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MINSK JEWS AFTER THE HOLOCAUST IN THE LAST DECADE OF STALIN'S RULE (1944–1953)

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the challenges faced by Jews in the capital of Belarus after the end of the Nazi occupation. On one hand, Jews struggled to adapt to peaceful life in places marked by their personal tragedies during the Holocaust. On the other hand, they suffered antisemitism in the late Stalinist period, facing restrictions from both the state and discrimination from ordinary city residents who believed the Soviet propaganda. Jews sought different survival strategies to become "their own" in society. Some chose to "wear a mask", while others remained committed to their Jewish identity.

KEYWORDS:
Stalinism, antisemitism, daily life, identity, cosmopolitanism, Holocaust

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INTRODUCTION

Jews have long lived in the Belarusian territories, with the first mentions of them dating back to the fourteenth century. Due to the Pale of Settlement that was established in the Russian Empire, many Jews settled in the towns and cities of Belarus. The tragic events of the twentieth century drastically affected their population, and today the Jewish minority constitutes less than 1% of the population. In conversations with Belarusian schoolchildren today, one can often notice that they are unaware of the rich multicultural history of Belarus before the Second World War, and it is unusual for them to hear the Jewish names of world-famous figures who originated from these lands. Minsk, as the capital, is no exception, and its example reflects broader trends. It symbolically illustrates the path to the current situation, showing how Jewish life continued in the last decade of Stalin's rule, and how it was possible to live on after the Holocaust.

According to the first Soviet census of 1926, Jews made up 40.8% of Minsk's population, ranking second after Belarusians (42.4%). By 1939, Belarusians became the majority (54.8%), while the percentage of Jews (30.8%) decreased due to migration to rural areas and industrial regions of the Soviet Union. The percentage of Russians remained almost unchanged during these years (9.8%).[1] However, by the 1959 census Jews accounted for 14% of the population in Minsk (38,800), with these considering Yiddish their native language. Gradually, the culture and literature in this language, along with the schools and scientific institutions where it was used, disappeared.[2] These were the consequences of the Holocaust and the antisemitic policies pursued by the Soviet state, as well as denunciations from "ordinary citizens" who supported the official policy and could significantly complicate the lives of Jews who sought to maintain their identity. Witness Natalya Kabakova recalled:

> After the war, we lived in a communal apartment. My mother was even afraid to speak Yiddish with us because there was this bully of a neighbour I remember. Anna Fyodorovna. A completely illiterate woman, she was a Party member. She worked at the Officers' Club, not even as a cashier but as a ticket collector... And she would say in the kitchen, 'I'm suffocating among the Jews.' You see, no one could argue with her.[3]

1 Thomas Bohn, *'Minski fenomen'. Haradskoe planavanne i ŭrbanizacyja ŭ Saveckim Sajuze paslja 1945 g.* (Minsk: Zmicer Kolas, 2016), p. 90.
2 Èlissa Bemporad, *Prevraščenie v sovetskich evreev: Bol'ševistskij èksperiment v Minske* (Moskva: Političeskaja ènciklopedija, 2016), p. 277.
3 Nataliia Kabakova, 25 April 1996, Brooklyn, USA, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 14665.

Before the Second World War, Belarusians and Jews were part of the same social space. The tragedy of the Shoah significantly changed the national composition of Belarus. According to official data from the Extraordinary State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Committed by the German-Fascist Invaders, more than 2.2 million people in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) were killed during the war, which means almost every fourth resident perished.[4] Among them, Jewish losses were particularly severe: up to 720,000 (72.7%) of the 990,000 Jews[5] who were residents of Belarus at that time (approximately 10% of the BSSR population).[6] More than half of those killed were so-called "Western Jews" from the territories illegally annexed by the Soviet Union in September 1939 according to the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.[7]

In Minsk alone, about 327,000 people were killed, but it is not known how many of them were native residents and how many were voluntary or forced migrants who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.[8] We do not know the exact number of those who survived the Minsk Ghetto,[9] nor do we know how many of them remained in the city where their loved ones were murdered after 1944–1945. How did those Jews from the Belarusian capital who survived the Holocaust feel?

In an attempt to ease the pain of trauma, they could move to other regions of the USSR (for example, to Moscow or Leningrad). Former prisoner of the Minsk Ghetto, Alena Drapkina, recalled:

> Peaceful life was quickly being restored in Minsk, and I had a good job. But it was very difficult for me to walk through the streets of the city where my parents, my little brother (all my relatives) had been killed. My mother's sister, Aunt Manya (even more than a sister: my mother's twin), lived with her family in Leningrad and survived the blockade. I moved to Leningrad and enrolled in dental school.[10]

4 Jaŭhen Novik, Henadz' Marcul', Ihar Kačalaŭ, *Historyja Belarusi ŭ 2 častkach. Č. 2. Ljuty 1917–2004 h.* (Minsk: Vyšèjšaja škola, 2006), p. 280.

5 Including the Białystok region, which was part of the BSSR before the war, the number rises to 894 thousand. *Cholokost v Belarusi: tragedija i pamjat': dokumenty i materialy*, ed. by Vjačeslav Selemenev (Minsk: Kolorgrad, 2022), p. 26.

6 Evgenij Rozenblat and Irina Elenskaja, 'Dinamika čislennosti i rasselenija belorusskich evreev v XX veke', *Diaspory*, 4 (2002), 27–52.

