for their claim that a specific Pole denounced Jews, though at the time of writing, an appeal is still waiting to be taken up by the courts. Alan Charlish and Anna Włodarczak-Semczuk. “Polish Court Orders Historians to Apologise over Holocaust Book.” Reuters. February 09, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-holocaust/polish-court-orders-historians-to-apologise-over-holocaust-book-idUSKBN2A91M7.
⁸ “Righteous” here noting the honorary term bestowed upon non-Jews by the state of Israel after the war, “Righteous Among the Nations.” This was given to non-Jews who provided repeated or substantial assistance to Jews for altruistic reasons during the Holocaust. Poland has the largest share of people officially recognized as Righteous among the Nations, at roughly 7,000 of the total of 27,000. “The Righteous Among the Nations.” yadvashem.org. Yad Vashem. https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous.html.
genuine animosity. Several rural places in the Białystok district were the sites of horrific atrocities shortly after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. In the towns of Jedwabne and Radziłlow, the subject of Jan Gross’ *Neighbors*, local gentiles instigated and participated in the murder of nearly all their towns’ Jews, roughly 1,500 and 600 respectively, by locking them in barns and burning them alive. These horrific incidents were not isolated. Within just a few days of the invasion, “on June 26–28, a small German unit (or perhaps units) set fire to Dabrowa Białostocka, Zabłudów, Jasionówka, and Trzcianne, likely because their inhabitants almost all were Jewish.” Additional violence broke out in Łomża and Kolno with Herman Göring’s arrival at the towns in mid-July. In each of these towns and villages, large numbers of Jews were murdered or deported. Those who were expelled returned to find their homes razed or appropriated, all within a month of the invasion, demonstrating the rapidity of violence in the region.

Many survivors experienced the harrowing trial of local suspicion while living outside the ghetto in Białystok or other cities, though the anonymity provided by densely populated spaces made hiding in cities less risky. Bronia Klibanski, originally from Grodno, found herself in Białystok at the behest of Mordechai Tenenbaum, the de-facto leader of the Białystok underground, after he met with her left-wing Zionist group, the Halutz Hatzair, in Grodno to discuss Nazi atrocities and the potential to resist the Germans. After spending some time in the Białystok ghetto, Klibanski was moved to the “Aryan” side in late 1942 to communicate between

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9 As described by Jan Grabowski in *Hunt for the Jews*, 52 and elsewhere, accurately calculating such numbers is almost impossible, though there seems to be a clear argument that the amount of Jews who were found while in hiding points to a degree of normalcy in betraying or exposing them.
11 Laura Crago, “Białystok Region (Distrikt Białystok),” in The Unites States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945, 858.
12 Laura Crago, “Białystok Region (Distrikt Białystok),” 859.
13 Barbara Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day...*, 89.
ghettos, purchase arms for the underground, and preserve the ghetto archive. These duties put her in frequent contact with Germans and gentile Poles alike.\textsuperscript{14}

Obtaining some form of documentation, whether forged or real, was critical to successful expeditions beyond the ghetto or to another city. Those engaged in resistance activity like Klibanski did everything possible to obtain official documentation, as there was no telling how quickly a falsified document could become outdated and thus easy to spot.\textsuperscript{15} In Klibanski’s case,

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{jedwabne.png}
\end{figure}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{14} Bronia K. Holocaust Testimony (HVT-0076). \textit{Fortunoff Video Archive For Holocaust Testimony}. Yale University Library, 1979, (Tape 1, 18:12).
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{15} The importance of authentic documents is detailed regularly in Chaika Grossman’s \textit{The Underground Army}.
\end{flushright}
she obtained “real [identification] papers on the basis of a false birth certificate,” but not without immediately facing an informal test by a Polish native of the place she was pretending to be from. He asked her mundane questions about the city, one local to another, putting Klibanski in extreme danger without even knowing it. Klibanski knew that other women in a similar situation were exposed and killed in such encounters, but she opted to make jokes to diffuse any suspicions. As Klibanski was readily aware, every interaction with a gentile could result in a death sentence.

Yet despite the dangers and restrictions, many like Tenenbaum and Klibanski occupied roles in the underground that demanded their exposure to the outside world. They often journeyed between cities by prohibited means such as trains. Trains and train stations served the Nazis as well as the resistance, as they simultaneously allowed for heightened control of movement and activity, and greater mobility for those able to pass or evade inspection. In her original trip from Grodno to Białystok, Klibanski decided that asking a German soldier to buy her a ticket she did not have permission to purchase was the best course of action. She also moved extensively by rail to coordinate with other resistance groups or to smuggle money, food, and weapons back to the ghetto. In one case, she even admitted to a German train inspector that she was smuggling food, an illegal offense, to mask the fact she had wedged a pistol into a loaf of bread. The German let her go and even ensured she had a seat on the train. These vital underground activities, and thus her experiences, could only be completed by someone living outside the ghetto.

16 Bronia K. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 2, 20:20).
17 Evgeny Finkel, Ordinary Jews, 127.
18 Bronia K. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 2, 8:00).
19 Bronia K. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 3, 11:50).
In addition to her location outside the ghetto, Klibanski’s appearance helped mask her heritage and made for easier social interactions. When she was stopped by the inspector, she recalled, “I asked him…with a nice smile, I suppose. I asked him if he wants me to open (my suitcase)…he said oh no, no, thank you very much.” Yet “even more important than being rich or not looking Jewish was the level of integration into non-Jewish society: the ability to speak the local language, (and) familiarity with Christian culture and traditions, and, most crucially, social ties and friendships with non-Jews.” Having gone to a Polish public school, Klibanski had no difficulty acting Polish. When she left the ghetto, she was in close contact with a small network of Jewish women also passing as Polish on the outside who arranged for her to get a job and apartment. In her Holocaust Survivors Film Project interview, Klibanski never explicitly stated she was multilingual, yet it seems obvious that she was, given how effortlessly she interacted with German soldiers. The ability to speak Polish, German, or Russian offered significant advantages, as did ties to local gentiles. Life in hiding necessitated one became an actor, preferably a good one. Luckily for Klibanski, she thrived in such situations.

What do such anecdotes tell us about the relationship between space and Jewish experiences? For one thing, the variety of situations that could arise, problems that needed to be dealt with, or dangers looming depended entirely on the environment where individuals found themselves. There were also unique obstacles to any action dependent upon the accessibility of a ghetto and availability of transportation. Klibanski deduced, “this was the problem: how to get out, how to come in.” Moving within and between cities, interacting with Germans and

20 Bronia K. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 3, 16:00).
21 Evgeny Finkel, Ordinary Jews, 148.
22 Bronia K. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 5:55).
23 Bronia K. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 2, 22:20).
24 Bronia K. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 2, 6:50).
gentiles, and living a false life were luxuries only afforded to those outside ghetto walls. They were “free” from ghetto restrictions but deeply entangled by others.

