

## **On the Margins**



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**Essays on the History of Jews  
in Estonia**

**Anton Weiss-Wendt**



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*To Eugenia Gurin-Loov (1922–2001) and  
Boris Lipkin (b. 1932)*



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# Preface

*by Antony Polonsky*

Ralph Waldo Emerson has written that “all history is autobiography.” The observation is borne out by this moving and innovative volume, which is both an account of the history of the Jews of Estonia and of how the author came to take up this subject. Its title, *On the Margins*, could apply to both the author and his topic. Anton Weiss-Wendt was born in the town of Narva in the extreme east of Estonia, in which during the interwar period about one-third of the population was Russian-speaking (today, as a result of Soviet rule, the percentage has risen to over 90 percent). His paternal grandfather, Helmut Weiss, was a young Jewish communist from Dresden, whose tragic life is painstakingly reconstructed in chapter 4 of this book. Helmut’s father, an accountant, was born in Chervonohrad (until 1953 called Krystynopol in Polish and Kristinopol in Ukrainian), a small town situated about 65 kilometers northeast of Lviv (Lwów) in today’s Ukraine. His mother came from Leipzig. Helmut’s father died a natural death in 1939 while his mother vanished without trace and was probably murdered by Nazis in occupied Poland. Helmut, their only son, immigrated to the Soviet Union in December 1934, where he hoped to work as a journalist. In spite of his commitment to the communist cause, he soon, like most foreign communists, aroused the suspicion of the NKVD. During the period of Great Terror he was arrested and sentenced to 10 years of corrective labor on cooked-up charges of espionage and terrorism. His wife, another communist émigré, Erna Brandt, attempted unsuccessfully to intervene on his behalf and may have been arrested herself. Weiss never heard from her again.

The following ten years Weiss spent in Dolinka, Kazakhstan, where he met his second wife, Elisabeth Luigas, who came from a mixed Estonian-Russian family. She wound up in the Gulag after being arrested in July 1941 because of her membership in the Russian Christian Youth Association (a youth movement sponsored by Russian émigrés in France). In No-

vember 1948 their son, Yuri, was born and spent his early childhood in the Gulag. After Helmut's release in 1957 the couple settled in Narva. His wife died in September 1999 and he followed her a year later. Helmut had renounced his Communist Party membership in early 1991 although he continued to believe in the communist ideal.

Anton's mother's family was Estonian. Between 1918 and 1944 they had run a farm located in the area where in the latter part of the war the Nazis had established forced labor camps for Jews from Lithuania. Both her uncles served in the Estonian auxiliary police, *Omakaitse* (Self-Defense), during the Nazi occupation and one had been in charge of food supplies to the Jewish camp at Viivikonna. On several occasions he had abused his position by bringing a handful of Jews from the camp to help on the farm. After the war he was sentenced to five years of forced labor, primarily on account of hunting down and killing Soviet parachutists.

Given his complex background, encapsulating many aspects of the tragic history of Eastern Europe in the twentieth century, it is not surprising that Anton should have been drawn to investigate the past of his country and of its Jewish minority. In the early 1990s, shortly after Estonia regained its independence, he became involved in a project to map the ruined cemeteries around his native Narva; this is how he came across a Jewish cemetery. When asking his grandparents what they knew of the Jewish past of the town, he made a startling discovery that his own grandfather was Jewish. Reading, at random, such books as Susan Zuccotti's *The Italians and the Holocaust*, he was inspired to study history at the University of Tartu where he became fascinated with the history of the Jews. Through the Fulbright Commission in Estonia he became involved with the Office of Special Investigation of the United States Department of Justice, which has been investigating allegations of war crimes against individuals who had immigrated to the United States from Europe after the Second World War. After a period at New York University, he came to Brandeis, where he completed a doctorate under my direction on local collaboration in the Holocaust in Estonia. His dissertation was published in 2009 by Syracuse University Press as *Murder Without Hatred: Estonians and the Holocaust* and has since then established itself as the definitive work on the subject.

In this collection of essays, he expands on some of the issues elaborated in *Murder Without Hatred* in an attempt to place the fate of the Jews in Estonia during the Second World War in the larger context of Jewish history. Although these topics may seem to be "on the margins," they graphically illustrate some of the key processes in Jewish history in the

brutal and violent twentieth century. The first chapter examines the development of Jewish life in Estonia from the second half of the nineteenth century to 1917, through the prism of Jewish settlement in Narva. The Estonian Jewish community was one of the smallest and most recent in Europe. Like that in neighboring Finland, it emerged only in the nineteenth century and was made up of former soldiers and those groups who were allowed by the reforms of Alexander II to reside outside the Pale of Settlement. Small traders and artisans made up the bulk of the Jewish community in Estonia which on the eve of the First World War numbered 5,500.