7 Oleg Budnickij, 'Sliškom poljaki dlja Sovetov, sliškom evrei dlja poljakov: pol'skie evrei v SSSR v 1939–1945', *Ab Imperio*, 4 (2015), 213–36 (pp. 213–14).

8 Bohn, *Minski fenomen*, p. 92.

9 According to researchers, up to 80 thousand local Jews were in the ghetto. Leonid Smilovickij, 'Sud'ba Minskogo getto', in *Evrei Belarusi v gody Cholokosta (1941–1944 gg.): Sbornik izbrannych statej* (Tel Aviv: Izdanie Tel Aviva, 5782/2021), p. 212. The number of survivors is mostly estimated by former prisoners, who mention figures of up to 10 thousand people. CityDog, '«Rebenok zaplakal ot goloda – i ego zadušili». Minčane vspominajut pro svoe strašnoe detstvo v getto', *CityDog.io* [n.d.] <https://citydog.io/post/ghetto-deti/> [accessed on 12 June 2024]. But these numbers are not confirmed by precise documentary evidence.

10 Pamjat, 'Alena Drapkina', *Centropa* [n.d.] <https://pamjat.centropa.org/by/bijahrafija/alena-drapkina-blr/> [accessed on 12 June 2024].

At the same time, several thousand Jewish families who had survived the Nazi occupation in nearby towns resettled in Minsk. A certain number of Jews also returned from evacuation.

STRANGERS AMONG THEIR OWN

The city of Minsk, as the capital of the BSSR, was a prestigious city to where people from all over the republic sought to move, and the situation there became indicative of the official attitude toward Jews. The concentration of those who believed Soviet propaganda was higher here than in other parts of Belarus at the time.

Soviet authorities treated Jews in accordance with the antisemitic policies that became particularly evident after the establishment of the independent state of Israel in 1948 and the assassination in Minsk of Solomon Mikhoels, the chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC). Official authorities actively restricted Jews in both public and religious life. It was convenient to officially blame Jews for all misfortunes and failures. Jewish nationalists and saboteurs were "discovered" everywhere. Under the guise of protecting the interests of the Belarusian people, repressions were carried out against doctors, geneticists, and the Party bureaucracy to remove Jews from medicine, trade, and leadership positions. Minsk, as the centre of republican institutions where people from all over Belarus gathered, witnessed the largest 'purges' of Jews.

In the late 1940s, Jews played a noticeable role in the economy, education, scientific research, culture, and arts of the BSSR. As of 1946, Jews made up 6.1% of the managerial staff in the BSSR: 279 people out of 4,569 (with Russians and Belarusians in the majority). By 1949, this number decreased to 240 people out of 4,420 (5.4%).[11] In 1947, among the nomenklatura in the Voroshilov district of Minsk, there were 748 Jews out of 3,438 individuals. In the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, the 429 scientific staff members included only 63 Jews.[12]

Starting in 1947, purges began in ministries and departments, including the Ministry of State Security (MGB), where Jews were removed from many significant positions. Witness Syamyon Shkolnik recalled:

11 *Istorija mogilevskogo evrejstva: Dokumenty i ljudi: nauč.-populjar. očerki i žizneopisanija*, ed. by Aleksandr Litin and Ida Šenderovič (Mahilëŭ: AmelijaPrint, 2011), II, III, p. 23.

12 Leonid Smilovickij, 'Delo vračej', in *Evrei Belorussii: do i posle Cholokosta: Sbornik izbrannych statej* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute, 5781/2020), p. 140.

> I was dismissed in 1953 due to staff reductions. I was left without a job. At that time, there was only one reason: nationality. They dismissed the entire design bureau, which mostly consisted of Jews. My friend Kaplan, the chief engineer, the factory director Pulbyansky, and Yudzelevich were all dismissed due to staff reductions. I was the last one because they needed me until the station went into production.[13]

The MGB of the BSSR, among other things, uncovered and eliminated an "anti-Soviet Jewish nationalist" organization that had allegedly carried out sabotage in the republic's healthcare system. Shneidman, the head of the Main Pharmaceutical Directorate of the BSSR, was declared the leader of this organization. He was accused of creating a network of collaborators who worked in pharmacies across the republic, stealing medications and other scarce items. More than 140 pharmaceutical workers were allegedly involved in the scheme. According to Nikolai Gusarov, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, and Lavrentiy Tsanava, the Minister of State Security of the BSSR, these people met and conducted anti-Soviet agitation, slandering the Communist Party. The accused believed that Jews were being treated negatively both in the Soviet Union as a whole and in the BSSR in particular, and that Soviet leadership was encouraging antisemitism.[14]

The notorious "case of the JAFC" primarily targeted active Jewish figures, particularly intellectuals, leading to a significant number of Jews from various institutions being accused of espionage and anti-Soviet nationalist activities, arrested, sentenced, and even executed. The MGB created other cases that similarly punished a number of Jewish intellectuals. Some of the names of repressed Jews in Belarus included soil scientist Elizary Magoram, historians Moisei Potash and Yefim Shlosberg, and poets Isaac Platner and Moisei Teif.[15] For lesser-known figures, administrative measures were often used (dismissal from work, obstacles in finding employment, expulsion from the Party, denial of admission to higher education institutions, etc.), but only rarely did they face arrest.[16]

13 Semen Shkol'nik, 3 July 1996, Herzlya, Israel, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 18011.

14 Report to Panceljaimon Panamarenka, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (b) of Belarus, and Viktor Abakumov, Minister of State Security of the USSR, from Lavrentiy Tsanava, Minister of State Security of the BSSR, 7.10.1946, National Archive of the Republic of Belarus (hereafter NARB), Minsk, Fund 4, Inventory 29, File 574, p. 49; Report to Panceljaimon Panamarenka, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, from Lavrentiy Tsanava, Minister of State Security of the BSSR, 12.10.1946, NARB, Minsk, Fund 4, Inventory 29, File 574, pp. 64–65.