**Survival in the countryside**

Jewish agency, or conversely, German control, were affected by the environments within which they were exercised. The lands surrounding the city of Białystok consist of dense marshes, vast forests, and countless small agricultural communities. Each space presented unique difficulties for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi oppression and the many forms of violence enacted by the German occupiers. While the term “countryside” can falsely imply an undifferentiated rural environment, the rural communities surrounding Białystok are distinct from the forests of eastern Poland. In the Polish countryside, life on the run or in hiding meant constant dangers alien to the cities. Yet, for the privileged few, this kind of environment could also alleviate many of the worries that emerged from ghetto life.

Most Jews fleeing into rural Poland found it an unknown space. Before the war, the overwhelming majority of rural Poland was “preindustrial… and many (some 30%) [of rural Poles] were illiterate.” Rampant poverty and a tight-knit insular attitude meant that rural Polish communities kept to themselves. Farming was the largest profession in Poland, especially in the east, with around 60 percent of the population working in fields, predominantly on small family plots. Here, proposals to modernize or change the economic system were received with

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25 Barbara Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day...*, 16.
26 Barbara Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day...*, 10.
27 Barbara Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day...*, 10.
derision. Rural society saw the modern world as a threat to “distinct virtues”\textsuperscript{29} and a way of life that farming communities were hesitant to change. Because rural Polish communities possessed “strong social bonds and control mechanisms, as well as considerable interdependence in everyday life,” they were able to better weather demands made by the Germans during occupation.\textsuperscript{30} It also made it much more difficult for outsiders to seek safety there, as many automatically viewed newcomers with suspicion.

While thousands of Jewish refugees poured through the Polish countryside seeking safety, their destinations and the lives they were able to lead there were largely influenced by their demographic and social positions. Wealthy, connected individuals more easily secured hiding spaces in an unknown area, whereas a penniless refugee coming from a city to a community they had never set foot in would have struggled immensely to do the same.\textsuperscript{31} The experience of Celina Friedmann, who escaped to the village of Osipy-Lepertowizna, 60 kilometers (40 miles) southwest of Bialystok, reveals some of the intricacies of Jewish survival in the Polish countryside.


\textsuperscript{30} Barbara Engelking, \textit{Such a Beautiful Sunny Day...}, 10-12.

\textsuperscript{31} Jan Grabowski, \textit{Hunt for the Jews}, 54-55.
Celina lived with her family in the Białystok ghetto for almost two years. She was just nine years old when they hid tenuously in an attic for two days during a major deportation action of the ghetto that started on February 5th, 1943. Fearing that children and the elderly were targets of the action, her mother arranged for Celina’s temporary shelter in a small farmhouse in an unidentified village an hour by train from Białystok. She sent Celina’s twin sister, Fella, to stay

Figure 2.2 A U.S. Army topographical map of Białystok and the outlying area from 1944. West and south of Białystok, the predominant environment was farmland. Hundreds of small, dispersed communities and patches of forest dotted the landscape. The Narew River ran directly through this portion of the Białystok district. Farmers from the villages in the small blue box (Osipy-Lepertowizna) travelled 60 kilometers to Białystok to sell produce. U.S. Army Map Service. “Białystok, Poland.” M-17. 1:100,000. Washington, DC: U.S. Army, 1944. Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/ams/poland_100k/index.html
with a Polish friend. With a smile on her face, Friedmann recounted the conditions at that farm in a Museum of Jewish Heritage Video Project interview: “there were two rooms, very primitive…they looked at my hair and they said, ‘no lice!’ They couldn’t believe that somebody had no lice. But of course when I left after a week in the house, I was loused up!… I said to myself, I’d rather be dead than stay here.” Frustrated by the conditions of rural life and isolated without her family, Celina soon returned to the city by train and briefly reunited with her mother and sister.

Short-term shelter in the countryside was much more attainable than a long-term hiding place. The temporary nature of this kind of assistance made such efforts more abundant and less conditional. In Celina’s case, her father’s coat was enough compensation to convince the farmer to house her until the ghetto quieted down several days later. Those seeking sustained help needed large sums of money, a strong personal connection, or incredible luck. The countryside for many was a “desert of humanity,” where Jews sought empathy from people who were often too jaded, afraid, poor, or bitter to provide it. For the most part, then, hiding for more than a moment was a luxury for children or the wealthy.

During the invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Germans moved or murdered thousands of Jews in the countryside. The already wide gap between Polish and Jewish Poland expanded through the violence of warfare and deliberate acts of terror and looting by the German Army or by local Poles sensing an opportunity. In Wysokie Mazowiecki, the town nearest to Osipy-Lepertowizna, over 1,000 were forcibly relocated to a labor camp in East Prussia, and up

33 Celina H. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 36:30).
34 Barbara Engelking, Such a Beautiful Sunny Day..., 87.
35 Celina H. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 36:20).
36 Barbara Engelking, Such a Beautiful Sunny Day..., 59-60.
to 90 percent of the town’s buildings were burned to the ground before the Germans ceded the area to the Soviet Union.\(^\text{37}\) By the time Celina Friedmann was smuggled out of the ghetto permanently in early 1943, rural towns and villages were already emptied of their Jewish populations in the mass liquidation action of November 2\(^\text{nd}\), 1942.\(^\text{38}\) Those who remained were, like Celina, in hiding. What became for Celina a safe environment mostly free from German control was already a space altered irrevocably by genocide and by two invasions.\(^\text{39}\)

For Celina, just nine years old in early 1943, the rural space of Osipy-Lepertowizna was both a reason for her survival and the source of new risks. Her mother had acquired forged Polish birth certificates to escape Białystok with the twins, but she was ultimately exposed by someone in the ghetto. Through some good fortune, she still managed to evacuate the two girls, placing them in the hands of a Mrs. Kaczynska, who was a stranger to Celina. This was the second time Celina and her sister Fella fled the ghetto, though this time the sisters were together and she knew which village they were being sheltered in. Celina knew of no prior relation between her mother and their new protector, personal or business; her mother simply gave the woman whatever she had to take them in before the ghetto was liquidated.\(^\text{40}\) A stranger providing such a degree of assistance with so little in return was truly a rarity.


\(^{38}\) Alexander Kruglov and Martin Dean, “Wysokie Mazowieckie,” 981.

\(^{39}\) Here, Timothy Snyder’s thesis describing the dual-colonization of Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine and the murderous effects double occupation had on the region, seems to be largely accurate. Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands, 20.

