

Jewish Holocaust Commemoration Activity in the USSR

Under Stalin^{*}

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Holocaust commemoration was one of several fields in which Jewish survivors in Eastern Europe acted extensively in the first decade after World War II. In addition to gathering documentary material, this was manifested in memorial assemblies and the construction of memorial stones and monuments to commemorate one of the most horrific events in Jewish and human history. It is commonly believed, however, that this commemorative enlistment did not find expression among Jewish survivors in the USSR.

Most studies on the topic that were written outside the Soviet Union - many of which had a clear political agenda - dealt with the official policy toward Holocaust commemoration and focused on the construction of the monument at the Babi Yar ravine in Kiev, in which Jews apparently played no significant role.¹ Only in recent years, as the Soviet archives have become somewhat accessible, has a small part of the comprehensive Jewish activity in the effort of Holocaust commemoration come into view.

Many Jews who returned to their former places of residence considered it their privilege and duty to commemorate their loved ones by publishing *yizkor* (memorial) books, holding memorial assemblies, and erecting monuments to the victims of the Holocaust. This is how they expressed their personal anguish and emotions in view of the devastation of European Jewry and, particularly, Soviet Jewry. Many Soviet Jews, including those who had lived outside the Nazi-occupied areas before World War II, had lost relatives in the Holocaust. This fact transformed the commemoration into a personal commitment of sorts; it united ordinary people with well-known personalities in Soviet society and religious Jews with anti-religious Communists. Generally speaking, the Holocaust became a unifying factor across broad Jewish social

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¹ William Korey, *The Soviet Cage: Anti-Semitism in Russia* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), pp. 98–124.

strata. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the initiatives in Holocaust commemoration were taken at the local, grassroots level, while officialdom, for the most part, opposed or disapproved of this activity.

Several Jews who had lost most of their families believed that the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee should be in charge of commemorating Holocaust victims. In December 1945, General David Dragunskii expressed himself in this vein:

Where I was born [Novozibkov],² the German monsters shot all my relatives - seventy-four members of the Dragunskii family.... The bones of my sisters and the children lay supine in the field, where animals trod on them.... The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee must take action to build monuments [in the memory of] the children, the elderly, and the women who were shot.... It is difficult to forget this nightmare; the site [of the murders] should be fenced in and monuments with inscriptions including dates [of murder] should be stationed [there].³

Evidently, however, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee did not accept Dragunskii's proposal to assume responsibility for the ceremonial and physical commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust. Thus, the *kehillot* (religious community organizations; singular, *kehillah*), the only legitimate agencies that continued to exist after the Anti-Fascist Committee was disbanded in November 1948, naturally became the main sponsors of the commemorative initiatives. As the Nazi-occupied areas were successively liberated, such *kehillot* had taken shape in most cities and towns that had Jewish population.⁴

² Novozibkov (Chernigov *gubernia*) had a Jewish population of 3,836 according to the 1897 census, one-fourth (25.4 percent) of the population at large. As the population of the town grew, on the one hand, and as Jews migrated from it, on the other, the share of the Jewish population declined. The January 1939 census found 3,129 Jews there, only 13 percent of the population. Many of them did not flee when Germany invaded and remained in Novozibkov under Nazi occupation. The first *Aktion* there, in which about 800 Jews were murdered, took place on February 17, 1942. Ilya Altman, ed., *Neizvestnaia chernaia kniga* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, GARF: 1993), p. 402.

³ Genadii Kostyrchenko, ed., *Evreiskii Antifashistskii Komitet v SSSR, 1941–1948, Dokumentirovannaia istoriia* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1996), p.108; Shimon Redlich, ed., *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented Study of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), p. 231. I thank my colleague, Professor Shimon Redlich, for calling this document to my attention.

⁴ Yaacov Ro'i, "The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union after World War II," in Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1995), pp. 264–289.

The cause of commemorating the Holocaust became one of their focal points of direct or indirect action. This activity on the part of the communities, or of people directly or indirectly associated with them, overstepped the strictly religious domain that the authorities had defined as the communities' responsibilities. Therefore, by donating funds, invoking personal connections with local officials, and so on, a very large number of Jews became participants in Holocaust commemoration activity formally organized by ostensibly religious communities. Since the communities were under the supervision of the Council for Religious Affairs by the Government of the Soviet Union (Sovet po Delam Religioznykh Kul'tov pri SNKSSSR; CARC) and its representatives in the *oblasti* (provinces), this activity is reflected mainly in the archival material of the CARC, which was inaccessible until the past decade.

Although the main and most extensive form of commemoration of Holocaust victims was physical, several attempts were made to publish victims' testimonies and writings. In 1946, the L'viv (Lwów)⁵ community began to gather survivors' testimonies and planned to publish this material in 1947.⁶ The Vinnitsa community asked the municipality of that town for permission to publish a book with the names of Jewish townspeople whom the Nazis had murdered. On the margins of the application, the mayor, Petrov, wrote, "The municipality has no objection to the publication of a book about the victims of Fascism."⁷ However, no one followed up on the initiatives of the *kehillot* in L'viv and Vinnitsa; the activity focused mainly on the "Black Book" project that the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was preparing.

Memorial Assemblies

⁵ In this article we have made an exception to our editorial policy regarding geographic names. Rather than use the accepted name in 1938, or the name as it is most commonly known, we have for this article used the accepted names for the post-war period being discussed. [The editor]

⁶ Report of Community Chairman Serebrianni, January 5, 1947, Tsentralnyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Vysshykh Organov Vlasti i Upravleniia Ukrainy (TsGAVOU), Record Group (RG) 4648, List 2, File 33, pp. 138–139.

