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## Mortal threat: Latvian Jews at the dawn of Nazi occupation

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In late June 1941, Nazi Germany stormed the borders of the Soviet Union, occupying the three Baltic republics within weeks. By the end of 1941, a significant proportion of the Jewish population had been murdered by German forces and local collaborators. In the days before full Nazi occupation of the territory, Latvia's Jews confronted the question of whether to flee into the Russian interior or stay in their communities. History shows that this would be a critical choice. Testimonies and memoirs of Jewish survivors illuminate the competing motivations to leave or to remain. This article highlights the key factors that figured into these calculations and the interaction between individual agency and structural opportunities and obstacles in determining where Latvia's Jews were when Holocaust in their homeland began.

**Keywords:** Latvia; Holocaust; Jewish community; World War II; flight decisions

In late June 1941, the armed forces of Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union by land and air, occupying the three Baltic republics within weeks. Riga, Latvia's capital, fell to the Nazis on 1 July and by 10 July 1941, the entire territory of Latvia was under German control.<sup>1</sup> When the occupation was complete and the borders no longer passable, about 70,000 Jews were still in Latvia. An estimated 15,000 had fled ahead of occupation, crossing into Russia (Stranga 2005). In this month of chaos and conflict, the fates of the two groups diverged dramatically and decisively: at the end of the war, there would be numerically and proportionally more survivors from the latter group than the former. What factors influenced the decision of Jewish families to flee or remain in their communities? What means were available for flight and what obstacles stood in the way of escaping the Nazi threat? These questions inform this work, a key goal of which is to understand individual agency and structural factors that influenced choices and actions in the face of mortal threat.

The survival of Latvia's Jews is closely tied to where they found themselves in July 1941. Most of those still in the territory of Latvia met a deadly fate at the hands of the Nazis and their Latvian collaborators. Those who were outside of Latvia's territory, many of whom were in or headed toward the Russian interior, were significantly more likely to survive to the end of 1941, though quite a few would not make it through the war years. Of those who fled, about four out of five remained alive at war's end; of those who remained, only about two of 100 survived.<sup>2</sup> It is, as such, important to understand what factors affected flight decisions and opportunities. This article raises questions that

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include the following: What did Jews in Latvia *know* about the Nazi threat? What did they *believe* about the threat to their families and communities? What did they *fear* most in the time leading up to German occupation? Answers are based primarily on oral and written testimonies of Latvian Jewish survivors and their recollections of this time.

The testimonies used to build a narrative about the motivations and actions of Jewish families and communities and the means available or blocked for flight come from testimonies assembled at the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the online documentation project Centropa, and from published memoirs. All testimonies are those of Jewish survivors from Latvia and of an age that enabled them to remember or reconstruct the basic considerations of their families in taking decisions about flight in the shadow of war and occupation. The accounts focus largely on a limited period of time: the weeks leading up to and the days after the German attack on the USSR, but before full occupation of Latvia. Omer Bartov has suggested that that value of testimonies in the reconstruction of events "gain[s] immensely from being focused on one locality and a relatively limited time span and cast of characters," as perspectives can be checked against one another, as well as existing documentary evidence of events (2011, 489–490). Thirty-two testimonies, one interview, and ten published memoirs in English, Russian, and Latvian were used with secondary sources to build this narrative.

Bartov underscores the importance of testimonies, asserting that,

they are valuable in reconstructing the events of genocide and communal massacre during the German occupation of Eastern Europe both because they provide different insights into these events from those available in official documentation and because they "save" from oblivion events that cannot be found at all in other documents.

He adds that,

by virtue of being personal, or subjective, such testimonies provide insight into the lives of men, women, and children who experienced the events and thus tell us much more than any official document about the mental landscape of the period, the psychology of the protagonists, and the views and perceptions of others. (2011, 486–487)

Many testimonies were collected decades after the Holocaust. Some historians express trepidation about using testimonies far removed from the events they recount. Jan Gross writes that, "The best sources for a historian are those that provide a contemporaneous account of the events under scrutiny" (2001, 23), but he makes a vigorous case for the use of testimonies, recognizing their importance as a means to reconstruct what might otherwise be missed in the historical record. Bartov writes that for survivors who experienced the Holocaust in their youth, "their experiences could often be recounted in full only after they reached greater maturity" and the accounts are unlikely to have been "contaminated" because many are only told in old age, as survivors act to "inscribe in memory and history the names of the murdered that would otherwise sink into total oblivion" (2011, 488).

Simon Geissbüler, who uses oral histories to recount the mass murder of Jews in Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia at the beginning of the war, writes that, "Obviously we must read [oral histories] critically and in light of whatever other evidence may be available. But in many cases, survivors' testimonies are the only evidentiary material available" (2014, 432). In our case, testimonies offer a source with no apparent alternative, as they provide insight into the deliberations of and choices faced by Latvia's Jewish families during the chaotic first week of Operation Barbarossa that are unlikely to be reproduced elsewhere. Eliyana Adler points out that,

Beyond clarifying the context, no official documents ... could possibly shed light on the private deliberations of family, much less those of an individual. We are thus left with subjective personal recollections, often recorded decades after the events in question. Indeed, in the case of the question of whether to stay or go, it is precisely later testimonies that provide the answers. (Adler 2014, 6)

Adler notes that early testimonies, including those collected in the 1940s, “do not tend to focus on the question of choice,” as much of the initial collection of testimonies sought to document atrocities (2014, 6). Later testimonies, together with written memoirs, offer an opportunity to illuminate “patterns of behavior,” including choices and deliberations regarding flight (Bartov 2011, 498).

While decision-making about flight in Germany’s Jewish population has been closely examined (Kaplan 1998), the topic of Jewish decisions and actions in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe has received less attention. Levin (1990a) writes of the dilemma of escape from the western territories in the summer of 1941. Altschuler’s (1994) work examines how Soviet policies affected flight, while Shternshis (2014) focuses on survivors’ perspectives, illuminating the decision-taking of Jews who were citizens of the USSR prior to 1939 and fled their communities. Fewer publications look at Jewish families who stayed in their communities. In her article on Polish Jews in the border town of Hrubieszow, Adler uses testimonies and memoirs to examine factors that influenced families living in close proximity to the USSR when Germany attacked Poland in 1939. Adler raises questions about decisions to stay or flee that are pertinent to the Latvian case: “what exactly were the factors that tipped the scales? How does someone decide whether to trade one brutal and unpredictable regime for another?” (2014, 6).