\(^{40}\) Celina H. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 39:10).
Friedmann’s story is exceptional, but it tells a great deal about what life was like for many of those in hiding. Her experience underscores that children were most likely to benefit from the kindness of locals when it came to being hidden. After all, there was considerably less danger in hiding them and more believable explanations for the appearance of new children. Especially when a child was young and not socialized in Jewish life, it would be easy for a family to explain their presence as a visiting relative. Gentiles and Jews alike sought to protect or

Figure 2.3 The village of Osipy-Lpertowizna, in a detail from Figure 2.2, marked by a blue rectangle. Somewhere in the rectangle was Celina Friedmann and her sister’s home after leaving the Białystok ghetto. To the south is Wysokie Mazowieckie, where the two went to school as newly converted Catholics. U.S. Army Map Service. “Bialystok, Poland.” M-17. 1:100,000. Washington, DC: U.S. Army, 1944. Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. 
http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/ams/poland_100k/index.html.
save children first and foremost. Children were by no means protected from the atrocities of the Holocaust, but they often received the most support from family members and strangers.

In Osipy-Lepertowizna, Celina and her sister Fella found their lives completely transformed. They lived at a small family farm with Mrs. Kaczynska, her sister, and her two sons. As she described it, the house had “a thatched roof…a small barn for the cow, another

Figure 2.4 Celina Friedmann and her twin sister Fella, center of the top row, attending a church school in Wysokie Mazowieckie, dressed for their first communion. By the time this picture was taken, the Białystok ghetto had already been liquidated. “Group portrait of girls at a church school in Wysokie Mazowieckie, Poland, who are dressed for their first communion. Among the children are twin Jewish sisters who are living in hiding.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives # 24162. Courtesy of Celina Friedmann. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 1943.

In Osipy-Lepertowizna, Celina and her sister Fella found their lives completely transformed. They lived at a small family farm with Mrs. Kaczynska, her sister, and her two sons. As she described it, the house had “a thatched roof…a small barn for the cow, another

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small structure for a pig and a chicken coop.”

The Germans were rarely a concern, as they were seldom there; only when the Russians pushed westward in 1944 did they need to hide from the Germans. The greater danger came from the scrutiny and curiosity of neighbors. They constantly prodded at the sisters’ religious upbringing by testing their knowledge of scripture and ceremonies, which was a risk for all in hiding. The sisters’ prewar secularism made their adoption of Catholicism more convincing and easier to internalize, thus reducing the risk of being detected. Yet despite their success at hiding their Jewish heritage from their neighbors, they still faced the dangers of exposure from a woman who knew their mother. On a trip to sell produce in the city, the Polish woman housing Celina and Fella learned that an acquaintance of their mother drunkenly told the Gestapo that Jewish twins were in the village. She did so without giving the children’s names or the name of the woman housing them, allowing for some flexibility with how they handled the situation.

Their protector was faced with a dilemma. She could give up the children and spare her family the danger of exposure, or she could hide one of the twins somewhere else until the situation diffused. Ultimately, Celina was sent to another farmer’s house to work as a shepherdess. She recalled that the family were “terrible antisemites…on Sundays they used to go to the forest to look for Jews, but in the meantime, they thought they had a nice Polish child in their house.” Celina and her sister spent a few months working for their host families, trading places occasionally, but from “the moment I heard the big guns, the Katyusha [Soviet rocket artillery], I ran back to Mrs. Kaczynska. We knew the front was coming.”

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43 Celina H. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 50:50).
44 Celina H. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 41:20). Barbara Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day…*, 35.
45 Celina H. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 44:10).
46 Celina H. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 47:15).
47 Celina H. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 48:00).
48 Celina H. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 48:45).
Germans finally came through the village, probably in July 1944, Friedmann and her new family were forced to hide in the nearby fields, at the time riddled with mines. Celina witnessed the retreating Germans burning numerous villages and fields on their way through the region, a practice quite common on the eastern front. Between 1939 and 1945, “some 675,000 peasant farmsteads were completely or partially destroyed.” Knowing the war was lost, the Germans sought to see through at least part of Generalplan Ost (the “Master Plan for the East”), the Nazis’ colonial scheme to eradicate all those deemed undesirable in eastern Europe and replace them with Germans.

Regional patterns: visualizing data from the Holocaust Ghettos Project

As was the case for Celina Friedmann, Jews fleeing the ghetto often did so at specific times, most often just before or during ghetto liquidations. Within the Białystok district alone, almost a dozen ghettos entries in the USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos mention the escape, often unsuccessful, of ghetto residents during a ghetto liquidation. In Brańsk, hundreds fled to the forests on the night of November 2-3 after being told by an escaped Białystoker about the German plans to liquidate all the ghettos in the district. In much smaller numbers, similar escapes happened in Czyżewo, Drohiczyn, Druskieniki, Grodzisk, Jasionówka, Prużana, Sopoćkinie and Wasilków. Movement outside the ghetto was difficult for the Germans to control, thus, a dramatic shakeup like a deportation action or a mass killing would have been conducive to escape attempts.

49 Celina H. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 52:00).
51 Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands, 307-308.
Ghetto liquidations in the Białystok district proved singular in their timing. The visualization from figure 2.6 illustrates the startling degree of uniformity for ghetto closures in the region. More than two-thirds of the 63 recorded ghettos in the district were liquidated on November 2nd, 1942. At this time, the Germans consolidated the Jewish populations from the various ghettos in rural communities into several “transit ghettos,” often by retrofitting holding spaces in a larger town or city with a rail station nearby, murdering all those who were too old or weak to make the journey, and sending thousands more directly to the Treblinka death camp. This contrasts with most other regions, which saw gradual consolidation of ghetto populations.54 Such uniformity in the region made for a more intensified outpouring of refugees immediately following November 2nd, 1942, as many attempted to avoid deportation by escaping to the forests or by seeking refuge in the countryside.

Those who fled the ghettos at this time faced weather conditions distinct from the previous winters’ biting cold and heavy snowfall. As the data in figure 2.7 shows, after November 2nd, 1942, temperatures hovered just above freezing, but by Saturday of the same week, the 7th, temperatures already dipped below freezing. While temperatures in the winter of 1941-1942 fell much sooner and more sharply than in 1942-1943, regular freezing and thawing from November 1942 onward presented clear dangers like frostbite or illness for those on the run, especially considering they were completely exposed to the elements, having fled with “little more than the clothes on their back.”55 While their destinations varied, the experience of harsh fall and winter conditions applied to all in hiding.