15 *Vozvraščennye imena: Sotrudniki AN Belarusi, postradavshie v period stalinskich repressij*, ed. by Aleksandr Machnač and Nikolaj Tokarev (Minsk: Nauka i technika, 1992), pp. 70, 89–90, 113–14.

16 Gennadij Kostyrčenko, 'Ideologičeskie čistki vtoroj poloviny 40-ch godov: psevdopatrioty protiv psevdokosmopolitov', in *Sovetskoe obščestvo: vozniknovenie, razvitie, istoričeskij final: in two volumes*, ed. by Jurij Afanas'ev, (Moscow, 1997), II, pp. 125–26.

The main accusation against the intelligentsia was cosmopolitanism. Antisemitism was a central aspect of the fight against cosmopolitanism, although this was not officially mentioned. The term "cosmopolitan" was vague and thus became extremely flexible. Teachers were particularly vulnerable and could be sent to "courts of honour", which were most common in 1947 and were dissolved in 1949. The search for cosmopolitans led to increased scrutiny of Jewish employees in various organizations and departments. These actions were not widely known to the general population, but intellectuals, especially those in the humanities, suffered most from the anti-cosmopolitan campaign.[17]

The use of repressive measures against so-called "untrustworthy" individuals also aimed to brand them as violators of the socialist legal system. For this reason, criminal or formal pretexts were sought to restrict the rights of Jews. For example, under the guise of democratic procedures, a Jewish teacher with extensive professional experience was denied an award during a university's anniversary celebrations. The department head had included her in the list of potential honourees, but the Party and the union arranged the vote in such a way that the decision was negative. Publicly, this was presented as a "resolution of the department".[18]

An example of how Jewish employees were purged in the BSSR was the case of Faddee-Feifel Ioffe, a lecturer in the Department of Theory and Practice of Soviet Journalism at Belarusian State University (BSU) and head of the Propaganda Department at the newspaper *Sovietskaya Belorussia*.[19] He was publicly criticized at Party organization meetings of various levels and was given a severe Party reprimand, in addition to being dismissed from his teaching position at BSU. In response to his appeal to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, it was stated that Ioffe had been justifiably criticized and had been dismissed from his position at BSU for not having an academic degree and for being primarily employed at *Sovietskaya Belorussia*. This reason for his dismissal was questionable as there was a shortage of qualified staff in Belarusian higher education institutions after the war. As of 1947, 1,325 scientific workers were employed by Belarusian universities, of whom over 1,000 had no academic degree, including 131 department heads and even three out of seven professors.[20]

17 Ibid.
18 Valjancina Chejnman, born in 1922, 25 March 2009, Minsk, Belarusian Oral History Archive (hereafter BOHA), 2(2)–67–203.
19 Report from Stepin, Head of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Bolsheviks of Belorussia to the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the VKP (Bolsheviks) on the results of the verification of the claim of Faddee-Feifel Ioffe, Head of the Propaganda Department of the editorial office of the newspaper "Sovetskaya Belorussia", 8.8.49, NARB, Minsk, Fund 4, Inventory 62, File 1, pp. 221–25.
20 Georgij Korzenko, *Nauchnaja intelligencija Belorussii v 1944–1990 gg.* (Minsk: Fico A-SKAD, 1995), p. 34.

The Personnel Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus (CP(b)B) collected information on the composition of students studying and graduating from higher educational institutions, monitoring the number of Jews among them. In June 1947, a report was submitted to Nikolai Gusarov regarding the "abnormal" staffing of the Belarusian Law Institute, the Belarusian Polytechnic Institute, the Minsk State Medical Institute, and the Institute of National Economy of the BSSR. For example, it was reported that the Belarusian Law Institute was poorly staffed with Belarusian national cadres: out of 26 scientific staff members, only 7 (26.9%) were Belarusians, while 17 were Jews (65.9%) and 2 were Russians (7.69%). There were no Belarusian teachers in the Department of Marxism-Leninism. A similar situation was observed among students: out of 467 students, 169 were Belarusians (36.18%), 198 were Jews (42.40%), and 90 were Russians (19.27%). From this, it was concluded that the Belarusian Law Institute was experiencing a decrease in the number of Belarusian national cadres among both the teaching staff and the student body. It was emphasized that the administration did not understand, and did not want to understand, the political importance of training Belarusian national cadres.[21]

At the same time, the Central Committee of the CP(b)B was not concerned that Russians predominated among students in the Belarusian Agricultural Institute (452 out of 813 – 55.6%), the Belarusian Veterinary Institute (204 out of 382 – 53.4%), the Brest Teachers' Institute (88 out of 201 – 43.7%), and the Belarusian Theatre Institute (32 out of 69 – 46.4%).[22]

The fight against cosmopolitans could be used by interested parties to free up positions for other more "reliable" cadres. This was the case, for example, at the Faculty of Philology at Belarusian State University (BSU). A group of Jewish lecturers was opposed by another group with more official support, led by Ivan Gutarov, the head of the Department of Russian Literature and a "partisan" professor. Gradually, the positions held by Jewish lecturers were taken by people considered more "suitable".