The Latvian case offers the opportunity to expand the literature on Jewish decisions about and experiences of flight, as well as factors that persuaded Jews to remain in their communities. The article recognizes factors that overlap with those discussed in analyses of other territories subject to Nazi occupation, and identifies factors that have been little recognized in the literature on Jewish responses to the Nazi threat in Eastern Europe. Specifically, this article identifies factors pertinent to decisions taken to remain or flee that are linked to the experience of Latvian Jews under Soviet occupation in 1940–1941.

Issues of choice, debate, and agency have been largely overlooked in prominent works on the Holocaust in Latvia. Historian Valdis Lumans writes that, “in a twist of irony,” after the deportation of several thousand Jews by the Soviets on 13–14 June 1941, “most of the remaining Jews in Latvia attempted to flee to the Soviet Union” (2006, 227). It is not clear, however, that “most” Jews attempted to flee: while many who wanted to flee were thwarted by obstacles, others, for reasons this article highlights, chose to remain in Latvia. Historical accounts that recognize diverging decisions offer little elaboration: Josifs Šteimanis writes that, “Many Jews, recalling the benign German occupation of 1915/18, expected only humiliation but not killing, and, not wanting to abandon their older relatives and their property, chose to stay,” but does not pursue the topic further (2002, 125).

This work examines ways in which Jewish survivors recall motives and means for leaving Latvia, as well as factors that influenced the decision, made by thousands of Jewish families, to remain after Germany’s attack. Paul Shapiro writes in the preface to *Churbn Letland: The Destruction of Jews in Latvia* that, “there is something missing in much of the recent work on the Holocaust in Latvia, and that is the voice of the survivors” (Kaufmann 2010, 11). This work uses survivor testimonies and memoirs to build a narrative that highlights what Latvia’s Jews knew, believed, feared, and experienced in the period leading up to the beginning of the Holocaust in their homeland.

We begin with a brief overview of the history of Jews in Latvia's territory, highlighting their experiences during the years of independence (1918–1940) and the first year of Soviet occupation (1940–1941). We then consider what Latvian Jews knew about the Nazi threat in the 1930s and beginning of the 1940s. This forms a foundation for the next sections of the paper, which highlight, first, decisions and experiences of flight and, second, motivations for remaining in Latvia and obstacles to escape. The article concludes with a consideration of the significance of this research for building a fuller historical and sociological understanding of the Holocaust and its victims in Latvia.

### **Historical background: Jews in Latvia**

From the early 1800s to the 1940s, southeastern Latvia was part of a region of settlement for Jews. Many of the survivors in this study trace their roots in Latvia back for several generations. In 1935, the census determined that Latvia was home to about 94,000 Jews. The Jewish population made up close to 5% of the country's inhabitants and constituted the second largest minority after Russians, who comprised 10.5% of the population. An estimated 92.5% of Latvia's Jews were citizens (Volkovičs 2008).

In the interwar period, many Jewish families sent their children to Yiddish or German schools, and language knowledge among Latvian Jews was diverse. Most were users of multiple languages, including Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and Russian and, in 1940, an estimated 70% were fluent in Latvian. Most of Latvia's Jews were urban dwellers (about 86,000) and many lived in ethnic enclaves in cities like Liepāja and Kuldīga (Volkovičs 2008). About half the Jewish population lived in Riga, making up 11% of residents; Jews were the capital's largest minority group. They also comprised substantial proportions in some Latvian towns and cities in the southeast: in Preiļi, Jews were over 50% of the population; in Rēzekne and Daugavpils, they were between 20% and 30% of the population (Amosova 2013). Jews were granted official recognition as a minority and had access to their own schools and cultural institutions. There was no effort to assimilate the community. Bolin (2012) characterizes national politics in the interwar period as “dissimilationist,” because while minorities were granted substantial rights, the state institutionalized ethnic categorization and segregation.

Jewish political parties were ideologically diverse, and during Latvia's parliamentary period (1918–1934), they had between three and six elected members in the 100-delegate *Saeima* (parliament). Job opportunities in Latvia's civil service, police force, and military were limited; as such, many Jews earned a living in commerce and trade, the professions, or health care. They contributed significantly to Latvia's economy, owning, by one estimate, 20% of industry and 28% of shops (Lumans 2006, 218).

Jewish life changed after the political coup of 1934, which led to the dissolution of parliament and consolidation of power in the hands of Kārlis Ulmanis. In a quest for a more “Latvian Latvia,” Ulmanis sought to shift economic power to Latvians, declared that ethnic minorities must attend their own or Latvian schools, and curtailed the cultural autonomy of minorities. Ulmanis's limitations on freedoms of speech and press reduced the circulation of anti-Semitic propaganda, though that was not the regime's specific goal (Stranga 1997). Ulmanis also cracked down on *Pērkonkrusts*, an anti-Semitic political movement, and accepted Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in Germany, Austria, and Poland, even after other countries stopped accepting them (Lumans 2006).

On 17 June 1940, Soviet tanks rolled into Riga, signaling the end of Latvia's independence and beginning of its incorporation into the USSR. Jewish reactions to Soviet occupation were mixed. Some Jews welcomed the replacement of the Ulmanis regime with

Soviet power. Nationalist politics had negatively affected Jewish life and Soviet propaganda highlighting the “equality of nations” gave hope to Jews that minority interests would be recognized. As well, while the Final Solution had yet to be realized, there was little doubt about the violent anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany. Among Jews, there was hope that the Soviet Union, a “lesser evil,” could protect them from this threat (Levin 1991, 1995). Significantly, Nazi propaganda, seeking to turn ethnic Latvians against the Jewish community, characterized Jews as collaborators with the Soviet occupiers. Daina Bleire notes, however, that “the number of Jews in positions of authority in the first year of the Soviet occupation was proportional to their number in the population” (2009, 146).