54 Laura Crago, “Białystok Region (Distrikt Białystok),” 861.
Figure 2.6 The date of lasting German occupation (where the red line begins), and the duration of ghettoization (until the blue line ends) in the Białystok district. Generated by Jeremy Braun using data compiled by members of the Holocaust Ghettos Project, 2021. Derived from *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, vol. 2, Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe* (2012).
On top of inclement weather, renewed German efforts to find and kill those who fled the ghettos made life in hiding even more dangerous. The German military and local police
conducted search efforts that have come to be called *Judenjag*,
literally, “Jew hunting,” a process targeting those who fled ghetto liquidations from 1942 onwards. Jan Grabowski
developed this term in his book, *Hunt for the Jews*, to distinguish between earlier efforts to locate Jews in hiding immediately following ghetto deportations and the more systematic, long-term “system of prizes and penalties” for catching Jews that came in late 1942 through 1944.57 For one, the Germans began to strictly enforce the death penalty for helping a Jew. They further incentivized cooperation and participation by offering rewards like property, money, alcohol, food, or even the victims’ clothes.58

Fleeing the ghettos in search of safety came as a necessary consequence of their destruction and the mass murder of their inhabitants. If those escaping the violence of liquidation could not find shelter or aid in the city or countryside, they often made their way to the forest. The hunts coordinated by Germans to track down these refugees, as well as other organized efforts to crush resistance, often brought death and violence to spaces and people who were otherwise largely left to their own devices in the forests of eastern Poland and western Belarus. Here, partisans, Jewish family camps, and other early refugees of Nazi terror established roots in 1939 to late 1942, only to see the numbers of refugees swell following the ghettos’ destruction. Most Jews living in the forests were primarily concerned with survival; only a minority participated in actual coordinated attacks on the German war effort. Despite this narrow focus, their existence under a regime seeking their eradication meant they were indeed resisting in some way, and the work they often did as members of partisan units or as part of the exchange

57 Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews*, 55
economy within the forest deserves to be analyzed in that context. Forest spaces altered the lives of Jews outside Nazi control more radically and more totally than in any other space. “Hiding” does not quite capture what these people experienced. The forests became havens as well as death-traps, incredibly dangerous at certain moments, yet largely free of everyday Nazi violence. Depending on the group they joined and the space they inhabited, Jews could exercise a degree of autonomy not seen even before the war, though still shaped by wartime contingencies and the physical environment.

CHAPTER 3

CONFLICT AND SURVIVAL IN BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST

This chapter assesses the forest as both a social and physical environment for the many groups all fighting to survive within it. Forest life necessitated adaptation to the natural world and acculturation to an area mostly void of people. As a social space, it was unfamiliar for most of those hiding in the woods. Forests were also changed physically by German occupation. To understand how Białowieża Forest, which sits approximately 60 kilometers southeast of Białystok, along the modern Belarussian and Polish border, was interacted with and perceived by various groups, it must be contextualized within the German colonial project and cultural assumptions about nature and forest spaces. The Jewish slave laborers who worked within the forest were forced to mold the forest space according to German military needs. In doing so, they were at the edge of Nazi spatial control.

The physical environment of Białowieża Forest

Those in the forest faced both the harshness of the natural world and brutal German occupation, so a brief review of the forest’s physical characteristics is in order. While Białowieża Forest may appear idyllic and wild from the outside, photographer and environmental geographer Stuart Franklin disputes the claims that Białowieża constituted a “primeval” forest. While part of this debate stemmed from the translation of the Slavic term “puszcza,” meaning “a vast, uninhabited area,” his contentions went deeper than translation. For the forest to be truly primeval, it would need to have had no human intervention into it. For Białowieża Forest, this simply was never the case. As far back as the early Middle Ages, Białowieża Forest saw heavy

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settlement along the streams and rivers that run through it. Later, industrial forestry radically depleted much of its timber biodiversity and propped up species like pine and oak, which already thrived in the region.

Plant life was not the only affected part of the forest. Fauna present in the forest between 1941 and 1945 were either foreign species or species previously brought to extinction and reintroduced. Animals like “wolverine, tarpan horses, and the European mink became extinct or extirpated. Red deer, roe deer, and (briefly) bears… were introduced or reintroduced and wolves were poisoned…to protect the game for hunters.” The European bison, which was a central feature of Nazi conservation policy and animal breeding, had disappeared from Białowieża by 1919. German zoologists had to bring bison held in captivity to Białowieża to repopulate the forest’s prototypical species. According to Franklin, “exploitation of Białowieża Forest has, at all times, followed a zigzag path of plunder and preserve.” This space was by no means primeval in 1941; it had experienced centuries of human intervention, settlement, and both formal and informal economic practices by those living within it. In particular, Białowieża, “during 400 years of royal protection, was affected by long-lasting internal concessions [rights given to the peasantry] (e.g., beekeeping, charcoal, potash and tar production, farmsteads), prescribed fires, and 120 years of Russian style intensive game management thus was far from being a natural ‘‘self-controlled’’ ecosystem.” The Germans attempted to further alter the forest, structuring it in service of the war effort as well as Nazi racial and spatial theories, while also implementing strict preservation measures to protect the wildlife from those dependent on it for their survival.


4 Stuart Franklin, “Białowieża Forest, Poland,” 1466.

5 Stuart Franklin, “Białowieża Forest, Poland,” 1472.

6 Stuart Franklin, “Białowieża Forest, Poland,” 1466.

Figure 3.1 Composite map of Białowieża (center and bottom of maps) and Knyszyn Forest (top left of map) Białowieża Forest stretched for hundred of square kilometers, with only small, sporadic settlements along the forest edge or within it. U.S. Army Map Service. “Hajnówka, Poland.” N-18. and “Świsłocz, Poland.” M-18. 1:100,000. Washington, DC: U.S. Army, 1944. Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/ams/poland_100k/index.html
“Bandits,” partisans, and fugitives: defining social life in the forest

The previous chapters aimed to provide an understanding of Jewish experiences within geographically specific spaces, Białystok itself and the rural villages near it, while connecting them to Holocaust literature on urban and rural environments more generally. While that same specificity is intended here, the very nature of forest spaces and the availability of digitally archived survivor testimony frustrate such efforts. Many survivors who fled to the woods did not know where exactly they were situated, and they often moved too frequently to maintain such knowledge. Additionally, testimony discussing such experiences is rare, as only around 10
percent of the roughly 50,000 to 80,000 who fled to eastern Europe’s forests survived, and only a small fraction of survivors have been interviewed.\(^8\) What testimony was digitally available at the time of writing, in the midst of a global pandemic, is even more scarce.\(^9\) By virtue of available source material, little can be gleaned of the lives of those actually hiding within the forests near Białystok. More can be found, however, by looking at the experiences of forced laborers and their interactions with fugitives in the woods.

Hundreds of Jews fled to the forests around Białystok during the war, joining partisan units, so-called Jewish “family camps,” or surviving in smaller, unorganized groups or individually. It is important to distinguish between the kinds of forest inhabitants because while they shared the forest space, their experiences varied. When describing those within the forests, the term “partisan” often obscures more than it clarifies. Few joined organized groups or engaged in active, armed resistance against the German war effort. Most Jews in these forests were not “partisans” but refugees fleeing Nazi terror and mass murder.\(^10\) Even amongst actual partisans, organization and communication were severely limited in the Białystok district.