⁷ Letter from the representative of the Council for Religious Affairs (CARC) in Vinnitsa *Oblast* to the director of the *oblast* Agitprop Department about the latter's misunderstanding of Soviet policy on religious affairs since 1948, Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Vinitzskoi Obladsti (GAVO), RG R-2700, List 19, File 35, p. 27.

One of the first assemblies seems to have taken place in Khar'kov in January 1945, marking the third anniversary of the horrific murder of the Jews in that town. At the gathering, the community raised some 15,000 rubles for the commemoration of Holocaust victims.⁸ However, assemblies of this type were often opposed. In 1945–1946, the Novograd-Volynskiy community wanted to organize memorial assemblies at the place where the Jews of that town had been murdered, but the authorities objected.⁹ In August 1946, the Jews of Kamenets-Podol'skiy attempted to hold an assembly to mark the anniversary of the murder of 23,000 Jews there in 1941, but the mayor, Lemchuk, who seems to have been antisemitic, forbade it categorically.¹⁰

The *kehillah* members, however, did not accept the ban. In July 1948, they complained to the president of the Soviet Union (the chairman of the Supreme Soviet), Nikolai Shvernik, and the prime minister of the Ukraine, Nikita Khrushchev:

In 1946, we all presented the mayor with our request, which emanated from the depths of the souls of hundreds of Jews, to allow us to mark the tragic day of bereavement, [the day] when our innocent mothers, fathers, and children were tortured to death and murdered *en masse*, but he refused.... Since 1944, the *kehillah* in Kamenets-Podol'skiy has been asking the mayor to allow us to arrange, modestly, the mass graves where our fathers and parents were buried, the places where tens of thousands of our parents, brothers, sisters, and children were buried alive, places where the ground trembled with fear and terror. In another year, it will no longer be possible to recognize the place where, in 1941, the German murderers perpetrated a tragedy of the likes never known in human history. The pits are being covered over by thorns and grass. The traces and memory of our dear sisters, mothers, and relatives are slowly being obliterated, and despite our lawful demands,

⁸ TsGAVOU, RG 4648, List 2, File 37, p. 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, File 301, p. 77.

¹⁰ Letter of grievance, Jews of Kamenets-Podol'skiy to President of the Ukraine, September 1947, *ibid.*, File 37, p. 46.

flowing from hundreds of broken hearts and our sisters' tears - our request still remains unrequited.¹¹

This impassioned request, like its precursors, was brushed aside. The authorities refused to lend official approval to a memorial assembly for victims of the Holocaust, as they had several years previously in Odessa.

In Bogdanovka, about 150 km. from Odessa, tens of thousands of Jews were murdered during the German and Romanian occupation. The bodies were cremated to obliterate traces of the crime. This fact, confirmed by the Soviet Committee for Investigation of Nazi Crimes, was reported in a local newspaper (*Chernomorskaia Kommuna*) on April 30, 1944. Thus, the Soviets admitted, in a sense, that the persons murdered were Jews and not unspecified Soviet citizens in general.¹² Pursuant to the report, D. V. Klinov, a leading figure in the Odessa community, went to Bogdanovka, gathered up the ashes and bones of the murdered Jews, contacted the CARC representative on behalf of the community, and asked him to allow the community to conduct a public interment of the remains on December 10, 1946. He even insisted that the assembly be advertised in the local press. The CARC official, reluctant to make the decision, turned to his superiors in Kiev, who replied that such a public burial must never be allowed. "In Bogdanovka," they added, "citizens of various nationalities were cremated, not only Jews. Therefore, the appropriate institutions [*sootvetstvuiushchie organy*, i.e., the security services] should investigate to determine how the citizen D. V. Klinov could have gathered the ashes and bones of murdered persons in Bogdanovka and divided them up by national criteria."¹³

Thus, the authorities not only forbade a symbolic public burial for these Holocaust victims but also suggested that such an attempt must have ulterior motives that should be brought to the attention of the security services. By so behaving, they correctly construed such actions as manifestations of national

¹¹ Letter of grievance, Jews of Kamenets-Podol'ski to President of the Ukraine, September 1947, *ibid.*, File 37, p. 47, and *ibid.*, File 52, p. 92. See also Tsentralnyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Obshchestvennykh Obedinenii Ukrainy (TsGАОOU), RG 1, List 70, File 1172, p. 5.

¹² See David Starodunskii, *Odesskoe getto* (Odessa: Khaitekh, 1991), pp. 14–15; Itzhak Arad, ed., *Unichtozhenie evreev SSSR v gody nemetskoj okkupatsii (1941–1944), Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1991), pp. 164–166.

¹³ TsGAVOU, RG 4648, List 2, File 37, pp. 66–68.

(or “nationalistic,” as they put it) aspirations. In 1947, the CARC representative in the Ukraine said as much in a memorandum about the Jewish religion:

Nationalistic manifestations find special expression in the context of the mass graves where the patriots of our homeland, tortured to death by the German Fascists, are buried. Although it is well known that these graves hold the remains of believers and nonbelievers and of members of different nationalities, certain Jewish public circles wish to transform them into the graves of murdered Jews.¹⁴

Although the authorities vehemently opposed outdoor memorial assemblies for Holocaust victims, in the last phases of the war they authorized and even encouraged such assemblies in synagogues. To elevate the status of the rabbi of the Great Synagogue in Moscow, Shlomo Shlifer, and pursuant to an appeal by Chief Rabbi of Palestine Isaac Herzog, the authorities agreed to allow a memorial service for Holocaust victims in the synagogue on March 14, 1945. Participation was limited to ticket-holders, and the tickets were distributed according to official instructions. The recipients were government officials, including Paulina Zhemchuzhina, the wife of Viacheslav Molotov, who sat in the men’s gallery. Also in attendance were high-ranking officers, Yiddish writers (Itzik Fefer, Shmuel Halkin, David Hofshtein, Leyb Kvitko),¹⁵ and even Evgenii Tarle, an important Soviet historian of Jewish origin who had converted to Christianity in the nineteenth century. *Kaddish* and *El Maleh Rahamim* were recited by Mikhail Aleksandrovich, a very popular singer in the USSR at the time.¹⁶

Memorial services also took place in additional locations. On August 12, 1945, the Mozir *kehillah* held a special memorial service for Holocaust victims. In

¹⁴ Report on the state of the Jewish religion in the Ukraine, July 1947: TsGAOUU, RG 1, List 23, File 4556, p. 132.