While Latvians have laid claim to the mantle of victimhood in the first year of Soviet occupation, the Jewish community, in spite of its hopes for equality, also suffered significant losses. Soviet nationalization of property affected Jewish homes and businesses and the mass deportations of 14 June 1941 saw the deportation of an estimated 15,424 people, including at least 1771 Latvian Jews (Stranga 2009, 104).<sup>3</sup> The Soviet experience had a powerful effect on the Jewish community: survivor Margers Vestermanis suggests that, “Latvia had never before experienced such deportations” that targeted entire families, the elderly, and small children (quoted in Tomson and Trons 2017). As testimonies in this work show, disaffection with the Soviets fed some Jews’ hopes that German occupation “would not be worse.”

The richness and diversity of Jewish life in Latvia was decisively destroyed in 1941. After the German army retreated, an estimated 200–500 Jews remained alive there (Levin 1990b). The number of Jews in Latvia rose with the reconsolidation of Soviet power: among the estimated 14,000 returnees were Jews who had spent the war in the Russian interior, had served in the Red Army, or had completed gulag sentences imposed during Soviet occupation (Tseitlin 1989). The community that numbered 94,000 in the middle 1930s was below 15,000 in 1946. Below, we explore one aspect of this dramatic annihilation, highlighting the choices and obstacles that stood before Latvia’s Jews at the dawn of Nazi occupation.

### **What did Latvia’s Jews know about the Nazi threat?**

The question of what Jews knew about events in Germany and German-occupied territories in the period preceding the Nazi attack is pertinent to considering later decisions about flight. At the same time, some testimonies show that contradictions existed between what Jewish families *knew* and what they *believed* about the Nazi threat to Jewish communities in Latvia.

Shternshis identifies three sources of information about German actions and atrocities for Jews residing in the pre-1939 borders of the USSR: “state officials, the media, and rumors” (2014, 485). Latvia’s Jews had a broader array of sources, though, significantly, they had limited opportunities to flee once Germany attacked. We focus on sources that were available beginning in the mid-1930s and ending in mid-1941, including the Latvian and Western media; Soviet media; news from relatives in the West; and news brought by refugees from Germany, Austria, and Poland in the late 1930s.

For most of the interwar period, Latvia was a parliamentary democracy. With the dissolution of parliament in May 1934, President Ulmanis assumed authoritarian powers. The government enacted controls over the media: critique of the regime was limited, though world news was largely accessible. The Latvian and Russian-language press carried news of Jewish persecution.<sup>4</sup> For example, in 1937, the Latvian newspaper *Jaunākās*

ziņas published an article, “How are Germany’s Jews doing?” The article described signs around German villages that declared, “Jews not wanted here,” and asserted that, “Such signs surprise even those who know well that the so-called Nuremberg race laws forbid Germans to marry Jews” (Aichers 1937, 15). Another paper described the scene in Berlin after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938:

Some blocks in Berlin look as if they had suffered an explosion or an air raid: the windows of Jewish shops are smashed, the streets are littered with glass shards and broken furniture ... On one street, residents forced a Romanian Jew to crawl 2.5 kilometers on his knees, all the while beating him. (*Brīvā zeme* 1938, 6)

Growing instability in Europe affected coverage of foreign events as Latvia sought to maintain a neutral position. In the months before Soviet occupation, news of Jewish persecution became scarce and newspapers like the Russian-language *Segodnia*, which had a large Jewish readership, lost any remaining autonomy (Stranga 2008).

Survivor testimonies indicate that there was awareness of the persecution of Jews in Germany and other Nazi-occupied states: Julius Drabkin, born in Ukraine in 1918 but raised in Tukums, recalls that he knew about *Kristallnacht*, as well as the persecution of Jews and Communists.<sup>5</sup> Max Solway, who was a child in Liepāja when the war began, remembers that children had songs and poems poking fun at Hitler. In his testimony, Solway sings a song in Latvian that warns Hitler to stay away or he will be pelted with rotten eggs.<sup>6</sup>

For families with members who spoke languages like English or French, foreign radio news offered another source of information. Zeldā-Rivka Hait, born in 1920 in Kuldīga, remembers her father listening to news of German atrocities on the BBC, though he continued to hold a good opinion of Germans, believing that the worst that would befall the Jews in Latvia was that they would have to work harder. She notes that he was wary of going to Russia, remembering that during the Russian revolution there had been bloodshed.<sup>7</sup> Edward Anders, born in 1926 in Liepāja, recalls that his father listened to the BBC and subscribed to foreign magazines; after the Soviet occupation, he notes, there was considerably less news available.<sup>8</sup>

After the Soviet occupation in 1940, the local press was subjugated to the tightly controlled Communist media: Riva Schefer, born in 1922 in Riga, recalls that, “Latvia was very well informed, but all this information ended when the Soviets came to power.”<sup>9</sup> The same political maneuvers that brought the Baltics into the Soviet sphere also influenced press coverage of Nazi Germany. The secret protocol to the Soviet–German Non-Aggression Pact of 23 August 1939, split the Baltics, Poland, and Romania (Bessarabia) into Soviet and German spheres of influence, but the public treaty itself was a document of diplomatic friendship. Subsequent to the pact, the availability of information about Nazi atrocities was minimal. Levin writes, “In the interim period between September 1939 and June 1941, the Jews had grown less sensitive to the Nazi danger, mainly because the Soviet media went to great lengths to obfuscate events across the border” (1990a, 119).