Jewish life in Estonia was adversely affected by the Russian Civil War and a number of Jews left the country. More than half of the 4,434 Jews in Estonia (0.4 percent of the total population) lived in the capital, Tallinn. Antisemitism seems to have been a marginal phenomenon in interwar Estonia, despite the coup of March 1934 that brought to power the semi-authoritarian government of acting President Konstantin Päts and General Johan Laidoner and the closer relations with Nazi Germany from the mid-1930s. Although Estonia signed a declaration guaranteeing minority rights only in September 1923—under strong pressure from the League of Nations—the extensive cultural autonomy granted to the Jewish community in February 1925 lasted until the Soviet occupation in the summer of 1940. This autonomous system is discussed in chapter 2, where Weiss-Wendt convincingly demonstrates that Jews were the residual legatees of the desire of the Estonian government to appease the Baltic German population. Nevertheless, the international Jewish community appreciated what it saw as the benevolence of the Estonian government. In 1927 the Jewish National Fund in Palestine presented the Estonian government with a certificate of appreciation intended to show gratitude “for the first historical deed in the history of Israel through the gift of national and cultural autonomy to the Jewish minority in Estonia.” The Jews were a marginal factor in Estonian economic life, mainly contributing as small businessmen and artisans. German and Russian cultural influence remained dominant in the community, even though Estonian acculturation was beginning to take place, particularly after 1934. Essentially, this was a small and relatively adynamic community whose relations with the majority population Weiss-Wendt describes as “friendly, yet largely superficial.”

Chapters 3, 5, 6, and 7 discuss different aspects of the tragic fate of the Jews in Estonia during the Second World War. Chapter 3 analyzes the vexed topic of the Jews under Soviet occupation in 1940–41. In all those areas that were assigned to the Soviet Union by the Molotov-Ribbentrop

Pact of August 1939 and which were subsequently occupied by Nazi Germany, the occupation authorities used the trope of “Judeobolshevism” to argue that the Soviet regime was essentially controlled by a world Jewish conspiracy. This type of propaganda fell on fertile soil and was responsible for the wave of anti-Jewish violence from Latvia in the north to Bessarabia in the south. Although spontaneous anti-Jewish pogroms did not occur in Estonia, the argument that the Jews had extensively collaborated with the Soviets was used to justify the judicial murder of those Jews still in the country. Making use of NKVD investigation files, Weiss-Wendt shows that Jews were not a prominent element in the Soviet apparatus established from June 1940 onward and suffered disproportionately under Soviet rule. Thus he concludes that “[g]enerally, the proportion of Estonian Jews in the Soviet apparatus fluctuated between 1 and 4 percent, regardless of which statistics one takes as a basis.” Among the 10,157 victims of the Soviet deportation of June 14, 1940, there were 439 Jews, who constituted 10 percent of the total Jewish population of Estonia.

There are some paradoxical features to the implementation of the Nazi “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” in Estonia. Nearly 3,000 Jews (two-thirds of the Jewish population), were able to flee the country before the Nazi occupation in July-August 1941 along with 62,000 other citizens of Estonia. Thus, fewer than 1,000 Jews remained in Estonia. Some had waited too long to flee and were thus trapped by the rapid German advance. Others, partly because they remembered the German occupation at the end of the First World War positively, and partly because the Soviets had downplayed Nazi persecution of the Jews, felt that their lives would be tolerable under Nazi rule. Still others were married to non-Jews or were well integrated into Estonian society. Knowledge of the difficult conditions in the Soviet Union also fed the desire to remain. The remaining Jews were subsequently identified, arrested, and executed by the Estonians on German orders, enabling the Nazi occupation authorities to proclaim Estonia the first country in Europe “free of Jews.” Given the small number of Jews in occupied Estonia, the German Security Police encouraged the Estonian authorities, who were eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the Third Reich in the hope of obtaining a political status similar to that of Slovakia, to undertake judicial procedures against them. In what were essentially kangaroo courts, nearly a thousand former citizens of Estonia were put on trial individually for collaboration with the Soviet regime and disloyalty to Estonia by special “Punishment Planning Commissions” set up by the Estonian Security Police. Roughly half of the interrogation and trial records have been preserved; examined in detail in chapter 5, they



provide a fascinating insight into the murder of the 963 Estonian Jews. These quasi-legal procedures were for the most part accepted by the local population, a fair number of whom gave testimony in these investigations. In a relatively small number of cases, the prosecutions were the result of denunciations. An unexpectedly large number gave testimonies favorable to Jews or submitted petitions in an attempt to defend their Jewish acquaintances, and sometimes spouses. This is how the process of destruction evolved in the capital city. The way this process was carried out in provincial centers such as Pechory, Paide, Kuressaare, Pärnu, Narva, and Tartu is reconstructed in detail in chapter 6.

Chapter 7 examines another paradoxical feature of the Holocaust in Estonia, the establishment by the Germans in late 1943 of a network of nearly twenty forced labor camps for Jews. By then, Heinrich Himmler seems to have relaxed his obsessive campaign to rid continental Europe of Jews due to the acute shortage of manpower faced by the Third Reich. Deported to Estonia from the liquidated Kovno and Vilna ghettos, some of the Jews held in Estonian labor camps were used to build defense lines, but most worked in the Estonian shale oil industry, which became increasingly important for the Nazi war effort in the last stages of the war. Conditions in these camps were so brutal that nearly 55 percent of the more than 9,000 Jews sent to Estonia perished.