¹⁵ Although the Yiddish writers attended the memorial service with the authorities’ explicit or tacit approval, this “sin” was mentioned at the trial of the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Vladimir Naumov, ed., *Nepravednyi sud- Poslednii Staliskii rassretel* (Moscow: Nauka), 1994, pp. 38, 115, 116; A somewhat abridged version appeared in English as: *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Post-War Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Emanuel Mikhlin, *The Ember* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Shamir, 1986), pp. 94–96; Mikhail Aleksandrovich, *la pomniu...* (Moscow: n.p., 1992), pp. 138–140.

advance of the event, invitations were sent to about 500 prominent Jews and non-Jews, including Father Romanushko, a local Russian Orthodox priest. Of the 500 participants, 350 were young people and Jewish Communists¹⁷ who held important positions in the town. The *oblast* radio station advertised the service. At this opportunity, 13,000 rubles were collected for the renovation of the synagogue and 4,000 rubles for the Soviet Red Cross. Remarks in praise of the Red Army and Stalin were delivered at the service, and a special cable was sent to the leader.

In Belorussia, however, unlike in Moscow, the act of holding the memorial service was fiercely criticized, and the local authorities were accused of “political myopia” (*politicheskaia blizorukost*).¹⁸ In view of the vagueness surrounding holding memorial services for Holocaust victims in synagogues, the congregation of the Great Synagogue in Moscow sent the following cable to most *kehillot* in December 1945 - with the authorities’ approval, of course: “The religious community of Moscow announces that religious Jews the world over have designated a week of mourning starting on March 8 in memory of the victims of the Fascist hangmen.”¹⁹ Thus, many synagogues across the Soviet Union, including the Great Synagogue in Moscow, held memorial services for Holocaust victims in 1946.

In 1947, however, no special services for Holocaust victims seem to have been held in synagogues, although sometimes a general *Yizkor* memorial prayer was recited during the *hazkarat neshamot* service.

Why did the authorities feel differently about memorial assemblies for Holocaust victims held outdoors as opposed to gatherings in synagogues? Two factors seem to explain the difference. (1) The synagogue service might be construed as part of a religious activity that was permissible and legitimate in a house of worship but strictly forbidden outside; (2) the participants in the synagogue services were carefully selected and could be strictly monitored,

¹⁷ Including Vinokur, director of the Human Resources Department of Poles’e *Oblast*, and Gotlovskii, an editor for the *oblast* radio.

¹⁸ Report of CARC representative in Poles’e *Oblast* for the third quarter of 1945; Natsionalnyi Arkhiv Respubliki Belarus (NARB), RG 952, List 2, File 2, p. 84; report of CARC representative in Poles’e *Oblast* for October 1, 1945–May 21, 1946, *ibid.*, File 5s, pp. 15–17.

¹⁹ Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Chernovitskoi Oblasti (GACHO), RG R–623, List 2, File 3, p. 6.

as could the ceremony, which was scheduled and prepared in advance, unlike outdoor ceremonies at murder sites.

Physical Commemoration

The construction of monuments, unlike individual memorial assemblies and services, was meant to create a permanent focal point of identification with victims of the Holocaust. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the authorities were especially sensitive about this activity, which actually began before the end of the war. Indeed, the very idea of building a monument to the Warsaw ghetto fighters was actually conceived in the USSR in 1943.²⁰

Since the murder of Jews across the USSR took place near each city and town,²¹ commemorative activities were not restricted to several central locations but were undertaken in many localities, of which only a few are known thus far.

Soviet authorities in the Baltic countries were often more favorably disposed to Holocaust commemoration than their counterparts elsewhere in the USSR.²² This is evident with regard to the building of a monument to the Holocaust victims in Vilna. In late 1946, the Vilna *kehillah* asked the CARC representative in Lithuania for permission to put the mass graves in Ponary in appropriate order and to erect a monument there. During the Nazi occupation, Ponary, about 10 kilometers from Vilna, had served as a killing ground for tens of thousands of Jews, Soviet prisoners of war, and anti-Nazi civilians. After the liberation, the place was neglected and left totally unmarked. The CARC representative in Lithuania forwarded the request to the deputy prime minister. He recommended that he reply in the affirmative and view favorably the proposal to put a monument on the site - in coordination with the chief architect of the Lithuanian SSR, of course.²³ Following this, memorial stones were also placed in other towns in the Lithuanian SSR where Jews had been

²⁰ Nathan Rapoport, "Memoir of the Warsaw Ghetto Monument," James E. Young, ed., *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History* (Munich: Prestel, 1994), p. 106.

²¹ See my article, "The Unique Features of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," in Ro'i, ed., *Jews and Jewish Life*, pp. 171–211.

²² The reasons for this still await thorough and systematic research beyond the purview of this article. For several examples, see Zvi Gitelman, "The Soviet Politics of the Holocaust," in Young, ed., *The Art of Memory*, p. 141.