Having established contact between the Białystok ghetto underground and the high command of the Soviet partisan movement, Chaika Grossman recounted that “the closest partisan unit with which they were in contact was in the Białowieża forest, 80 kilometers from Białystok.”\(^11\) In Knyszyn forest, immediately surrounding Białystok, no Soviet-supplied partisan activity existed.

The best the Soviets could offer partisans near Białystok were words of encouragement and

\(^9\) Of the less than 50 indexed survivor interviews from the USC Shoah Foundation Virtual History Archive, the USHMM Oral History Archive, or the Yale Fortunoff Archive that even mention Białowieża or Knyszyn Forest, only a handful are digitally available to the public.
sparse information.\textsuperscript{12} This is not to say that highly organized partisan groups did not exist in the area, some almost certainly did,\textsuperscript{13} but the proximity to the city limited the degree to which Jews could organize the forest space. Despite this, changes made to forest spaces by Jews were not inconsequential. Jewish “fugitives used the forest. They transformed it spatially to protect and sustain their bodies physically…” while also adapting their own social and cultural practices to a new environment.\textsuperscript{14} In most larger groups encampments were somewhat developed, complete with workshops, clinics, and defensive structures,\textsuperscript{15} whereas in smaller groups, shelter was more temporary.

The Germans similarly had little control over forest spaces, apart from their violent, though infrequent, excursions to locate and kill partisans or escaped Jews. Contrary to Tim Cole’s assessment of partisan-controlled forest landscapes, forests in the Białystok district were not “highly regulated spaces under semi-military discipline.”\textsuperscript{16} Rather, they were contested and negotiated spaces. They were negotiated in the sense that those making new lives within the same camps had to coexist under new, extreme circumstances. Men and women, old and young, soldier and refugee cohabited in the forests, adapting to life in hiding. The forest was a space contested by Jews and non-Jews, by the Germans and local collaborators on the outside and the various groups inside the forest, and by the German and Soviet armies as the front approached in mid-1944. In Białowieża Forest, the occupiers attempted to control the natural world through arranging space and the people within it. While none of these groups could exert as much control

\textsuperscript{12} Chaïka Grossman, \textit{The Underground Army}, 140-141.
\textsuperscript{13} Sara Bender, \textit{The Jews of Białystok During World War II and the Holocaust}, 295.
\textsuperscript{16} Tim Cole, \textit{Holocaust Landscapes}, 63.
as they desired, individuals fleeing to the forests rightly perceived that the forests offered more freedom and the choice to exercise some power over their own lives.\textsuperscript{17}

Forest inhabitants worked to reconstruct social and gender norms in a new environment, though life in the forest was organized around different challenges and material realities than in a city. This ad hoc organization depended in part on who went to the forests in the first place, but it was also caused by the need to order a socially disordered space. Suzanne Wiener Weber posits that “in addition to mastering the physical demands of forest life, survival also depended on reconfiguring and adapting to social structures which were very different from their former life.”\textsuperscript{18} Cultural attitudes around previously immoral behavior like stealing had to shift to accommodate new, necessary decisions, while at the same time, life in the forest deprived urbanites of the material comforts to which they were accustomed. Also behind these changing lifestyles and ethical systems was the fact that men were the overwhelming majority of those hiding in the forest.\textsuperscript{19}

While family camps like the one that accrued around the Bielski partisans accepted all who came to them, most groups did not hold to such ideals.\textsuperscript{20} In male-dominated, militant partisan units, the few women who were allowed to join were relegated to a position of dependency, being “defined as sex objects, (and) excluded from participation in valued activities” like combat or acts of sabotage.\textsuperscript{21} Also, children no longer benefitted from the kindness of strangers; in the forests, partisans hesitated to admit them. This was both the

\textsuperscript{17} Suzanne Weiner Weber, “The Forest as a Liminal Space” 48.
\textsuperscript{21} Nechama Tec, “Women in the Forest,” 39.
consequence of practical, material needs, as it was a fear that children were likely spies.\textsuperscript{22} Life among a partisan group intensified gender norms while presenting new dilemmas that generated new responses.

In the forests, mistrust of newcomers was common. With so many people fleeing the Germans, including Jews, Polish soldiers or communists, Belarusians forced laborers, Soviet POW camp escapees, and spies from all sides, it was difficult for those who established themselves in the forests to distinguish between real refugees and the enemy. Within Soviet and Polish partisan camps, antisemitism was still quite common. In fact, many partisan units mistrusted, killed, or threatened to kill Jews who came to them seeking refuge.\textsuperscript{23} This was in part a blanket response to any newcomer not demonstrably able to contribute to the group. The forests also held “marauders acting under the name of ‘people’s avengers,’ (who) robbed the local population and often killed Jews in hiding.”\textsuperscript{24} Preexisting groups presented very real dangers for Jews fleeing to the shared forest landscape.

Polish forests were directly in the line of fire when the Soviets returned to the Polish hinterland in 1943. The Soviet counteroffensive also changed life for those within the forests by generating more immediate danger and potential for violent resistance. Historian Leonid Smilovitsky argues that prior to spring 1942, “the situation of the partisans themselves was desperate; they were isolated and undermanned bands sheltering in remote areas. They did not yet command broad popular support, nor did they possess the numbers, communications, or firepower to resist the Germans.”\textsuperscript{25} Tim Cole, observing changing perceptions of forest spaces,

notes that “following the German defeat at Stalingrad in [February] 1943, the Soviet Union placed greater emphasis on developing the existing Soviet partisan movement, and men and supplies were parachuted into Belorussian forests.” 26 This heightened their own ability to fight while also spurring German efforts to destroy the partisan threat. Several targeted attempts to root out partisan activity began in 1943, including Operation Hermann in Naliboki Forest. Such

![Figure 3.3 One of many graves within Białowieża of local people killed during World War II. Białowieża Forest is the resting place for thousands of people. This grave was marked, the mass graves of partisans and fugitives rarely ever were. Franklin, Stuart. “POLAND. The Białowieża forest showing one of about 12 crosses in the forest. The crosses stand above the graves of local people killed during World War II.” Magnum Photos, 1998.](https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.18957263)

efforts resulted in forests becoming mass graves and demonstrably more dangerous for those within them.\textsuperscript{27}