Lev Barag, who taught ancient Russian literature and folklore, was one of the affected educators. His folklore theory was publicly criticized

21 Reference about "abnormal" staffing of the Belarusian Law, Polytechnic, Medical Institutes and the Institute of National Economy of the BSSR for the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (b) of Belarus Nikolai Gusarov from the instructor of the propaganda and agitation department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (b) of Belarus M. Karol, 21.6.1947, NARB, Minsk, Fund 4, Inventory 29, File 571, pp. 34–36.

22 Summary table on the composition of students of higher education institutions of the Byelorussian SSR, 20.10.1947, NARB, Minsk, Fund 4, Inventory 29, File 571, p. 168; Summary table on the composition of students graduating from universities of the Belarusian SSR in 1948, 20.10.1947, NARB, Minsk, Fund 4, Inventory 29, File 571, p. 169.

in a lead article in the newspaper *Literature and Art* on 13 March 1948.[23] In the same year, the BSU Academic Council removed Lev Barag from teaching courses and then dismissed him for making "serious political errors" and refusing to correct them. It was claimed that he "himself admitted at the Academic Council that for 15 years he had been promoting bourgeois objectivism and frivolity".[24]

At the same time, in interviews conducted by this article's author, two former students of Barag who graduated in 1953 had a different opinion of him. For them, Barag was "a gifted teacher by the grace of God":[25]

> As a lecturer, he was simply excellent. When he delivered his lecture, it was as if he hypnotized the entire course. His listeners. In appearance, you wouldn't say he was very attractive. Tall, thin, with a big nose and lips. A typical Jew. But as a lecturer, he was exceptional. Everything was in his head. He would pull a small card from his pocket to support his ideas... and quote something... During a two-hour lecture, he would transfer about 10 or 20 of these cards from one pocket to the other [Laughs]... Barag also never sat down; he stood the whole time. He was so emotional that it seemed he might fall over at any moment. And this passion was passed on to the students. They would all sit there with their mouths open, as they say. That was his special power... his influence over the audience.[26]

Despite potential consequences, some people tried to hire Jewish professionals.[27] Exceptions could be made for specialists with highly sought-after skills. An example of this is the story of respondent Natalia P., who was the head of a department at the Minsk Polytechnic Institute:

> And what I could do, I did; I still managed to get Jews hired quietly. For example, I hired Galya Ivkina. There were five Party committee meetings because of this!... Galina Yevseyevna was Jewish... she graduated from BSU, a PhD. I wanted to hire her – but it was not allowed! I couldn't hire Galya Ivkina because of the 'fifth point' [the section in personal forms indicating nationality]. So I said:

23 Report to Nikolai Gusarov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus "About the article by V. Galperin 'about the vestiges of bourgeois nationalism in Belarusian literary studies', published in the 'Literaturnaya gazeta' on 12 May 1948" from Ivan Gutorov, Head of the Literature and Art Department of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, 18.5.48, NARB, Minsk, Fund 4, Inventory 29, File 651, p. 76.
24 Ibid., p. 78.
25 Valjancina A., born in 1930, 28 February 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–54–136, 138.
26 Uladzimir Damaševič, born in 1928, 22 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–62–174–176.
27 Shkol'nik, 3 July 1996, Herzlya, Israel, USC Shoah Foundation, 18011.

> 'Oh, she has such a unique specialty. You know, she is very much needed for [the institute]... We don't have such a [specialist]... and we consult the entire institute, all the special departments. What do you mean?' In general, the Party committee met five times because of this issue. They summoned me, scolded me, reproached me, and everything you can think of, but I stood my ground: 'I want to hire her and that's it.' And so, they hired her. Do you think as a lecturer? No, as a lab assistant! 'If you want her so badly, you can take her as a lab assistant.' But then I could easily assign her any task as a lab assistant, so I asked her to give lectures. And she taught well, and then the students were on our side, you see? So, it was easy to get her into a teaching position later. But there were five meetings! Just to hire a PhD as a lab assistant!"[28]

Attempts to fight against the virtually legalized antisemitism could be punished. Altschuler, the head of the investigative department of the district prosecutor's office in Minsk, closed a case against a woman named A., claiming that it was initiated solely because she was "Jewish by nationality". His actions were later deemed a violation of the Party members' code of conduct.[29]

At the beginning of 1953, the persecution of Jews continued with the notorious "Doctors' Plot", which "exposed" a conspiracy by Kremlin doctors against the Party and state leaders.[30] In Belarus, Jews were also removed from medical practice. Jewish medical professionals frequently experienced antisemitic attacks from some of their patients.[31] Historian Leanid Smilavitsky studied the reaction of workers to the "Doctors' Plot", which reflected the attitudes towards Jews in the Sovietized part of society. People, brainwashed by propaganda, went so far as to claim that the death of Mikhoels was evidence of Jewish guilt, believing that Jews had killed him themselves to hide his exposure as an enemy of the people.[32] Some even accused Jews of being responsible for the Holocaust itself, alleging that they were passive, did not resist the enemy, and were traitors. They argued that after the victory Jews forgot the role of the Soviet state, which had supposedly saved them from total annihilation. In a culmination of

28 Natallja P., born in 1917, 15 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–84–296.
29 Report to the Representative of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks Lopukhov from Lavrentiy Tsanava, Minister of State Security of the BSSR, 14.11.1946, NARB, Minsk, Fund 4, Inventory 29, File 574, p. 33.
30 Elena Zubkova, *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obščestvo: politika i povsednevnost'. 1945–1953* (Moscow: ROSSPÈN, 1999), pp. 206–07.
31 Sarra Leyenson, 20 October 1997, Queens New York, USA, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 35029.
32 Smilovickij, 'Delo vračej', p. 154.

accusations, some people called for the deportation of Jews, and there were even demands for their execution.[33]

Nevertheless, in general, if there were no direct conflicts nor specific ideological pressure, the situation in work collectives was somewhat better.[34] However, individuals with a "Jewish" appearance or Jewish names could still become targets of persecution.