²³ Letter from CARC representative in Lithuania (Pushinis) to Deputy Prime Minister of Lithuania (Naionkanai), March 12, 1948, LCVA, RG 12181, List 1, File 26, p. 77.

murdered in the Holocaust, such as Seta and Utian, and in the town of Dobele in Latvia.²⁴

In neighboring Belorussia, too,²⁵ there were several attempts to commemorate Holocaust victims by means of monuments. In Minsk, fundraising for this purpose was conducted, and the monument was built as the result of the close cooperation between the *kehillah* and Jews who held important positions in the administrative and economic life of the town.²⁶ After the monument, with its inscriptions in Russian and Yiddish, was installed, the *kehillah* asked the authorities for permission to conduct an unveiling ceremony in August 1946. They were refused on the grounds that, as a religious agency, the community had no right to act on behalf of the non-Jews and the non-religious Jews who had been murdered there. The community held the mass unveiling ceremony anyway.²⁷

Pursuant to the commemoration activity in Minsk, a similar activity in Cherven, in the Minsk *Oblast*, began in November-December 1945. On the eve of World War II, Cherven had had a Jewish population of 1,491. Most of them were murdered by the Nazis. After the Red Army liberated Cherven in early July 1944, dozens of Jewish families returned to the town, and several of them organized a *minyán* (prayer quorum). They even had a rabbi. The

²⁴ Gitelman, "The Soviet Politics," p. 144–145; idem, *A Century of Ambivalence* (New York: Schocken, 1988), p. 185.

²⁵ A book recently published in Belarus mentions several localities where monuments and memorial plaques were put up during the period discussed in this article. Memorial markers were erected in the cities of Borisov and Brest; the urban localities of Diatlovo, Radoshkovich, Starobin, Uzda; and the villages of Lugovaia, Timkovich, Budelav, Uzliany, Shatsk, Chernavchitsy, and Derechin. According to the author of the book, the monuments and memorial plaques were placed in locations where Jews had been murdered; however, his sources and the contexts in which he relates their story do not make this clear. Furthermore, nowhere is it stated that these markers were established at the Jews' initiative. Marat Botvinnik, *Pamiatniki genotsida evreev Belarusi* (Minsk: Belaruskaia navuka, 2000), pp. 32–36, 43, 48, 55, 60–61, 68–69, 72–74, 77, 79, 81, 87, 89, 91–93, 96, 98, 111, 113, 117–118, 120, 135–136, 252, 257, 259, 271–272.

²⁶ Report from CARC representative in Belorussia for the third quarter of 1946, NARB, RG 952, List 2, File 6, p. 41. See also Shalom Cholawski, *In the Eye of the Hurricane: The Jews in Eastern Belorussia during World War II* (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, The Institute for Contemporary Jewry, Sifriat Poalim and Moreshet, 1988) (Hebrew), p. 248. The director of the municipal physical-plant department (Nahum Gonin), the director of the Town Beautification Department (Yosef Nisenbaum), and the plant manager who served in this department (Matvey Falkovich) assisted in building the monument. See Leonid Smilovitskii, *Istoriia Evreev Belarusii, 1941–1944* (Tel Aviv: privately published, 2000), p. 280.

²⁷ Report from CARC representative in Belorussia for the third quarter of 1946, NARB, RG 952, List 2, File 6, p. 41.

members of this *minyán* wanted to erect a monument to the Jews who had been murdered during the occupation. They also wanted to inscribe the names and ages of all the victims on the monument, in the sense of “To Every Person There Is a Name.” For this reason they contacted Jews all over Belorussia and even in Moscow who had lived in Cherven in order to obtain information about their relatives who had perished in the Holocaust. Vladimir Fundator, a scientist from Moscow whose parents had been murdered in Cherven, participated in this endeavor. Those wishing to commemorate their loved ones by inscribing their names on the monument were asked to donate at least 300 rubles. In all, some 15,000 rubles were collected. The money was used to order forty metal plaques from a foundry in Moscow and to inscribe on them the names of the Holocaust victims from Cherven. The plan was to record about twenty-five names on each plaque, or about 1,000 in all. As the monument was being prepared, the organizers ran into financial difficulties and were unable to complete the work.²⁸ Thus, on September 14, 1946, Vladimir Fundator wrote to the head of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Shlomo Mikhoels:

I send you a photograph of the first plaque that will be stationed on the grave of the victims of Fascism in Cherven.... Forty such plaques will be cast. I ask you to persuade the Belorussian Council of Ministers to allocate 30,000 rubles for the construction of a monument at the grave of the victims of Fascism in Cherven, in addition to the 15,000 rubles that we have collected for the manufacture of the aforementioned plaques in Moscow. Several people have suggested that we install the plaques on a wall of a stone building in Cherven itself and affix one plaque with a general inscription at the site of the grave of the victims of Fascism. Please let us know your opinion.²⁹

²⁸ Leonid.Smilovitskii, “Eto bylo v Chervene,” in *Evrei Belarusi; Istorii i kultura* (Minsk: Belorusskoe ob”edinenie evreiskikh organizatsii i obshchin, 1998), vol. III-IV, pp. 223–231.

²⁹ Central Archive of the Jewish People, P–199. See also Mordechai Altshuler, “The Jewish Antifascist Committee in the USSR in Light of New Documentation,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 1 (1984), pp. 280–281.

Thus, by late 1946, the sponsors of this monument project had not yet completed it. They met with fundraising difficulties and had to request assistance from the Belorussian authorities. We do not know if Shlomo Mikhoels actually contacted the Government of Belorussia in this matter. If he did so, the government probably would have turned down his request anyway, due to its dim view of Holocaust commemoration in general. The affair, however, is evidence of extensive Jewish activity in the commemoration of Holocaust victims. Jews from various towns participated in these efforts, and religious circles and prominent figures in the Soviet establishment maintained cooperative relations in their joint endeavors.