Other sources also brought news to Latvia. What Altschuler has termed the “unofficial system of word-of-mouth dissemination” was a potent source of information (1994, 83). Some Jewish families learned of German atrocities from family members living in Poland or Germany. Others heard stories from Jewish refugees who streamed into Lithuania and Latvia until the end of 1939. Maja Abramowitch, born in Daugavpils in 1929, had relatives in Poland and remembers that her family received letters from them after they moved into the Warsaw ghetto, which was established in October 1940. The letters contained messages with ambiguous phrases like “birds are being shot continuously,” implying an

ominous fate for ghetto inhabitants. Abramowitch describes an encounter shortly before Soviet occupation with a German Jewish couple who came to her father's shop in Daugavpils. The couple, refugees from Nazi Germany, told of their plight and sought her father's help.<sup>10</sup> She writes, "The flood of refugees increased day by day. The whole town was agog with the revelations of those unfortunate people" (2002, 17). Abramowitch's family did not flee after the Nazi attack, though her brothers left to join the Red Army. Adele Honigwill, born in 1912 in Daugavpils, recalls that in spite of having relatives in the Warsaw ghetto, there was not a sense in her home that the family should flee: "We never expected ... what really happened."<sup>11</sup>

Decisions about flight were taken in a short window of time in which "the evacuation dilemma compelled people to evaluate both the risks of remaining and the dangers of departure" (Manley 2009, 86). Germany attacked the USSR on June 22. The killing of Latvia's Jews commenced quickly: on 23 June, six Jews were murdered by an *Einsatzgruppe A* subgroup in the town of Grobiņa near Liepāja (Stranga 2008). In the following days, there were still limited opportunities for flight. It is challenging to say when the doors to departure closed, as they shut sooner for those around Liepāja, where the German army moved in first, than they did for those closer to the Russian border or in Riga, which fell on 1 July. In the sections below, we describe fears and flight, as well as factors that drove decisions to stay, breaking down the logics of action into categories that emerged from survivor testimonies.

### **Leaving Latvia: motivations and means**

Levin (1990a) estimates that a sixth of Latvia's Jews left in the weeks and days before full German occupation; about 70,000 Jews remained. By Levin's estimate, 12,000–13,000 of 15,000 survived the journey. Below, we look at the motivating factor of fear and the travails of flight.

#### ***Fear***

Many Jewish families fled when Germany attacked the USSR. Tamara Fainshtein, whose family had learned of German atrocities from Jewish refugees fleeing Poland, recalls that her family left immediately, taking virtually nothing: she had only a spare pair of socks. The family hid in the forest, surviving for days without food or fresh water. The family moved toward the sound of a passing train, only to find many of the train cars bombed. They secured places in a car packed with refugees and infested by lice. The Fainshtein family ended the first part of their journey on a collective farm in Siberia where residents had never met any Jews.<sup>12</sup>

In some instances, decisions were taken that divided families. Pinkus Gurevich, born in 1924 in Viļaka, remembers that his father, who recalled German civility in World War I, thought that the Germans might help reclaim his store, which had been nationalized by the Soviets. While the elder Gurevich had little sympathy for the Soviets, Pinkus had been involved in left-wing activities. Gurevich's parents prepared for him and his brother bags and bikes for flight. When the war began, Gurevich fled, biking to the border in Abrene. Finding the border closed, Gurevich pressed on, abandoning his bike and walking. He eventually made it to Velikie Liuki in Russia. He never again saw his parents, who were murdered.<sup>13</sup> Sara Zalstein, born in Riga in 1927, remembers her family's conclusion that Jews would not be safe in Latvia: her mother grabbed coats and a few other items and the family began a walk on 27 June that she estimates was 100 kilometers. She recalls that her uncle's wife did not want to leave, as her elderly parents were



not fit for the journey. The uncle, his wife, and children fled. His wife's parents perished in Latvia.<sup>14</sup> Irina Golbreich, born in Riga in 1934, remembers that her mother was desperate to evacuate, though her father was "quite optimistic. He comforted Mama, telling her that if the Red Army had been successful fighting against German forces in Poland, they would have no problem defeating them in their own land." Golbreich fled with her mother; her father later followed. The family lost her father's siblings: "They believed that the Germans were not as bad as the Soviets and were resolute about staying. None of them survived."<sup>15</sup>

Levin points to a fear among some Jews of their non-Jewish neighbors and colleagues: "many sensed the terrible hatred which had been mounting during the previous year" (1990a, 121). In her work on Soviet Russian Jews, Shternshis writes that, "In speaking about the factors that mattered for Jews' decisions to leave or remain, respondents most often cited assessments of how locals would treat the Jewish population in the absence of Soviet rule" (2014, 494). Levin recounts a story told by Iakov Shkolnik, director of a factory nationalized during Soviet occupation:

On June 27, upon arrival at the Maradom factory, I saw that two gallows had been erected. A woman worker informed me with tears in her eyes that one was for me and the other one for Ozin. (a Communist Latvian manager)

Shkolnik fled, losing track of his family for several months (1990a, 121). Hannah Herman, born in 1912 in Liepāja, tells that she believes Latvian hatred toward Jews grew in the Soviet period. Fearing the worst, she sought to leave. She fled with her son on a truck without provisions. When the truck stopped, they continued on foot. While guards initially resisted allowing them across the border into Russia, they were put in cattle cars heading east after a German attack. In Liepāja, Herman left behind uncles, aunts, and cousins, all of whom were murdered.<sup>16</sup>

Haim Civian, born in 1905 in Krustpils, suggests that local Latvians, with whom, "relations were always good," killed Jews in Krustpils and surrounding towns because they, rather than the Germans, knew who the Jews were.<sup>17</sup> Cecilia Boruchowitz, born in Daugavpils in 1924, remembers that many Jews were murdered after Latvian residents pointed out their homes.<sup>18</sup> Although the murder of Jews was conducted according to German plans, research suggests that early violence in provincial areas was committed largely by Latvians (Ērglis 2005; Lasmanis 2008). Stranga writes, "In many of the places in Latvia where Jews lived, [local Latvian] self-defence units participated in the killing of Jews." The units were largely liquidated by August, when they had emptied many small cities and towns of Jewish inhabitants (2008, 25).

Greed and materialism were a threat to Latvian Jews. Sima Dreyer, born in 1917 in Ludza, tells that most Jews in Ludza were murdered in the first week of occupation. Dreyer recalls that a Russian neighbor gave up Dreyer's 13-year-old nephew, who was hiding after the murder of his mother and sister, so the neighbor could steal the family's valuables.<sup>19</sup> Survivor Marģers Vestermanis suggests that, "In Latvia's territory, in Latvia's rural areas, [the killing of Jews] happened in a rather wild way, like a 'pogrom.' Particularly in the rural areas, a very important motivating factor was Jews' material goods."<sup>20</sup> Timothy Snyder points to the situation created when Soviet expropriation of property in 1940–1941 was followed by an opportunity for non-Jews to acquire this property: "What had been the Sovietization of Jewish property now became, under the Germans, its Latvianization ... The combination of Soviet expropriation and Nazi anti-Semitism created a clear material incentive for non-Jews to murder Jews" (2015, 171).