Terminology also matters in discussions of forest hiding. Suzanne Wiener Weber took to calling those in hiding “forest fugitives,” an adaptation of Allan Levine’s \textit{Fugitives of the Forest}.\textsuperscript{28} This term is more broadly applicable than partisan. It also avoids perpetuating the legal apparatus constructed by the Germans that targeted people hiding in the forest. Under the Third Reich, language was weaponized as a tool for genocide. Führer Directive No. 46, issued on August 18, 1942, decreed that any enemies of the Reich found where they were not supposed to be were considered “bandits” who were legally slated for murder at the hands of civilians or military personnel. The Germans refused to accord forest partisans the status of combatants. Dubbing them “bandits” was a means to skirt international laws on the conduct of war, justify anti-partisan actions, and mandate murdering them on sight.\textsuperscript{29} The Nazis intensified the murder of partisans and other forest dwellers by simplifying their legal code and removing “partisan” from the military’s lexicon.\textsuperscript{30} The new blanket term, “bandit,” applied to everyone in the forests, regardless of if they were engaged in guerilla fighting, sabotage, or robbing nearby villages. Consequentially, of the more than 350,000 “partisans” killed by German anti-partisan activities, likely 90 percent were unarmed civilians.\textsuperscript{31} Terms that would normally apply to refugees, such as “evacuation,” were likewise coopted to legitimize state-enforced movement and violence done upon Jews by the Nazi regime.\textsuperscript{32} Evacuation “became a euphemistic device to conceal or

\textsuperscript{27} Tim Cole, “‘Nature Was Helping Us,’” 679-680.
\textsuperscript{31} Timothy Snyder, \textit{Bloodlands}, 250.
cloak…deportation, transportation, forced labor, and mass killings…“33 The Nazis paired language and violence in ways that made forests zones of conflict and violence. German claims on Polish forests also extended to efforts to organize and plan the natural world and change the ethnic makeup of occupied Poland.

**The German colonial project in Białowieża Forest**

Białowieża Forest was the subject of frequent exercises in imperial power from medieval times through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most often as a hunting preserve.34 This forest “was treated as an extraterritorial unit within the Distrikt [district], administered directly by the Reichforstamt (Reich Forestry Office).”35 As a result, it fell under the duties of the positions created for Hermann Göring within the German government, “Reichsjägermeister (Reich hunt master) and Reichsforstmeister (Reich forest master).”36 It was then established as a Reich hunting reserve in July 1941, becoming Göring’s colonial pet project.37

In Białowieża Forest, the goal was never to eliminate nature or demolish the forest, but to organize and systematize it so that it simultaneously served the war effort and realized the Germanic forest mythos. This mythos, as detailed comprehensively by Simon Schama in *Landscape Memory*, emerged from nationalistic attachment to ancient and medieval texts that emphasized the forest as a Germanic space. In Roman historian Tacitus’ *Germania*, dating back to the late first century AD, the Germanic peoples living in swamps and forests were depicted as “ferocious primitives” who also possessed “natural nobility,” both attributes being products of

33 Peter Adey, ““Evacuated to Death,”” 809.
35 Laura Crago, “Białystok Region (Distrikt Białystok),” 859.
the environments the Germans inhabited. The parallels to Nazi race theory and purported “Aryan” supremacy are clear. The Nazis sought mythological justification for their pseudoscientific race theories. In this light, it was taken as fact that their forest origins imbued Germans with natural superiority. In addition to Tacitus, another tale stirred the imagination of Nazis; “…the *Nibelungenlied* (an) epic tale, in which Teutonic knights dwelling in the primordial forest hunt deer, elk, wisent [bison], and aurochs, was prominent in the German nationalist self-understanding cultivated by the Nazis.” The Nazis’ attachment to myths and legends demonstrates their attempt at a nationalistic renaissance: “for Göring, the mythology of the lost aristocratic hunter apparently generated the need to restore the heroic ecology of German leadership.” Through these stories, the Nazis interpreted the forest as an idealized space and an ideal for Germans to aspire to.

Since Białowieża Forest was a massive physical barrier to Nazi administration of the region, Göring and other prominent Nazis attempted to graft Germanic ideals of forest spaces onto Białowieża Forest through intervention and ordering the natural environment. The heavily wooded, marshy terrain was riddled with partisans, refugees, and shtetls (Jewish villages). While Białowieża forest was never primeval or “wilderness,” it lacked modern infrastructure and easy access for military personnel. In response to these obstacles, the Germans went about imposing their colonial vision upon both the landscape and the people residing there within weeks of occupying eastern Poland. Luftwaffe, forestry, and hunting officials under Göring’s direction imposed “…ethnic cleansing as a form of landscape restoration.” Ignoring the atrocities committed in the name of preservation “…prominent Nazis were keen to publicly promote

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39 Clemens Driessen and Jamie Lorimer, “Back Breeding the Aurochs,” 140-141.
40 Clemens Driessen and Jamie Lorimer, “Back Breeding the Aurochs,” 140-141.
41 Clemens Driessen and Jamie Lorimer, “Back Breeding the Aurochs,” 148.
environmental and conservation causes,” but “…in practice few projects were realized, and the interests of industry and armament often received priority.”42 The Nazis claimed to be environmental stewards, paying lip service to conservation as they ravaged the forest. Extractive forest labor like logging was essential to the German war effort, as “unlike many belligerents, Germany’s military machine was highly dependent upon forestry products, derivatives, and synthetics.”43 The context of German environmental imperialism informed both the process of genocide in Białowieża Forest and the use of slave labor.

In Białowieża Forest, physical displacement was a central part of German occupation policy. The Germans invaded the Soviet Union on June 22nd, 1941. By early August, 1941, the Germans began deporting Jews from villages in or around Białowieża Forest including the communities of Białowieża, Hajnówka, Kamieniec Litewski, Narew, Narewka Mała, and Szereszów. They were sent to Prużana, a town on the southeast side of the forest, 100 kilometers from Białystok.44 At the same time, many male Jews from these villages, in some cases all of them, were murdered, ostensibly as a means to prevent partisan activity.45 From Białystok, an additional 5,000-8,000 Jews were deported to the Prużana ghetto in September and October of 1941.46 Many Jews from Białystok signed up because of the housing shortage caused by the synagogue fire or to escape a roundup.

42 Clemens Driessen and Jamie Lorimer, “Back Breeding the Aurochs,” 143.
45 Laura Crago and Alexander Kruglov, “Kamieniec Litewski,” 904.
46 Katrin Reichelt, Laura Crago, and Martin Dean, “Prużana” In The Unites States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945, 940.
Figure 3.4 Sites of mass murder and deportation near the forest at the start of German occupation. U.S. Army Map Service. “Hajnówka, Poland.” And U.S. Army Map Service. “Świsłocz, Poland.” The towns circled in blue were sites of mass deportations to control the forest space and the people allowed within it (Laura Crago, “Narew,” In The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945, 927). Not shown is the town of Prużana, the destination for those not murdered during deportation actions, just 10 kilometers farther east from Starowola at the eastern edge of the map.
By removing people from the physical spaces they were familiar with and putting them in unfamiliar ones, the Germans suppressed collective resistance. They hoped that by deporting some of the remaining unemployed or young men from the city, they could cripple any resistance movement in the Bialystok ghetto and dissuade flight to the forest. Yet having been sent to the Prużana ghetto with his family, Michel Mielnicki perceived that so long as they weren’t caught, Jews in Prużana were relatively free to roam, as they “were spread out to such a degree that the military had difficulty maintaining effective perimeter patrols. Consequently, anyone who wanted to could wander off into the surrounding forest at night, never to be seen again. That they were most likely to die out there was another consideration.”\(^\text{47}\) Because of limited resources and the fluidity of movement within the forest environment, leaving the Prużana ghetto to seek refuge in Białowieża Forest or assist the partisans was much easier than the Germans intended.