In Rechitsa, in the Gomel *Oblast*, there had been more than 7,000 Jews before the war, one-fourth of the local population. Only several dozen Jewish families returned after the liberation, and a monument of bricks for the Holocaust victims was built in the Jewish cemetery in 1946.³⁰ The few Jews who returned to the town of Glubokoe, also in the Gomel *Oblast*, also managed to erect a monument at the grave of the Holocaust victims, with an inscription in Yiddish.³¹

At that time efforts were being made to set up monuments for Holocaust victims in at least fifteen cities and towns in the Ukraine, including four cities in areas that the Soviet Union had annexed during World War II (L'viv, Kamenets-Podol'skiy, and Chernevtsey *Oblast*).

In early 1947, the head of the L'viv community, Lev Izrailovich Serebriannyi, proposed "to set up a massive monument in 'Piaski,' where the Hitlerists shot tens of thousands of Jews from L'viv."³² The general assembly of the *kehillah* adopted a resolution to this effect: "in 1947 ... to build a monument on the common grave of the victims of Fascism who are buried in 'Piaski'."³³ However, the resolution seems not to have been implemented, because about three weeks later (on March 25), the chairman of the community was arrested

³⁰ Smilovitskii, *Istoriia evreev Belorussii*, p. 268.

³¹ Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence*, p. 189.

³² Report of community chairman Serebriannyi, January 5, 1947; TsGAVOU, RG 4648, List 2, File 33, p. 138.

³³ Mikhail Mitsel, ed., *Obshiny iudeiskogo vereispovedaniia v Ukraine (Kiev, L'viv: 1945–1981 gg.)* (Kiev: Biblioteka Institutu Iudaiki, 1998), p. 180.

and charged with assisting the “Illegal” Immigration to Palestine. This was enough to strike the matter from the agenda.

However, at the initiative of Rabbi Hayyim Davidovich Kleiper, who had come to Tarnopol from L’viv, all the Jews in the town were canvassed for donations, and a monument was installed at the grave of the Holocaust victims, with the following inscription in Yiddish and Russian: “In eternal memory and honor of the Jews who were murdered by the German Fascists.” The unveiling, held in October 1946, was attended by municipal officials, and the secretary of the Communist Party in that city delivered a speech.³⁴

The town of Shepetovka, in Kamenets-Podol’skiy *Oblast*, had a Jewish population of about 20,000 before the war, approximately 20 percent of the total population. The Nazis murdered most of these Jews, and some of the survivors had left for Poland. The few remaining Jews in Shepetovka were unable to put up a monument. However, according to a report in 1946: “The believing [religious] Jews ... put the common graves in good order.... [In the place where] the Germans shot 26,000 people - Jews and members of other nationalities - soil has been heaped over the pits and a metal fence has been built around the area.”³⁵

In Chernevtsy (Czernowitz), where several communities existed after the war and competed with each other in various respects, an attempt was made to establish a monument to the Holocaust victims - a project around which the communities united. In 1945-1946, most of the Jews of Chernevtsy left for Romania and were replaced by Jews from other parts of the Soviet Union. After the community stabilized somewhat, the newly arrived Jews began to deal with the construction of a monument to the victims of the Holocaust. They contacted the CARC representative and asked him for permission to build a monument at the place where Jews had been murdered in 1941, and, for this purpose, to conduct a special fundraising campaign among the townspeople. In July 1948, in view of the vagueness that surrounded this matter, the CARC

³⁴ Report of the CARC in the Ukraine for the fourth quarter of 1946, TsGAOUU, RG 1, List 23, File 4556, pp. 61–62; Report on Jewish Religious Activity in the Ukraine, July 25, 1947, *ibid.*, p. 132; Brief Survey on the Jewish Religion, Gosudarstvennyi Archiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, RG R–6991, List 3s, File 61, p. 160. See also *Pinkas Hakehillot: Encyclopaedia of the Jewish Communities, Poland—Eastern Galicia* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1980), p. 251.

³⁵ Report on the condition of cemeteries in Kamenets-Podol’skiy *Oblast*, November 1946, TsGAVOU, RG 4648, List 2, File 14, p. 20.

representative in the *oblast* contacted his superior in Kiev. He replied that, since the persons murdered there had been Soviet citizens, “the question of building a monument is of concern to the entire population of Chernevtsy” and not a particularistic Jewish cause. Furthermore, “Fundraising in synagogues for the construction of a monument should be totally prohibited.”³⁶

An initiative by the community in Priluki, in the Chernigov *Oblast*, received a similar official response. The community there officially asked the municipal authorities for permission to hold a day of fundraising (*kruzhochnyi sbor*), in coordination with the authorities, to build a monument for persons murdered in the Holocaust, to conduct a mass unveiling ceremony, and to advertise the ceremony in the local press. The municipal bureaucrats, not knowing how to relate to this request or wishing to avoid making a decision, asked for instructions from Kiev. They received the following reply:

The stationing of monuments at the graves of victims of German Fascism is the concern of the municipality and not of the religious community. The municipality may involve *all citizens* [emphasis in the original] in this activity.... The *kehillah* should not engage in the construction of monuments.³⁷

An initiative by the few Jews in the town of Shchors (formerly Snovsk), in the Chernigov *Oblast*, was more successful. Shortly before World War II, there had been 1,500 Jews in Shchors, 15 percent of the population. Although only a few of them returned to the town after the war, they seem to have managed to put up a monument to the Holocaust victims during those years. In his memoirs, the Jewish-Russian author Anatolii Rybakov describes how they did it:

[One of the few survivors] circulated with other old men in the courtyards, in desolate and neglected places, on the roads, in the forests, and in the fields, and gathered in sacks the remains of the