### ***Flight***

Opportunities for flight were limited, though some groups were better positioned to take advantage of the chance to leave. Those with ties to critical industries or the Soviet regime or military were among the first to leave, though thousands of others crossed the border officially or unofficially.

Residents of all ethnicities left for the Russian interior with their factories, as the Soviets prioritized the evacuation of industrial assets. Altschuler (1994) points out that evacuation orders were circumscribed, prioritizing property, especially factories with military, chemical, or metallurgical capabilities. This enabled, and sometimes compelled, Jews to leave the territory though the first order of business was industry not individuals. Survivor Anne Buvitt, born in Belarus in 1912 but raised in Riga, recalls that she wanted to leave after hearing about Jewish experiences in Poland. Her husband was evacuating with his factory and planned to collect Buvitt and their son, but the bus never stopped as it passed by the meeting spot and they remained behind.<sup>21</sup>

The Red Army and other fighting units were another means by which some Jews left Latvia, whether under conscription orders or voluntarily. Vulfsons (1998) was a reporter for the 27th Army unit. Vulfsons spent the war on the Eastern Front, returning to Riga in October 1944, only to find that 32 of his and his wife's relatives had been murdered. Levin describes another fighting force, the "Workers' Guard," established in July 1940, shortly after Soviet occupation. The Workers' Guard was "a kind of police auxiliary and support force" made up of about 10,000 men and women, many of whom were Jewish (1975, 45). Many members of the Workers' Guard evacuated, with some making their way into the Soviet army.

For most families and individuals, flight was characterized by risk and chaos. Isaac Ziemán, born in 1920 in Riga, remembers that he was with a group of about 15 Jews walking to the border; it was closed for several days, but his group passed during an opening and made it on to a train headed for Chelyabinsk.<sup>22</sup> Gerta Feigin writes that, "The last train with evacuees left the Riga freight station for the Soviet interior on June 27, 1941." Her family was not on the train, though she ended up being spirited over the border on a motorcycle by her uncle shortly before the fall of Riga (2006, 11). Refugees continued to try to cross the border for several more days, but the border was not consistently open.

Many decisions to flee were taken without knowledge of the destination. The family of Rhoda Volpyansky Gurevich, born in 1926 in Riga, tried twice to get to Riga's railway station: the first time they were thwarted by Latvians shooting at those trying to leave; the second time they reached the trains, but the wagons were packed. She recalls begging a Soviet soldier to pull her into the train through an open window; once aboard the train, she pulled in her mother and uncle. There were no tickets and the frightened passengers did not know where the train was headed. Gurevich spent four years in Russia and only learned of what had happened to Latvia's Jews when she returned in 1945.<sup>23</sup>

A small proportion of Latvia's Jews, including Communist Party functionaries, military conscripts and volunteers, and refugees left when Germany attacked the USSR, but most Jews remained behind. Why did they stay? What choices did they make? What obstacles did they encounter to flight? Below, we examine the key factors that affected decisions and actions.

### **Those who remained: motivations and obstacles**

In this section, we highlight motivations that emerge from survivor testimonies. While each case is unique, there are commonalities that paint a picture of how Jewish families came to

the decision to stay in their communities. At the end of the section, we highlight obstacles that compelled those who wished to leave to remain behind.

### *Kinship and community*

Levin writes that, “Solidarity with one’s family was the dominant factor in delaying Jewish attempts to flee,” noting that some younger Jews and heads of family who had the opportunity to leave chose not to abandon older or younger family members or gave in to the pleas of parents to remain (1990a, 124). Ella Medal’e, born in 1912 in Tukums, wanted to flee with her mother, sister, and husband, but her mother had medical issues and Medal’e did not want to leave her behind.<sup>24</sup> Maksim Felton, born in 1925 in Riga, recalls that his multi-generational family did not want to separate. In the end, his father, who “did not believe it could happen,” was among those who chose with his family to stay.<sup>25</sup> Sara Munic, born in 1926 in Liepāja, remembers that her father, who had worked on construction for the Latvian Army and later the Soviet Army, had the opportunity to go to Russia because he was employed by the military. He had, however, family that he did not want to leave behind. She adds, “maybe he decided he was scared for nothing,” even though the family was aware of events in Germany.<sup>26</sup>

Some Jewish families remained in place because they had lost track of a family member or were waiting for his or her return. In his memoir, Jack Ratz recalls, “My father begged my mother to go on the bus [out of Riga], but she refused. She insisted upon waiting for my older brother to come home and remained with me and my brothers.” Ratz’s brother did not return, having been conscripted into the Red Army without the family’s knowledge (2004, 20). Bella Bogdanova, born in Liepāja in 1926, remembers that, “My mother wanted to flee, but I insisted not a step be taken without my father,” whom the family had lost track of after Germany’s attack. Bogdanova later learned that he had been murdered.<sup>27</sup>

Some Jewish families resisted flight because, in addition to leaving family and friends, they feared losing homes and property that had been earned over generations. Max Kaufmann writes, “There were ... many Jews who did not want to part from their possessions, which they had worked so hard to acquire” (2010, 35). The fear of loss and the fear of what awaited them outside of Latvia were powerful motivations to remain.

### *A mighty army*

Soviet authorities were relentless in their message that the Red Army was the guardian of the people, instilling, arguably, a sense that the German onslaught was not a mortal threat. Levin writes that,

By June 1941, the majority of the Jewish inhabitants in the annexed territories had become full-fledged Soviet citizens who felt relatively safe from the ravages of war which had engulfed almost all of Europe. This feeling was largely grounded in their trust in the might of the Soviet Union, particularly the “great Red Army,” glorified day in, day out as “invincible”. (1990a, 119)

The realization that the Red Army could not protect Latvia’s Jews came quickly, though for many it came too late. Ruvim Fridman remembers that students in his school were taught that the Soviet army was the strongest in the world. He adds that when the Germans attacked, he saw Russian soldiers in retreat, some shoeless, leaving without putting up resistance,<sup>28</sup> a picture that is consistent with the testimony of Shmuel Shusan, who remembers that on 27 June 1941, “While the [Soviet] radio was broadcasting victory announcements, we saw the soldiers of the Red Army coming down the street ... they walked

without order, their uniforms soiled and in tatters, their heads bowed. They trudged along in dust-covered boots” (cited in Levin 1990a, 116). Confidence in victory in some cases included the certainty of Allied help: Valentīna Freimane writes, “My father didn’t doubt for a moment – the US and other Allies would join the war and beat Hitler. Until then, we would have to manage and prepare for offenses, humiliations, and repressions. But we would be alright” (2010, 233).