\(^{47}\) Michel Mielnicki, & John A. Munro, *Bialystok to Birkenau*, 118.
Figure 3.5 Herman Göring, then Prime Minister of Prussia and Reichsjägermeister (hunting master), hunting wild boar and wolves in Białowieża forest with the President of the Second Polish Republic, Ignacy Mościcki, in 1938. Killing predators like wild boar and wolves was seen as completely within the bounds of German conservationism. The only predator that would be tolerated in a Nazi-curated forest would be the German apex predator. “Prime Minister of Prussia Hermann Goring at the hunting stand in the Białowieża Forest in 1938.” Photo from the NAC collection. [Link](http://www.jewish-bialowieza.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Premier-Prus-Hermann-Goring-przy-stanowisku-my%C5%9Bliwskim-w-Puszczy-Bia%C5%82owieskiej-1938.-Zdj%C4%99cie_zbior%C3%B3w-NAC.jpg) and “President Ignacy Mościcki and Hermann Göring hunting in Bialowieża, 1938.” Photo from the FotoPolska collection. [Link](http://www.jewish-bialowieza.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Prezydent-Ignacy-Mo%C5%9Bcicki-i-Hermann-G%C3%B6ring-na-polowaniu-w-Bia%C5%82owie%C5%BCy-1938.-Zdj%C4%99cie-ze-zbior%C3%B3w-FotoPolska.jpg)
Michel Mielnicki’s family left Białystok for Prużana, escaping off the records through a contact on the Judenrat. They feared for their father’s capture by the Gestapo, as he had served as a prominent Soviet bureaucrat for Białystok prior to 1941.\(^48\) Spending 14 months from early fall 1941 to late winter 1942 in Prużana, Mielnicki observed the labor and living conditions in the

open Pružana ghetto, while also offering some insights into the purpose of the influx of Jews to
the town. He also relayed the initial scrutiny of those leaving for the town:

‘Pruzhany?’ people in the ghetto asked. ‘what’s at Pružhan? Nothing. Some poor
peasant farms, logging camps, and a few sawmills. For what do they need 6,000 more
Jews at Pružana?’ There was wide belief that these 6,000 would be machine-gunned into
some nearby ravine…compared to Białystok, Prużany was an improvement…It is true
that conditions in these bush camps were primitive: lice, poor food, inadequate clothing,
and long hours working in sub-zero temperatures. It is also true that there were people
that either froze to death or were murdered if caught trying to escape. But that was it.
Nothing out of the ordinary – relatively speaking of course.49

Michel and his brother Aleksei became the breadwinners for the family, working six days a week
either in logging operations nearby or collecting firewood for local German officials. Labor in
Białowieża Forest served a clear purpose for the Nazi war effort. The Pružana ghetto appears to
have been closed off by barbed wire fence in late 1941,50 though this does not necessarily
contradict Mielnicki’s recollection. Since most Jews were forced to work, they often left the
ghetto and could easily slip into the forest. Michel’s parents urged the two brothers to flee to the
forest, but like many, for them “there was no choice. There never would be. The Mielnickis were
a family.”51 Escaping to join the partisans was a last resort. Abandoning one’s family was among
the chief concerns for those who did not make that critical step.52

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50 Katrin Reichelt, Laura Crago, and Martin Dean, “Pružana,” 940.
51 Michel Mielnicki, & John A. Munro, *Białystok to Birkenau*, 115.
52 The same hesitation restrained Abraham Okun, whose friends urged him to leave the Białystok ghetto before it
was destroyed. Abraham O. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 20:00).
Forced labor in or along the edge of the forest was the way many Jews interacted with it. Around 200 Jews deported to Prużana were assigned to road construction cutting through Białowieża Forest. In this group, Leon Marcus worked building “something like 25-30 kilometers” of a highway “from Kamieniec to Białowieża…” As shown in figure 3.8, few roads existed between Białowieża and Kamieniec Litewski, making it easy to presume which they were working on. By constructing a highway directly through the forest, the Germans were attempting to bring order to a largely undeveloped space.

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53 Katrin Reichelt, Laura Crago, and Martin Dean, “Prużana,” 941.
54 Leon M. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 33:08).
While physically demanding, road construction in Białowieża Forest also presented some benefits to those working there. Leon Marcus noted that the summer improved working conditions considerably; “…summer was very good for us, because we had a lot of food in the woods. We weren’t supposed to go in more than like 25 feet, but we used to defy this and go
deeper and pick blackberries.’’\(^{55}\) Although construction of a large highway through marshy, forested land was arduous, it supplemented meager rations and allowed the workers to bring back additional food for their families in the Prużana ghetto.

Highway construction in the forest also meant encounters with partisans: “I saw quite a few, we talked with quite a few in the woods, but they did not encourage us to go with them.”\(^{56}\) Those already living in the forest often rejected newcomers, either fearing they were spies or that they would be a burden. Because of partisan resistance, this new highway, a central aim for the German Army, came at a high cost. Another survivor of these labor details, Benjamin Kawer, recalled that the Germans “had to cross that highway, and the forest was on both sides. The partisans were always waiting for them there, they would machine gun the trucks. On a dirt road, they couldn’t really go fast, so they built the highway with us.”\(^{57}\) What Kawer meant was that the Germans used Jewish labor to improve the road from a dirt path to smooth gravel, a “Macadam” road.