³⁶ Letter from CARC representative in the Ukraine to his representative in Chernevtsy *Oblast*, September 13, 1948, *ibid.*, File 50, p. 199.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, File 116, pp. 93–94, and Report of the CARC in the Ukraine for the Fourth Quarter of 1946, TsGAOUU, RG 1, List 23, File 4556, p. 61.

murdered.... They buried those remains in a common grave.... A large granite stone was set atop the common grave and an inscription in Russian was engraved in it: "To the everlasting memory of the victims of the Nazi German occupiers,".... [and in Hebrew], *Ve-niqeiti damam lo niqeiti* ("Thus I [God] will avenge their unavenged blood," Joel 4:21).³⁸

The Hebrew inscription did not correspond to the Russian one in its phrasing, let alone in its meaning. The local authorities, however, failed to notice this and thought that the non-Russian inscription was in Yiddish (*evreiskii*). Even the memoirist, Rybakov, did not understand the Hebrew inscription until his Jewish escort explained it to him. That is how he concluded his novel, *Heavy Sand*,³⁹ which attracted much interest the world over. This shows that the Jews had to use various ruses to express their feelings, but that sometimes they did so successfully.

The commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust persisted even when the authorities' antisemitic policy escalated to a peak level (1948–1953). For example, the small Jewish population in the town of Pervomaisk acted through the unofficial religious community to create such a monument. In 1948, the CARC representative in the Ukraine ordered his subordinate in Odessa *Oblast*⁴⁰ to explain to inquirers that monuments were to be built by the municipality and not by the *kehillah*. However, he also suggested that the executive committee of the *oblast* and the municipality of Pervomaisk take whatever action necessary to protect the burial places of victims of Fascism and to maintain them to the extent possible.⁴¹

The CARC representative in Kiev gave a similar reply to the Poltava community, which was raising funds for the construction of a monument to Holocaust victims there.⁴² In 1948, the Kremen'chug community, in the same *oblast*, asked the CARC representative and the municipality for permission to

³⁸ Anatolii Rybakov, *Roman-vospominanie* (Moscow: n.p., 1997), pp. 233–235.

³⁹ Anatolii Rybakov, *Heavy Sand* (London: A. Lane, 1981).

⁴⁰ John Anderson, "The Council for Religious Affairs and the Shaping of Soviet Religious Policy," *Soviet Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4 (1991), pp. 689–710.

⁴¹ Letter from CARC representative in the Ukraine to CARC representative in Odessa *Oblast*, July 8, 1948; TsGAVOU, RG 4648, List 2, File 50, p. 45.

⁴² Letter from CARC representative in the Ukraine to CARC representative in Poltava *Oblast*, July 21, 1948, *ibid.*, File 50, p. 71.

conduct a special fundraising campaign for the same purpose. The author of the letter stressed that “Every Jew should take part in the construction of a historical monument such as this.” After receiving municipal approval, special receipts would be printed with the following message at the top: “Contribution toward the construction of a monument on the graves of Jews murdered by the barbaric Hitlerites.” The sponsors of the initiative promised to ask the municipal architect to design the monument, which would bear inscriptions in “the Jewish language” (evidently Yiddish) and in Russian.⁴³ The community received the following response from Kiev:

The matter of building a monument on the graves of victims of the German Fascists falls within the purview of the local Soviet authorities. Here it deserves special emphasis that Jews were not the only Soviet citizens murdered; there were also Ukrainians, Russians, and others. Accordingly, the construction of a monument [for the victims] is the concern of the entire population of Kremen’chug.⁴⁴

The small *kehillah* in Lubny, in the Poltava *Oblast*, made a more modest request. They asked that the untended plot where the Holocaust victims were buried be transferred to it for care. Thus, the chairman and rabbi of the community, Leib Moiseevich Grinberg, asked the municipality to allow the community to tend the plot where 3,000 Jews from the town - who had been murdered near the lumber factory (Lubenskogo penwko-zavoda) - were buried. Although the local authorities agreed, the CARC representative in the *oblast* intervened and expressed his vehement opposition.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the rabbi was able to have a trench excavated around the plot; this served as a monument of sorts to the victims. The community also cleaned up the plot and took care of it for years. Rabbi Grinberg described the community’s participation in 1953: “None of the Jews who lost relatives at that time [the Holocaust] refuses to make any contribution.” He also testified that on Jewish

⁴³ Letter from Kremen’chug community to municipality, *ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁴ Letter from CARC representative in Kiev concerning construction of a monument to Holocaust victims in Kremen’chug, August 6, 1948, *ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴⁵ Report of CARC representative in the Ukraine for August–October 1946; TsGAOUU, RG 1, List 23, File 4556, p. 132.

holidays the victims' children came from Moscow, Leningrad, and other cities, and made donations for the maintenance of the location.⁴⁶

In Uman (Kiev *Oblast*), too, the community undertook the responsibility of maintaining Sukhoi Yar, a location north of the city where more than 10,000 Jews had been murdered. The Municipal Committee for Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the Occupied Territories determined - evidently in early 1944 - that some 13,000 Jews had been "burnt alive" there.⁴⁷ After the war the place remained neglected, and the municipality, which by law should have dealt with the matter, did nothing to alter the situation. As the CARC reported:

In Sukhoi Yar, Kiev *Oblast*, where the Germans executed 18,000 Soviet citizens [mostly Jews], the common grave was tidied up at the initiative not of the municipality [Gorsoviet] but of the local religious community, by its means, and at its expense. It was also [the community] that made inquiries about building a monument there. A model has already been prepared, a budget drawn up, and [building] materials gathered, and now [1947] a campaign to raise additional resources is under way. In all this activity, however, the municipality has stood aside.⁴⁸

An initiative to build a monument to Holocaust victims in the capital of the Dnepropetrovsk *Oblast* sheds light on the modus operandi of communities that attempted to attain their goals by exploiting conflicts of interests among Soviet authorities. The deputy chairman of the community, Shulman, was especially active in this matter. The CARC representative in Dnepropetrovsk *Oblast* opposed the initiative on the oft-used grounds that it was not the *kehillah's* function and that non-Jews, too, had been shot there. Nevertheless, Shulman persisted, and when the CARC representative was out of town he obtained a permit from the municipal building department and ordered a

⁴⁶ Report of CARC representative in the Ukraine for 1953, *ibid.*, File 3531, p. 33.