Paradoxically, the belief in the mighty Soviet military may also have encouraged flight, as the duration of one’s absence would not be long if the army could rapidly push back the occupier. Many who left Latvia ahead of German occupation did so with few provisions. Few expected that expulsion of Nazi forces would take years. Mavriks Vulfsons, who volunteered for military service, writes that he “believed the military activity would end soon” (1998, 30).

### *Rejection of Soviet power*

While some Jews stayed behind because of their belief in the Red Army, others welcomed the Soviet retreat and hoped that Germans would restore the societal and political order disrupted by Soviet occupation. In Latvia, middle- and upper class Jewish families, particularly those who were merchants or members of the intellectual or political elite, had suffered under Soviet rule and few lamented the departure of Communist functionaries and military and security forces. As Gerta Feigin, born in 1928 in Riga, writes, “When the Soviets occupied Latvia, my life, and the lives of my loved ones, were turned upside down.” (2006, 7). Several points underscore the importance of this factor in the choice to remain in Latvia.

First, thousands of Jewish families had experienced the nationalization of their property during Soviet occupation and had little sympathy for Soviet-style socialism. Arkadius Scheinker writes that,

Many well-to-do Jews could not get over this injustice and adverseness of the laws ... For Jews of German education and upbringing [many of whom were in the merchant class], the thought “of fleeing to the country that had done us so much harm” was absolutely unacceptable.

Scheinker notes that his brother Benno was among those who were compelled to give up their businesses and Benno rejected the idea of flight to Russia. Even the appearance of the German *Wehrmacht*, “who were good looking in their uniforms in comparison to the Soviet soldiers,” convinced him of the rightness of his decision. Benno Scheinker was arrested on 3 July 1941 by Latvian auxiliary police and shot (2010, 45–46).

The homes of well-off residents were also, in Feigin’s words, “nationalized.” She writes that, “a Soviet officer settled in our house ... He settled in mom’s living room. Mom was very nervous, because he wore big black boots and walked around on her Persian carpet” (2006, 9). Soviet regulations foresaw limitations on the allocation of living space, so many residents were forced to take in military personnel.

Jews were also affected by the closure of Hebrew-language schools (Lumans 2006). Naum Lifshits, born in 1923 in Krāslava, recalls the closure of schools, as well as the arrest of some teachers after Soviet occupation. Lifshits says that the effect of Soviet occupation on Jewish life was profound: his father was prosecuted for Zionist activities in Betar and deported by Soviet authorities shortly before the German attack.<sup>29</sup> Paradoxically, deported Jews were among the small number who survived the Holocaust, though Lifshits’s father and uncle did not survive the Soviet labor camps. Hana Rayzberg, born in 1927 in Ludza, tells that,

Men were taken to the Gulag to timber cutting, and children and women were exiles. This was terrible, but in the long run, this saved the life of many of them. The intelligentsia or wealthy people would hardly have evacuated during World War II, hoping that the Germans would restitute their property nationalized by the Soviets.<sup>30</sup>

Lumans notes a source that estimates a “one-third-survival rate” for Jews deported to Russia (2006, 227).

Second, Soviet political culture and social norms were foreign to many of Latvia’s residents. Styles of dress and behavior were regarded as “uncultured,” particularly among the middle- and upper classes. Feigin writes that, “Mom told me that the officers’ wives bought silk nightgowns and wore them as elegant evening gowns. Nobody would say anything, but privately the local population laughed and jeered.” (2006, 9). Zeld-Rivka Heit remembers the story of the nightgowns, adding that Russian officers stole goods like watches from shops.<sup>31</sup>

In the choice between what Margaret Kagan called the “red devil” and the “brown devil,”<sup>32</sup> some opted for the latter. Feigin recalls that when the war began, sirens were blaring and bombs began dropping. We hid in the basement. Some of the relatives said that we had to go to Russia because Hitler would come to Riga. In the end, my whole huge family decided to stay in Riga, figuring that the Germans were at least better than the Communists: “*Besser die braune Pest als die rote*” (Better the brown plague than the red one). They thought that it would be easier to get by under the Germans (2006, 11).

Edward Anders adds,

[The Nazis] had killed some tens of thousands of Poles and Jews in Poland in 1939/40, but we had not heard of these killings from either the local press – which wanted to keep good relations with Germany – or the BBC and the Swiss weekly *Weltwoche*. ... What we knew was bad enough and should have made us worry, but we were all so sickened by the Soviets’ deceit, hypocrisy, sophistry, coercion, terror, and lies, that the Nazis seemed the lesser evil. (2010, 46)

Third, the deportation of leaders of the secular and religious Jewish communities denied Jews the benefit of a leadership that might have offered guidance in the chaotic days after Germany’s attack. Among the prominent Jewish leaders deported by the Soviets in 1941 were Mordechai Dubin, a leader of *Agodus Israel*, a former elected member of the *Saeima*, and an associate of Ulmanis, as well as Rabbi Mordechai Nurock, a leader of Miz-rachi and also a former member of the *Saeima* (Levin 1995).

Some Latvian Jews actively rejected Communism and Soviet power. In addition to this, some were strongly oriented toward German culture and language, a factor that also affected decisions taken in the war’s opening days.