The negative image of Jews that was being created often led others to use them as "scapegoats" for accusations. Such antisemitism was more prevalent among poorly educated urban groups who believed state propaganda, or among individuals interested in harming a specific Jew professionally or in gaining advantages in property disputes. For example, A. Siamenchanka, the chairman of the regional court, was accused of bribery. Later, he claimed in a letter to Mikhail Zimyanin, Secretary of the Central Committee of the CP(b)B, that he had been slandered by Jews who profited from bribes.[35]

PRESERVING IDENTITY

The return to normal life after the war was difficult for Jews, who, under the influence of the Holocaust, did not feel sufficiently protected and accepted as "their own" in society. They had legitimate fears of poor treatment and possible violence against them. Witness Sofia Vaingauz, for example, was afraid to say she was Jewish after the war because she had heard about Jewish families killed by partisans.[36] She thought they might use violence against her, and she was scared. Another witness recalled her return to Minsk:

> We were brought to the city of Minsk, where I was born. And to my great regret, what I heard when we were unloaded at Vakzalnaja Square, and there were a lot of people. And everyone went their own way. And what was the first thing we heard? 'Look, look,' someone said, 'they were killing them, but didn't kill them all...' It was so frightening, so painful. We thought we were returning home to our place. But, unfortunately, that didn't happen. And it didn't happen later either.[37]

33 Ibid., pp. 160–61, 163–64.
34 Mariia Gil'movskaia, 24 January 1997, Brooklyn, USA, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 25311; Chejnman, 25 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–67–203.
35 Letter from A. Sjamenchanka, chairman of the regional court, to Mikhail Zimjanin, secretary of the CP(b)B Central Committee, 30.12.47, NARB, Minsk, Fund 4, Inventory 29, File 686, p. 14.
36 Sofia Vaingauz, 12 January 1998, Brooklyn, USA, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 38099.
37 Raisa Shkol'nik, 3 July 1996, Herzliya, Israel, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 18012.

Efforts to reclaim Jewish property that had been taken during the war also strained relations between Jews and local non-Jews, who, in the difficult post-war poverty, might not have wanted to acknowledge this appropriation and displayed individual antisemitism.[38] Attempts to reclaim housing occupied by others were especially contentious. A number of Jewish apartments and houses were occupied by officials of republican and regional organizations. Not everyone was willing to let Jews return to their previous apartments. People who fought for objective consideration of their cases could become victims of repression.

David-Khaim Kisel, a prosecutor of the Voroshilov district of Minsk, was expelled from the Party and arrested in April 1949 for exceeding his official powers in returning housing to demobilized soldiers and their families. Despite the intervention of the prosecutor of the BSSR and his heroic wartime activities, he was forced to sign statements that, due to his nationalist views, he had illegally evicted many Soviet citizens, including families of servicemen, from apartments and settled Jews in these apartments using fictitious documents and false witnesses.[39] Kisel was sentenced to ten years in prison; in 1955, he was rehabilitated on the political charges but was left with a conviction for abuse of power.[40]

For Jews who survived the Holocaust in Belarus, life was difficult because they were automatically classified as those who had remained under occupation, which was suspicious to the authorities. After the war, collaboration with the Germans was the most common accusation, and investigative bodies targeted those who survived the ghetto, especially if they had not managed to join the partisan detachments.[41] A notable case involved Polish Jews, employees of a radio factory moved to Minsk from Vilnius before the war. Since they were not evacuated, they ended up in the Minsk Ghetto. Only a few miraculously survived, but then they were persecuted by security agencies as "traitors" and sent to the Gulag.[42]

Survivors of the ghetto who stayed in the BSSR and later contributed their testimonies to the Shoah Foundation Archive in California recalled the distrust they faced from the repressive authorities. Those who had endured the trials of the Holocaust had to justify their survival.[43] For instance, Galina Kulchaeva recalled: "In the 1950s, I was summoned to

38 Franziska Exeler, *Ghosts of War. Nazi Occupation and Its Aftermath in Soviet Belarus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), pp. 194–195, 199.
39 Report to Panceljaimon Panamarenka, 7.10.1946, NARB, Minsk, Fund 4, Inventory 29, File 574, p. 57.
40 Leonid Smilovickij, 'Bor'ba evreev Belorussii za vozvrat svoego imuščestva i žilišč v pervoe poslevoennoe desjatiletie. 1944–1954 gg.', *Belarus' u XX staboddzi*, 1 (2002), 161–82 (p. 176).
41 Exeler, *Ghosts of War*, p. 171.
42 Veniamin Pumpjanskij, '«Evrejskaja» istorija odnogo belorusskogo zavoda: Vospominanija Veniamina Natanoviča Pumpjanskogo', *Tsaytshrift, Časopis dlja dasledavannja jaŭrèjskaj historyi, dèmagrafii i èkanomiki, litaratury, movy i ètnagrafii*, 7.2 (2012), 128–44.
43 Mariya Zamostina, 9 February 1996, Brooklyn, USA, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 11915.

the KGB...They asked: 'Tell us, how did you manage to stay alive?' I replied: 'Is it bad that I survived? Is that a bad thing?' 'No, just tell us'".[44] In addition to the threat of criminal prosecution, former prisoners faced problems obtaining passports, housing, work, and other necessities. The situation became even more complicated when there was no one to verify a person's identity. Such people were often suspected of treason.