⁴⁷ Yad Vashem Archives, M-52/14, p. 2. On the murder of Jews in Uman, see also Altman, *Neizvestnaia*, pp. 184–196, and R. Tager, "A Pleasant Day," *Folks Shtime* (Yiddish) (Warsaw), May 10, 1958; and Mordechai Altshuler, Itzhak Arad, and Shmuel Krakowski, eds., *Sovetskie evrei pishut Ile Erenburgu* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1993), pp. 148–149, 228–229.

⁴⁸ Report on the condition of cemeteries in the Ukraine and the RSFSR, June 1947; NARB, RG 952, List 1, File 7, p. 6.

model for the monument. The CARC representative in the Ukraine complained about the municipal officials' conduct and stressed that Shulman

...had obtained the support of several responsible workers in the town and [obtained] their consent to build a monument [to the Holocaust victims. After he had secured this consent,] they began raising money for this purpose.... Shulman concluded an agreement with a group of Jewish actors in Dnepropetrovsk to put on a performance to [raise funds for the construction of] the monument. The director of the Shevchenko Theater ... agreed to host the performance at his playhouse. Shulman also visited the municipal lecture bureau [*lektoraskoe biuro*] and there, for some reason, they received him well and agreed to organize a paid lecture on "Palestine" and [allow it] to take place in the theater or in one of the cultural clubs.⁴⁹

The deputy mayor backed Shulman's plan enthusiastically and even instructed the municipal administration department (*gorkomkhoz*) to help erect the monument. The municipality also issued all the necessary permits.

On November 18, 1948, armed with the permits, Shulman visited the CARC representative in the *oblast* at his home, hoping to obtain his consent for the construction of the monument. Instead, the CARC official contacted the municipal committee of the Communist Party and complained about the "misconduct of the municipality in this matter." This resulted in strained relations between the Municipality of Dnepropetrovsk and a representative of the central government (the CARC). The municipal Communist Party committee, chosen as an arbiter between the two, sided with the CARC representative and censured the municipal officials for their "political inattentiveness" (*politicheskoi blizorukosti*). After the censure, several municipal officials were fired, and a few were ousted from the Communist Party. The CARC representative dismissed the deputy chairman of the community, Shulman, and the rabbi of the *kehillah*, who had supported him.

⁴⁹ Report of CARC representative in the Ukraine for October–December 1948; TsGAOUU. RG 1, List 23, File 5667, pp. 59–60; memorandum on actions of religious functionaries, April 1949, *ibid.*, pp. 92–93. Report on the Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union, March 18, 1949; Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF) RG R–6991, List 4, File 23, pp. 31–32.

The two of them, fearing arrest, left town in 1950 - Shulman to Novosibirsk and the rabbi to Leningrad.⁵⁰ However, the attempt to build a monument for Holocaust victims in Dnepropetrovsk is evidence of extensive and persistent Jewish activity in this cause, with the greatest possible exploitation of the absence of explicit and unequivocal instructions against this form of commemoration.

In Zhitomir *Oblast* attempts to commemorate Holocaust victims seem to have been made in two cities. One modest attempt took place in Novograd-Volinskiy, where the community arranged “four common graves... built fences around them, and erected monuments with inscriptions in Yiddish and Russian.”⁵¹ The second attempt was in Berdichev, where the *kehillah* toiled for fifteen years to build a monument at the Holocaust victims’ burial place.

Most Jews in Berdichev and others nearby were murdered about 4 kilometers from the town, in a field near a military airbase on the road to the village of Romanovka.⁵² Shortly after Berdichev was liberated and the Jewish community regrouped, the community began to work on the construction of a monument at the murder site. The municipal authorities opposed this, and, in 1946, the chairman of the community, Metler, was ordered to desist. Instead, he proudly declared, “I acted on behalf of the religious [Jews] and the Jews at large.... and we will build ... monuments to the victims of Fascism no matter what....”⁵³

Since they were not allowed to place a monument at the murder site, the Jews of Berdichev built several symbolic monuments to the Holocaust victims at the Jewish cemetery. However, by so doing they did not give up the hope of building a proper monument at the murder site. They continued to work actively toward that goal in the late 1940s and into the early 1950s.⁵⁴ Indeed, in early 1953 - when the antisemitic policy reached its climax with the “doctors’ plot” after considerable effort the community was able to put up a monument

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Report on the Jewish community in Novograd-Volinskiy, March 2, 1948; TsGAVOU, RG 4648, List 2, File 37, p. 38.

⁵² See John and Carol Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev: The Life and Fate of Vasily Grossman* (New York: Free Press, 1996), pp. 175–176.

⁵³ Report of CARC representative in the Ukraine for August–October 1946; TsGAOUU, RG 1, List 23, File 4555, p. 392; Report of CARC representative in Zhitomir Oblast on his visit to Berdichev in 1949, TsGVOU, RG 4648, List 2, File 65, p. 22.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 21–28.

at the Holocaust victims' burial place. Although it disappeared a short time later,⁵⁵ after Stalin's death the community made efforts to replace it.