### ***Teutonophilia***

In Latvian Jewish middle- and upper class homes, the use of German as a primary language was common. Zeld-Rivka Heit recalls that in Kuldīga (which she referred to by the German name Goldingen) relations between Jews and Germans were good.<sup>33</sup> Gerta Feigin notes, “Everyone spoke German at our home, and I can definitively claim German as my mother tongue” (2006, 6). Henry Bermanis, born in 1925 in Ventspils, recalls that Germans were widely perceived in the German-speaking Jewish community as “civilized,” as their culture was the source of great music and literature. By comparison, “Latvian did not have any classics yet.”<sup>34</sup> Feigin, Heit, and Bermanis were among a segment of Latvia’s Jews who were, writes Scheinker, “rooted in German culture and language, they came mostly from Kurland [western Latvia] and the surrounding area of Riga.” He continues that,

My family was also part of this group. Most of these Jewish people, steeped in German culture, could not imagine that the Nazi soldiers ... did not have the task of sparing the German-speaking Jews, but rather were supposed to annihilate all Jews without exception. (2010, 44, 47)

A theme that appears in testimonies is the memory that German occupation in World War I was “civilized.” Scheinker notes that, “some Jews, remembering the benign German occupation of 1915–1918 were less afraid than they should have been” (2010, 5). Ella Perlman, born in Riga in 1926, was among those who fled, but she recalls the reasoning of her mother’s sister Sheine’s family in choosing to remain:

Sheine’s husband’s parents stayed in Riga during World War I. They were telling people how loyal Germans were to Jews. They were sure that however hard Germans persecuted Jews in their own country, this wasn’t going to be the case in other countries.<sup>35</sup>

This sentiment was shared in the region: Manley writes that, “The notion that Germans were civilized appears to have been fairly widespread among the older generation [in Russia].” She quotes a Russian who writes that his grandfather believed that Germans had their sites on Communists, but would not harm Jews: “I was a prisoner during World War I. Germany is a cultured, civilized country” (2009, 86).

### *Denial*

In numerous testimonies, one encounters the recollection that “we knew already what was going on in Germany,” but the family did not believe that it could happen in Latvia.<sup>36</sup> Aleksandrs Bergmanis writes,

We, of course, expected repressions from the German side: professional restrictions, reduced food rations, possible imprisonment in the ghetto and other tortures. But neither I nor my parents could have imagined that in the days ahead awaited the prologue to a catastrophe that would sweep from the face of the earth not only Latvia’s Jews, but nearly all European Jews. (2011, 10)

The roots of many Jewish families in the region stretched back generations, tempering the perception of threat from Germans and Latvians. As Morduch Max Eidus, born in Riga in 1921, remembers, “We never had any intention to leave Riga because we never realized that anything like that could happen to us.” Eidus tells that his father and grandfather were born in Riga and the family had no reason to leave.<sup>37</sup> Some Latvian Jews actively resisted flight: Mavriks Vulfsons writes that he entreated his father to leave, but the elder Vulfsons refused: “He said that all of his best friends were Latvians and Germans. ‘They will protect me.’ ... Put aboard a train, he jumped out of the wagon at the first opportunity” (1998, 29–30). Valentīna Freimane remembers a similar sentiment in her family: “This is, after all, Latvia, our home, we are among our own [*savējiem*], Latvian citizens, so we can feel safer” (2010, 234).

There is poignancy to the denial that is palpable in testimonies like that of Joshua Wainer, born in 1924 in Riga. Wainer tells of his parents debating flight. His father asked, “How can we go and leave everything here? And we don’t know where we will go.” The family remained, concluding that “They won’t kill us ... We didn’t do anything.”<sup>38</sup> Frida Michelson, one of the few to survive the operation at Rumbula in which over 25,000 Jews were murdered, remembers friends of her aunt pestering the aunt not to flee: “Where will you go? We are just old people, we are not doing anything to anyone, no one will touch us.” At that point, however, it was no longer possible to leave: masses of refugees were returning to Michelson’s town of Varakļāni, having been turned back at the border (1979, 24–25).

Among those who survived, like Pinkhus Gurevich, there is shock about what transpired. At the age of 16, Gurevich left Latvia, crossing the border and joining the Red Army. He did not know of his family's murder in Viļaka until much later and did not suspect it because "there was no reason [to believe they would be killed]."<sup>39</sup>

### *A closing door: obstacles to flight*

Characterizing the situation of Jews in the newly annexed (post-1939) territories of the USSR, Kaganovich writes that:

Many Jews from the Western territories attempted to flee eastward immediately after the beginning of the German assault on the Soviet Union, without waiting for help from authorities. However, under conditions of a dearth of reliable information, panic, and the destruction of the means of communication by bombing and sabotage, it was extremely difficult to do this. (2010, 88)

In writings on World War II in the USSR, one often sees the term "evacuation" [*evakuatsiia*]. According to Kaganovich,

In official Soviet terminology both flight among the population and the organized exodus from combat zones are referred to as evacuation in order to avoid the use of the negative term "flight," which suggests failure on the part of the authorities. (2010, 87)

The Soviets had an evacuation policy, though it was developed only beginning around 27 June, when an order was put forth to "evacuate and relocate quotas of persons and assets of value" (Altschuler 1994, 79).

Opportunities for flight were seized first by state and party functionaries, as well as army officers sending their families across the border (Shternshis 2014). Dubson writes that, "Both pre-war evacuation plans and orders concerning evacuation at the beginning of the war gave priority to the evacuation of material goods rather than to people. When it came to people, Jews were given no preference in evacuation" (1999, 54). Khenia Zivtson, born in Liepāja in 1921, remembers that her family did not leave because her mother learned that evacuees were mainly military families or those who had worked with the Communists: "Families like ours, nobody wanted."<sup>40</sup> Riva Schefer recalls that, "[Soviet authorities] went in their cars and trains and didn't warn anyone about anything."<sup>41</sup> Zeldā-Rivka Hait tells that her family tried to get a place on a train from Riga on 27 June, just days before Germany occupied the capital. The train was filled with Russian officers and their wives and there was no room for her family.<sup>42</sup>

Among the obstacles to flight was Soviet military control at Latvia's borders. Refugee accounts suggest that Soviet secret police may have feared the crossing of German spies and there was an effort to convince fleeing families that the Soviet military had suppressed the threat and they should not sow panic. Another obstacle was the lack of official personal documents, as independent Latvia's passports were unusable, but many people had not received a Soviet Latvian passport; this was, in any case, a rumor that circulated among Jewish families (Ročko 2008, 368). Jakob Basner, born in 1927 in Riga, recalls that his family knew Latvian Jews who returned after trying to cross the border; their flight failed because they did not have documents. They were also hindered by Latvians shooting at retreating troops and refugees.<sup>43</sup>

Many refugees were injured or killed during the journey. Kalman Aron, born in Riga in 1924, remembers his family's attempt to reach the capital's railway station. They were turned back by Latvians shooting from buildings around the station.<sup>44</sup> Maya Abramowitch recalls that while some Jews escaped from Daugavpils, many trains carrying refugees were bombed before they reached safety.<sup>45</sup> Among those who survived flight, some would not

make it to the end of the war, losing their lives at the front or in the difficult conditions of evacuation, but those who lived to return found that the communities they left behind had been brutally destroyed.