Another nuance that drew more attention from the authorities was being in Nazi camps outside the Soviet Union. This may have been due to officials' concerns about the "influence of Western intelligence services" and the potentially unfavourable comparisons with life in Western countries for those who were uninformed.[45] Proving one's innocence was incredibly difficult for a Jew who had survived a German concentration camp. Knowing the Nazis' attitude towards Jews, the Soviet authorities doubly suspected them. Anna Gurevich recalled the story of her mother:

> She fled on foot like all the refugees. She came to Minsk. Of course, she had to cross the border. They questioned her. The KGB [then the NKGB] asked everything at the border, who she was. And here [in Minsk], they didn't believe her either. My mother needed to work. She needed documents – a passport. And they didn't believe her – they called her a spy again. How many times could she be accused of being a spy? 'Jews cannot survive in a concentration camp in Germany, no way, no way at all.' And my mother did not work for a long time.[46]

It is therefore not surprising that survivors might conceal their time in camps and ghettos or their work in the resistance, especially during this last decade of Stalin's rule, which they considered the most dangerous period in terms of the threat of repressions; the level of fear of suffering from them was extremely high.[47] Not only could former ghetto prisoners be suspected of "betrayal", but also their rescuers.

In the early postwar years, there were illusions that the authorities would not interfere with the restoration of Jewish life, but this proved to be untrue. Although there were initially positive developments – a synagogue reopened in Minsk, books by Hirsch Smolyar about the Minsk Ghetto were

44 Galina Kul'chaeva, 7 January 1998, Nalchik, Russia, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 38625.
45 Wladimir S., Interview aus dem Archiv Zwangsarbeit 1939–1945, Belarus – RWTH Aachen, za009, Transkript.
46 Anna Gurevich, 10 September 1997, Minsk, Belarus, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 41691.
47 Gil'movskaia, 24 January 1997, Brooklyn, USA, USC Shoah Foundation, 25311; Kul'chaeva, 7 January 1998, Nalchik, Russia, USC Shoah Foundation, 38625.

published in Yiddish and Russian,[48] and in August 1946, at the initiative of Jewish believers, a Black Obelisk was erected at Yama to commemorate the victims of the 2–3 March 1942,[49] pogrom in the Minsk Ghetto – a request to the first secretary of the Central Committee of the CP(b)B, Pancelajmon Panamarenka, by Jewish cultural figures to reopen Jewish schools in the BSSR was rejected as "Zionist propaganda".[50]

After the war, some of the Jewish population experienced a religious revival. Believers began petitioning for the creation of religious associations and the reopening of synagogues. Before the war, most of the synagogues had been converted into cultural and educational institutions, and the few remaining ones were destroyed and burned during the German occupation.[51] Stalin's antisemitic policies did not allow the broad registration of Jewish communities or the opening of synagogues. The authorities explained their refusals to open synagogues by claiming that most of the Jews' requests were motivated by the desire to promote nationalist views. From 1944 to 1953, only two synagogues operated continuously under the threat of closure in the BSSR: one in Minsk and one in the district centre of Kalinkavichy in the Palesse region.[52] Other synagogues, like the one in Babruisk, if officially functioning, did so only briefly.

The Jewish community in Minsk was registered in June 1946 and was granted part of the building of the Cold Synagogue on Niamiha Street. It was headed by Rabbi Yaakov-Yosef Berger, a native of Kaunas, until 1956. In 1964, the synagogue was closed, and the building was demolished to make way for a new house.[53]

Most Jews in Minsk had distanced themselves from religion and identified as Soviet citizens, often marrying non-Jews.[54] However, there were those who secretly preserved their traditions. The observance of rituals depended on the family and how willing they were to endure hardships for the sake of their Jewishness. For safety reasons, children were often not raised in religious traditions and were not taught Yiddish. Witness Natalya Kabakova recalled:

48 Hersh Smolar, אטעג רעקסנימ נופ (*Fun Minsker geto*) (Moskve: Melukhe-farlag "Der Emes", 1946); Hersh Smolar, *Mstiteli getto* (Moscow: OGIZ – Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo «Der Èmes», 1947).
49 Uladzimir Navicki, 'Partyjna-dzjaržaŭnaja palityka da rèligii ŭ pasljavaenny čas', in *Kanfesii na Belarusi (k. XVIII–XX st.)*, ed. by Navicki Uladzimir (Minsk, 1998), pp. 260–61.
50 Bemporad, *Prevraščenie v sovetskich*, p. 277.
51 Aljaksandra Veraščagina and Aljaksandr Gurko, *Historyja kanfesij na Belarusi ŭ druhoj palove XX st.* (Minsk: ISPD, 1999), p. 30.
52 More than 10 synagogues and houses of worship before the war. Bemporad, *Prevraščenie v sovetskich*, pp. 274–75.
53 Navicki, 'Partyjna-dzjaržaŭnaja palityka, pp. 234–63, 260.
54 Bemporad, *Prevraščenie v sovetskich*, p. 273.