In the mid-1950s, fundraising for this purpose resumed. The donors included Jews who were living in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, and other cities. Due to contacts with a stone-processing factory and, in the main, informal connections with Mesis, its manager, the inscription was engraved in Yiddish or Hebrew ("Evreiskii," or "Jewish," which could refer to either language). The Russian inscription read: "Here lie the bodies of local inhabitants and war prisoners who were shot in a bestial fashion by the Hitlerite Fascists in 1941–1942." The inscription - or the Russian inscription in any case - did not state explicitly that most of the people murdered there had been Jews, although the engraving of Hebrew letters alludes to this fact. The monument was to cost 20,000–25,000 rubles to prepare and erect; evidently, the *kehillah* had access to this sum.

This time, having learned the lessons of the early 1950s, the community officials made strenuous efforts to obtain explicit approval for placing a monument near the airfield. As part of this endeavor, they invited several officers from the unit that had run the airfield to witness the construction of the monument. It stands to reason that they gave a few of them certain gifts. In May 1958, when the monument was completed and the community officials thought it very likely that they would be allowed to erect it, the chairman of the community, Yitzhak Avramovich Khmel'nitskiy, contacted the headquarters of the military unit that had been in charge of the airfield. He requested permission that the community be allowed to put up the monument and dedicate it publicly. The deputy commander of the unit, not wishing to assume full responsibility, consulted the director of the municipal planning department. The latter's response stressed that monuments to casualties in the Great Patriotic War could be put in cemeteries but not in public places and that citizens who so desired could exhume their relatives' remains from the common graves and reinter them in the cemeteries.

This reply, of course, did not satisfy the Jews of Berdichev. They employed their many contacts in order to prevail upon Division Commander Magerin,

⁵⁵ S. Elisavetskii, "Berdichev: ot vozniknoveniia evreiskoi obshchiny do nashikh dnei," "*Shtetl'* iak fenomen evreiskoi istorii (Kiev: n.p., 1999), p. 44.

whose authority included the airfield. Among their contacts was the former home front commander of the 32nd Division, Spivak, who had been friendly with the airfield commander's father during the war. Due to this far-reaching activity, in which many Jews of Berdichev were involved, the division commander gave an order allowing the community to erect the monument on the airfield premises. The Jews greeted this order delightedly and scheduled the unveiling for 10:00–12:00 on June 2, 1958. The community contacted the municipal transport authority and arranged a fleet of buses for the public during the opening ceremony. According to the program, several community figures and prominent government officials were scheduled to speak. At the last moment, however, the plan was disrupted, evidently by municipal officials or higher-ups in Kiev. The community was not allowed to erect the monument, and several personalities involved in the matter, foremost Spivak, were hauled before the municipal Communist Party committee, interrogated, and severely reprimanded.⁵⁶ Since the Jews were not allowed to erect the monument at the murder site, they did so in the Jewish cemetery,⁵⁷ and the murder site remained untended until the early 1990s, if not longer.⁵⁸

Thus, the Jews of Berdichev spent fifteen years in their attempt to place a monument at the grave of their loved ones who had perished in the Holocaust. This protracted struggle, in which many Jews from various social strata were involved, must have left deep scars.

Conclusion

Today, as various organizations, municipal authorities, and central governments throughout Europe and the United States are busily involved in commemorating the Holocaust and building monuments to its victims, a place in the historical memory must be found for those thousands of Jews who invested years of indefatigable toil in the commemoration of Holocaust victims

⁵⁶ When Spivak emerged from the party inquest, he advised the people around him, "Don't worry about the dead; save the living." Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Zhitomirskoi *Oblasti*, RG R-4954, List 4s, File 3, p. 40.

⁵⁷ Report of the CARC in Zhitomir *Oblast* for 1958, *ibid.*, pp. 37–40.

⁵⁸ A photograph, taken in 1991, shows the site in untended condition; only one monument bearing a Star of David, lying in the field, is visible. See Garrard, *Bones of Berdichev*, p. 247.

across the USSR. Their profound commitment despite the authorities' opposition must be recognized.

The primary source material presented in this article shows that Soviet Jewry, like Jewish communities in most East European countries, fervently wished to memorialize the victims of the Holocaust. Soviet Jews acted intensively for years, even during Stalin's last days, to make this possible. Although the commemorative effort was conducted by the religious community administration or by people associated with it, it embraced very broad strata in Jewish society. This may be one reason for the authorities' spirited opposition to memorial assemblies and the construction of monuments.

Both the communities and the authorities were keenly aware of the broad significance of the Jews' activities in commemorating the Holocaust. The communities knew that this overstepped their religious domain but created solidarity among all Jews, including the largely non-religious and even the overtly anti-religious. The authorities were also aware of this aspect and believed - correctly - that these actions strengthened the collective Jewish national consciousness. Indeed, many locations where monuments were erected or where common graves of Holocaust victims were maintained became sites of pilgrimage for many Jews and their families.⁵⁹ Thus, the commemorative act was a unifying factor that clashed with the authorities' "atomization" policy regarding the Jews.

In other East European countries, including Communist countries, Holocaust commemoration was not staunchly opposed. Soviet Jews, in contrast, had to make strenuous efforts in order to fund every such action - since no outside assistance was forthcoming. Moreover, they had to maneuver among various Soviet authorities in order to implement, albeit partly and often unsuccessfully, even a few of their plans in this respect. This alone illustrates the vast importance that these Jews attributed to Holocaust commemoration.

Translated from the Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood

⁵⁹ For photographs of these gatherings in the vicinity of Zhitomir and Rovno, in the Ukraine, evidently taken in the early postwar years, as the clothing indicates, see Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence*, p. 184; and idem, "The Soviet Politics," p. 146.

Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, XXX, Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 271-296.