## Conclusion

Many Latvian Jews made the decision to stay in their homes and communities when Germany attacked the USSR. Others desperately fled into the Russian interior. Among those who stayed, only a few hundred survived. Several thousand returned from evacuation and the Red Army at the end of the war and found devastated communities and news of murdered families. Today, Latvia's Jewish community has about 6000 members. Few are historical descendants of Latvia's pre-war Jews; most are migrants who arrived during the Soviet period or their descendants. Of the Latvian Jews who survived World War II, many migrated to Western countries after the war. Others left for Israel when the doors were opened by the USSR in the 1970s. These survivors constitute the majority of testimony-givers in this research. In many Latvian cities from which survivors hail, like Jēkabpils and Kuldīga, Jewish cemeteries remain, but Jewish life is only a memory.

A goal of this work is to consider the key factors that underpinned decisions made by Latvia's Jews to flee or to remain when Nazi Germany attacked. Decisions were taken in an environment of political, military, and societal chaos, but were, testimonies and memoirs show, conditioned by logics of action rooted in identifiable sociological factors. Also important were opportunities for or obstacles to flight that were determined by factors like geography, Soviet policies, and access to means for flight.

Understanding choices and circumstances that determined where Latvian Jewish families found themselves in July 1941 is part of understanding death and survival in Latvia's Jewish community. Whereas each family's decision-taking represents a unique case, we recognize patterns that offer a broader picture of threats, obstacles, and choices. While the small number of cases demands caution in generalizing findings, they point to factors found by researchers in other territories, including the influence of kinship ties and impressions of Germans from World War I, as well as factors that have received scant attention, like motivations linked to rejection of Soviet power.

This work expands the body of historical knowledge on the Holocaust in the East. Since the establishment of historical commissions in the Baltics in the 1990s, significant work has been done. However, most research highlights the perspectives of German occupiers, local collaborators, and ethnic Latvians. This article seeks to return Jewish voices to the history of the Holocaust in Latvia. Survivor testimonies and memoirs offer recollections of the wrenching process of choosing to flee or stay and underscore a logic of action in both instances. It is through these unique sources that we can gain a fuller understanding of how the world looked to Latvian Jews caught between the forces and interests of Soviets, Germans, and Latvians in the grim summer of 1941.

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**Notes**

1. Latvia was an independent country from 1918 to 1940. In June 1940, Latvia was occupied by the USSR. German troops occupied in July 1941. Soviet troops reclaimed Latvia beginning in summer of 1944, launching months of regional battles. With the full retreat of Germany in spring 1945, it was reoccupied by the USSR. We use “Latvia” to refer to both the independent and occupied territory. We use “Russia” to refer to the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic.
2. Authors’ calculations based on available data.
3. Levin (1990b) writes that across the Baltics, the toll of deportation included “12,000 Jews who were singled out as ‘enemies of the nation’” (56).
4. After the Ulmanis coup, much of the Jewish press was shut down.
5. USC Shoah Foundation, Institute, Visual History Archive (VHA), Julius Drabkin interview (no. 35043).
6. VHA, Max Solway interview (no. 37541).
7. VHA, Zelda-Rivka Hait interview (no. 26792).
8. U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), Edward Anders interview (RG-50.030\*0451).
9. VHA, Riva Schefer interview (no. 31842).
10. VHA, Maja Abramowitch interview (no. 4627).
11. VHA, Adele Honigwill interview (no. 24705).
12. VHA, Tamara Fainshtein interview (no. 38709).
13. VHA Pinkhus Gurevich interview (no. 22988).
14. VHA Sara Zalstein interview (no. 35077).
15. Centropa, Irina Golbreich interview. Accessed at <http://www.centropa.org/biography/irina-golbreich>.
16. VHA Hannah Herman interview (no. 4212).
17. VHA Haim Civian interview (no. 18435).
18. VHA Cecilia Boruchowitz interview (no. 4947).
19. VHA Sima Dreyer interview (no. 5898).
20. Personal interview with Margers Vestermanis, 16 October 2014, Riga.
21. VHA Anne Buvitt interview (no. 48351).
22. VHA Isaac Zieman interview (no. 38094).
23. VHA Rhoda Volpyansky Gurevich interview (no. 24569).
24. VHA Ella Medal’e interview (no. 32793).
25. VHA Maksim Felton interview (no. 7871).
26. VHA Sara Munic interview (no. 25700).
27. Centropa, Bella Bogdanova interview. Accessed at <http://www.centropa.org/biography/bella-bogdanova>.
28. VHA Ruvin Fridman interview (no. 6348).
29. VHA Naum Lifshits interview (no. 14131).
30. Centropa, Hana Rayzberg interview. Accessed at <http://www.centropa.org/biography/hana-rayzberg>.
31. VHA, Hait interview (no. 26792).
32. VHA Margaret Kagan interview (no. 46259).
33. VHA, Hait interview (no. 26792).
34. USHMM Henry Bermanis interview (RG-50.030\*341).
35. Centropa, Ella Perlman interview. Accessed at <http://www.centropa.org/biography/ella-perlman>.
36. VHA, Hait interview (no. 26792).
37. VHA Morduch Max Eidus interview (no. 1223).
38. VHA Joshua Wainer interview (no. 25829).
39. VHA Gurevich interview (no. 22988).
40. VHA Khenia Zivtson interview (no.41088).
41. VHA Schefer interview (no 31842)
42. VHA Heit interview (no. 26792)
43. VHA Jakob Basner interview (no. 6277).
44. VHA Kalman Aron interview (no. 84).
45. VHA Abramowitch interview (no. 4627).

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