> Of course, I understand a little Yiddish because it's somewhat similar to German. I studied German in school. I only remember that... when my mother and aunt wanted us not to understand, they would speak Yiddish to each other.[55]

In everyday life, religiosity in the context of living in the Soviet state was a form of preserving identity and, at the same time, an additional factor of potential persecution for Jews. Therefore, adherence to rituals was kept secret to minimize risks, and informal information exchange was very important. Celebrating major religious holidays at home was the most common way to maintain religious observance, as opposed to community involvement or attending synagogue. It was especially the older generation that adhered to the traditions. For Passover, matzah was made secretly, and Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and other holidays were celebrated. For those who kept the traditions, it was important to find a ritual slaughterer and ensure kosher compliance.[56] One witness recalled how traditions were maintained:

> We didn't observe any holidays. Although I remember that when it was Passover, matzah would somehow appear at home. I remember it well. And I remember vividly from my childhood memory that, for a long time, someone would periodically visit us [possibly an active member of the Jewish community?]. And I think it was on Jewish New Year, when a memorial prayer – Yizkor or Kaddish [author's note – Yizkor is a memorial prayer recited four times a year in the synagogue; Kaddish is a prayer about the aspiration for ultimate redemption and salvation] – was being recited. My mother would pay him to say it for someone; I don't know for whom. He would visit for a long, long time, and then he disappeared. I think he passed away. Later, when it became more relaxed, we still had matzah at home.[57]

In this case, it was fortunate that certain practices in the family were preserved until the end of the Soviet Union, allowing for their revival later.[58] Overall, with the passing of the older generation, the transmission

55 Kabakova, 25 April 1996, Brooklyn, USA, USC Shoah Foundation, 14665.
56 CityDog, 'Minskie diaspory: evrei (Minsk diasporas: Jews)', *CityDog.io*, [n.d.] <https://citydog.by/long/diaspory-jews/> [accessed on 12 June 2024].
57 Kabakova, 25 April 1996, Brooklyn, USA, USC Shoah Foundation, 14665.
58 Grigori Ch., Interview aus dem Archiv Zwangsarbeit 1939–1945, Belarus – IBB Minsk, za034, Transkript; Sarra Kossperskaia, 27 September 1997, Osipovichi, Belarus, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 44150.

of information on the topic of religion often ceased, and the younger generation knew nothing about Judaism.

For many Jews, the pressure to renounce their identity after the war became an additional severe trauma. The so-called "fifth column" (mandatory indication of nationality in a personal form) closed off certain professional and educational opportunities.[59] Jews were considered people of questionable loyalty and potential enemies of the state. To avoid conflicts with higher management, those responsible for staffing often did not hire Jews even if they were the most qualified candidates.[60] They were not told they didn't get the job because they were Jewish, but the refusal was explained with "any [legal] reason" without clear criteria.[61]

Jews were acutely aware of the discrimination they faced due to their nationality and employed various means to overcome this negative practice and, if possible, to help other Jews.[62] When they could, they tried to support others in gaining admission to educational institutions or obtaining employment where they had influence.[63] To keep their positions, Jewish professionals tried to be the best and indispensable.[64] Others sought to avoid discrimination by changing their names, for example, to their spouse's surname. Some continued to use names they had adopted during the war to avoid being identified as Jews by the German occupation authorities.[65] For instance, witness Yanina S. recalled:

> There was a girl in my school, a class younger than me; her name was Rachel Rozberg. She was saved, rescued by Russians here. And after the war, we met, and she started hugging me... There were many people around, and she hugged me and whispered in my ear: 'My name is Nina, they call me Nina now'... I said, 'I know, I know.' So I wouldn't say that she was Rachel Rozberg.[66]

After the war, such behaviour could have negative consequences because there were people who tried to expose Jews who hid their true identity.[67] This period was also difficult for Jewish children of school age,

59 Chejnman, 25 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–67–203.
60 Natallja P., 15 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–84–296.
61 Chejnman, 25 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–67–203.
62 Mariia Berlina, 10 August 1997, St Petersburg, Russia, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 35003; Efim Ioffe, 13 November 1995, Kiriat Motzkin, Israel, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 5749.
63 Mariia Aizenshtat, 11 January 1998, Qiryat Gat, Israel, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 39742; Gil'movskaia, 24 January 1997, Brooklyn, USA, USC Shoah Foundation, 25311.
64 Chejnman, 25 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–67–203.
65 Sofiia Chernina, 2 May 1997, Yekaterinburg, USA, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 30952; Aleksandr Shmyrkin, 29 December 1997, Kiryat Gat, Israel, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 39401.
66 Janina S., born in 1922, 24 February 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–92–336–339.
67 Lilija Č., born in 1927, 16 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–59–155–157.

who might encounter harsh antisemitic stereotypes and insults repeated by their classmates.[68]

Here is how one witness, Safija Chernina, explained why her close relatives registered as Belarusians:

> First of all, the Germans were very hard on us. To survive after such a horrible life... Second, there was a terrible stigma after the war. [Speaks quietly] People didn't like Jews. That 'nationality' column [in the personal form] was a problem. And I have to say, now that I'm older, I look more Jewish – my nose has grown longer. But when I was younger, no one took me for a Jew. People even shared things with me, saying, 'That's not our brother. That's a Jew.' Third, we had nothing left of Jewish culture. No language, no literature. Because Israel as such didn't exist... There was a bloody war there, which we learned about from newspapers. So, there was no way to learn or find anything, no matter how much we wanted to.[69]