Construction of the road took around a year; before and during the construction, the Germans were vulnerable to attack, which at least partially explains why the Jewish workers saw partisans so frequently. In addition to the Germans’ geographic vulnerability, Jewish laborers’ frequent contact with partisans meant the invaders were at a disadvantage in terms of information. Kawer recalled that he and others were asked questions by the partisans, but they remained silent whenever the Germans demanded information.\(^{58}\) In this way, at least, Kawer, Marcus, and other Jewish slave laborers contributed to the partisan cause. This was the byproduct of life in the forest space they temporarily inhabited; by pushing their colonial project

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\(^{55}\) Leon M. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 36:00).
\(^{56}\) Leon M. Holocaust Testimony (Tape 1, 33:50).
\(^{57}\) Benjamin Kawer, Interview 55634. Visual History Archive. USC Shoah Foundation, 2005. (Tape 1, 35:00). [https://vha.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=59369&returnIndex=0](https://vha.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=59369&returnIndex=0)
\(^{58}\) Benjamin Kawer, Interview 55634. (Tape 1, 34:05).
into Bialowieża Forest, the Germans blurred the border between an ordered, controlled environment and the unknown, catalyzing resistance and exposing themselves to dangers they could have avoided.
THE SPACES OF BIALYSTOK IN RETROSPECT

The previous three chapters analyze the predominant landscapes in the Białystok district. This focus on physical and social environments reveals much about the relationship between survivor experiences and space. The Germans hoped to reshape the entirety of eastern Europe, and in many places they left an indelible mark. Through every kind of space, disorientation and instability abounded. This was often the result of deportations to labor camps, concentration camps, or larger ghettos, but even the initial creation of ghettos at the start of the occupation disrupted Jewish lives. The Germans utilized chaos as a tool for suppressing resistance and transforming space. In Białystok, the synagogue fire marked the start of spatial transformations within the city. Ghettoization further altered the city landscape to become an alien, hostile environment for those inside ghetto walls. In rural Poland, these changes were more extreme; the Germans and their collaborators burned entire villages, killed young men and intelligentsia, and deported many more to foreign spaces, all within a matter of months, reducing resistance and implementing their colonial vision onto eastern Europe.

In these spaces, both German control and Jewish resistance can be observed in greater or lesser degrees. Life inside the ghetto presented unique challenges not found in the countryside or the forests, yet the ghetto was a place of relative stability in a turbulent region, providing a prime location for organized resistance as well as the continuity of prewar social and cultural life. The city’s preexisting political activism, relative material wellbeing, and size all facilitated armed opposition in the Białystok ghetto, fomenting one of the largest uprisings of any ghetto in occupied Europe. Rural Poland on the other hand, more directly lent itself to local collaboration. Here, the Germans had little day to day control, but they orchestrated a system of collaboration through material rewards and deadly consequences for disobeying. This, coupled with prewar
antisemitism and hostility to outsiders made the countryside a far deadlier place than the ghetto. Despite this, those in both the city and forest depended on the countryside. It provided those resisting with arms, supplies, and information, whether stolen or bartered. It was also the space Jews travelling to or from a city, or fleeing to the forests, needed to navigate. Survival in the forest brought extreme, concentrated moments of danger as well as the more natural struggles of life in a new and unforgiving environment. Yet it was also the space where German control over Jewish lives and the natural world was at its weakest.

Individual identity and space blended in unique ways, affording different groups different opportunities and presenting new challenges. By virtue of the mass killings or deportations of Jewish men, the ghetto was a space sustained by women. In fact, many of those resisting the Germans were women, a fact that stands out when compared to the more rigid gender roles found in forest partisan camps. On the “Aryan” side of the city, women could more easily avoid detection, although being on the other side of the ghetto wall constantly risked exposure and murder. In the countryside, children benefitted most. While being young certainly did not guarantee protection or shelter, many Poles felt obligated to help. With financial incentives from parents or the generosity of strangers, many children were saved as their families perished. Because of the overwhelmingly male forest population, those in the forests largely reinforced traditional gender norms and relegated women, the old, and the young to positions of dependency, if they were accepted into the group at all.

Environmental factors like weather, fire, and access to food or shelter altered relationships between people and space, as did the constant presence of forced labor. In Bialystok, the synagogue fire was used to send a message, while also destroying a traditionally Jewish part of the city. In the Bialystok ghetto, the Germans’ dependence on Jewish factory
workers and a diet supplemented by ghetto gardens sustained a higher quality of life than in other ghettos, extending the life of the ghetto for many months. Despite this, two distinctly brutal winters, 1941-42 and 1942-43, brought tremendous physical harm to the ghetto population. Availability of housing also influenced the decisions of many to leave the ghetto in search of better living conditions. In rural Poland, the most obvious environmental factors of Jewish experiences were the conditions they faced when on the run. The majority of ghettos in the region were liquidated in late fall, in November 1942, meaning anyone who fled deportation and avoided capture would have experienced a cold, wet winter with minimal supplies after more than a year of deprivation while living and working in the ghetto. In addition to that, however, the physical violence inflicted on the landscape by the German Army, the destruction of thousands of settlements for no other purpose than to destroy them, was experienced by many, even those safely hidden amongst Catholic Poles. In Białowieża Forest, slave labor involved extractive forestry and road construction, all of which required maneuvering and interacting with swampland and dense woods. Something as simple as picking berries outside the view of German guards prolonged the lives of road workers and increased their chances of survival. Suffice it to say, non-human nature influenced and guided the experiences of Bialystokers regardless of the landscape they were in.

The genocide of European Jews targeted not just people but the environments they inhabited. The Nazis attempted to destroy and rebuild spaces based on a twisted vision of modernity, with brutal efficacy in some places, and frustration and failure in others. Those spaces shaped individual experience, as did the numerous characteristics and qualities that make up an individual’s identity. While the murder of Poland’s Jewish population was thorough, the reorganizing of environments remained incomplete in part because urban, rural, and forest spaces
lent themselves to resistance, survival, and evasion. Consequently, the Germans decided to
destroy rather than reorganize. They burned and bombed cities, towns, and villages on their
retreat west, and just as the Soviets were advancing towards Poland, they intensified anti-partisan
activity in the forests, indiscriminately targeting everyone, armed or not, who was surviving in
them. Cities and villages bore the brunt of German plans to remake the east according to their
vision. Often, none could escape the rapid onset of violence. In the forest, however, these plans
failed no matter how many men and resources were poured into the project.

The Jews of Białystok, their experiences, and the spaces they inhabited were transformed
and shaped by German and Soviet occupations and the violence that accompanied the German
invasion of the Soviet Union. Each space, ghetto, countryside, and forest, shared in the process
of genocide and the enforcement of German colonial aspirations upon them, yet they all uniquely
influenced survivors’ experiences.
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“Group portrait of girls at a church school in Wysokie Mazowieckie, Poland, who are dressed for their first communion. Among the children are twin Jewish sisters who are living in hiding.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives # 24162. Courtesy of Celina Friedmann Friedmann. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 1943.


“President Ignacy Mościcki and Hermann Göring hunting in Białowieża, 1938.” Photo from the FotoPolska collection. http://www.jewish-bialowieza.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Prezydent-Ignacy-Mo%C5%9Bcicki-i-Hermann-G%C3%9Bring-na-polowaniu-w-Bia%C5%82owie%C5%BCy-1938.-Zdj%C4%99cie-ze-zbior%C3%B3w-FotoPolska.jpg

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“View of a street with wooden houses in prewar Białystok.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives #48323. Courtesy of Tomasz Wisniewski. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 1939.


Survivor Testimony


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