On the other hand, those who wanted to reclaim their original names might face a lack of understanding from officials. Witness Raisa Doel recalled:

> When I went to get my passport, I made a birth certificate... They asked me my nationality. I said, 'I am Jewish.' And they replied: 'You mean you're not Russian?' They would have written me down as Russian... I should have said I was Russian. Then at least my children could have written that down on their job applications. Later, I realized that this antisemitism [was present], despite everything I had been through. I thought that when the Soviet authorities came, things would be different. But it was even worse.[70]

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties in asserting their rights, some Jews protested against the atmosphere of antisemitism created by the state and refused to hide their Jewish identity, even confronting others over their antisemitic statements.[71] Therefore, our respondent Valancina Heynman, who could have changed her clearly Jewish maiden name to her Slavic husband's surname to have fewer daily problems, consciously chose not

68 Roman Kaplan, 5 September 1998, Minsk, Belarus, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 49254.
69 Chernina, 2 May 1997, Yekaterinburg, USA, USC Shoah Foundation, 30952.
70 Raisa Deuel', 22 July Brooklyn, USA, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 31184.
71 Fania Aksel'rod, 11 April 1997, Des Plaines, USA, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 28207; Aleksandra Utevskaia, 5 July 1997, Osipovichi, Belarus, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 34546.

to do so: "As for me personally, I could have easily changed my last name. But I didn't want to. I said: 'Why should I? Let them know right away who they're dealing with [laughs]'".[72]

Another witness, Barys Yalavitzar, recalled: "The Russians made me a nationalist. Not the government, but the people. You get on a tram, and they say: 'Jew, give up your seat, a person needs to sit down'".[73] Thus, antisemitism could become a significant factor in preserving Jewish identity, even in the absence of Jewish cultural and religious organizations.[74]

CONCLUSION

In the first post-war decade, Jews in Minsk who had survived the Holocaust were freed from the immediate threat of death but did not automatically become an integrated part of society. There were illusions that the Soviet authorities would not hinder the restoration of Jewish life and contacts with relatives outside the Soviet Union, but this proved to be untrue and led to disappointment among Jews.[75] The Soviet authorities implemented an antisemitic policy against those who remained: essentially anti-Zionist, provoked by the emergence of the independent Jewish state of Israel on the international stage.[76] Jews were restricted in both public and religious life.

People with "Jewish" appearances or names often became targets of persecution. The propaganda-led negative image of Jews as enemies often led to them being blamed for all misfortunes. Many Jews were dismissed, or they were demoted if they held high or medium positions, particularly in the medical field. Everyday antisemitism was more common among the less-educated residents of the capital who believed in state propaganda, or among people interested in harming a specific Jew professionally or in gaining an advantage in property disputes, such as in reclaiming housing occupied by others before the war. In general, if there were no direct conflicts and propaganda played a lesser role, the situation in work collectives was more tolerant towards Jews. The changing composition of the city's population, with many people arriving from other areas – often more loyal supporters of the Soviet system – also influenced the situation. These individuals were often more susceptible to believing Soviet antisemitic propaganda.

72 Chejnman, 25 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–67–203.
73 Boris Yalovitser, 26 August 1996, Brooklyn, USA, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 18963.
74 Bemporad, *Prevraščenie v sovetskich*, p. 278.
75 Litin and Šenderovič, *Istorija mogilevskogo evrejstva*, p. 20.
76 Kostyrčenko, *Tajnaja politika Stalina*, p. 693.

Nevertheless, oral history evidence shows that witnesses of the time generally did not recall local residents as particularly antisemitic. Even Jews believed that if antisemitism existed, it was felt much less at work, among friends, and in the family. Those who lived in Minsk during the war empathized with the loss of Jewish life and emphasized how it changed the city. They also recalled Jewish friends, mutual willingness to help each other, and noted that Jews, like any other group of people, varied from person to person. Respondents shared both positive and negative Jewish stereotypes.[77]

Knowing about discrimination due to their "nationality", Jews used various means to overcome it and, if possible, helped other Jews to enter educational institutions or find a job. Jewish specialists tried to be better and indispensable. Some changed their names to non-Jewish ones, took their spouse's surname, or continued to use names adopted for survival during the war. People often consciously avoided maintaining relationships with relatives in Israel due to the fear of persecution, which was a real threat.[78] Traumatized by the repressions of the 1930s, the Holocaust during the war, and trying to avoid the negative consequences of the post-war official antisemitic policies on their lives, many chose to "live behind the mask of another identity". This was only overcome in the early 1990s, and mass emigration from their homeland became a form of protest against feeling like outsiders in society.

The Jewish community in Minsk is currently the largest in Belarus (about 5,000 people). The city has two synagogues and a general Jewish organization, the "Union of Belarusian Jewish Public Associations and Communities". Unfortunately, the trend of decreasing numbers in the Jewish minority in Belarus continues. Following the events of 2020 and the start of Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine in 2022, the flow of repatriation to Israel from Belarus has increased.

77 Valjancina V., born in 1927, 23, 27 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–97–358-359; Klara S., born in 1924, 17 June 2008, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–90–323; Chejnman, 25 March 2009, Minsk, BOHA, 2(2)–67–203; Feigina Raisa, 19 February 1996, Toronto, Kanada, videotaped interview by the USC Shoah Foundation, 12207.

78 Shkol'nik, 3 July 1996, Herzlya, Israel, USC Shoah Foundation, 18011.

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