How those responsible for these crimes were punished in the Soviet period is analyzed in chapter 8. Two major war crimes trials took place in Estonia in March 1961 and January 1962, the result of both the Soviet desire to emulate the Israeli trial of Adolf Eichmann and the enactment of the Principles of Criminal Legislation, which made it possible for individuals accused of high treason to be tried by regular courts. Weiss-Wendt argues that the Soviet investigation of war crimes was part of Cold War politics, but also reflected a genuine desire to punish collaborators derived from the major role of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazism. The Cold War aspect of these trials was clearly evident in the fact that of the seven defendants who stood trial in Tallinn and Tartu in 1961 and 1962 only three were physically present in Estonia. Soviet propaganda made a case that leading figures who had collaborated with the Nazis in Estonia had been given shelter in the West. An important issue examined in this chapter is the cooperation between the American and Soviet legal authorities. Weiss-Wendt shows how effective cooperation was established in January 1980 between Allan Ryan and Walter Rockler of the U.S. Justice Department and the Soviet Prosecutor General Roman Rudenko, in spite of the deteriorating relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

A final chapter examines contemporary attitudes to the role of Estonian society in the persecution and murder of the country's Jews. Weiss-Wendt attempts to explain why there has not yet been a profound discussion, in spite of the establishment in 1998 of an International Estonian Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity. In the absence of public opinion polls on the topic, he investigates the responses of newspaper readers to Holocaust-related articles on the Internet. These responses reveal "high levels of antisemitism among those who choose to express their views on the Holocaust in general and Estonia's share in the Nazi genocide of the Jews in particular." As he convincingly demonstrates, while in Western Europe and North America the Holocaust is seen as carrying a universalistic message, in Estonia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe it is ultimately linked to attitudes toward Jews and antisemitism. Most Estonians thus respond to calls to confront the Holocaust as something imposed on them by Americans and West Europeans with no direct connection to their country. It is to be hoped that this calm, dispassionate, and yet perturbing book will help rectify this situation.

## **Studying Estonian Jewish History: A Professional and Personal Journey**

The history of Jews in Estonia, as usually told, is a feel-good story. Jews have traditionally been well integrated into Estonian society. Unlike other East European countries, interwar Estonia had low levels of antisemitism, which even the far right felt shy to exploit. Consequently, in 1926 the government granted the Jewish minority extensive cultural autonomy. Lasting until the Soviet takeover in 1940, Jewish cultural autonomy was unprecedented in the European context. Two-thirds of the Jews managed to get out of Estonia prior to Nazi occupation and thus survived, and most of them returned after the end of the Second World War. Compared with other parts of the Soviet Union, antisemitism rarely came to the surface in Estonia in the postwar decades. Ethnic tolerance and the more liberal intellectual environment brought to Estonia scores of Jews from Russia, among them Yuri Lotman. A Tartu University professor, Lotman effectively created a school of semiotics, which posthumously earned him the title of the man of the twentieth century in Tartu. Due to internal migration, the size of the Jewish population in Soviet Estonia exceeded that in independent Estonia—perhaps the only such example in post-Holocaust Europe. The Jewish community was among the first ethnic minorities in Estonia to officially reconstitute in the waning days of the USSR. The process of integration was equally successful after Estonia regained its independence in 1991. The newest synagogue in the Baltic states is in Tallinn, erected in 2007. Among other facilities, the synagogue features an excellent, if small, museum of Jewish history in Estonia.

This is of course all true. Yet the bright picture painted above represents just one side of the story; the other side, predictably, is much less glorious. Jews had historically constituted a marginal group in Estonia within its current borders. This was mainly due to the fact that present-day Estonia—administratively split between three different provinces—lay outside of the

so-called Pale of Jewish Settlement and was thus effectively off limits to Jews during the tsarist era. Jewish cultural autonomy was more of an afterthought than a consistent policy of the Estonian government. Proportionate to their share in the general population, more Jews than Estonians fell victim to the Soviet deportation of June 1941. About one thousand Jews who decided to stay in Estonia were identified, arrested, and executed by the Estonians on German orders. Those Estonians who had partaken in mass murder were motivated by rational choice rather than by racial anti-semitism. There were essentially no survivors among the Estonian Jews, which made the Nazis proclaim Estonia the first country in Europe “free of Jews”—a dubious honor it shared with Serbia. The death rate among Estonian Jews was therefore the highest anywhere. Although undoubtedly enjoying more freedoms than in the rest of the Soviet Union, Jews in postwar Estonia became a target of anti-Zionist ideology all the same. Due to emigration, numbers of Jews in independent Estonia fell below two thousand, the lowest it ever been since the mid-nineteenth century. The Estonian Jewish Museum is essentially a one-man project by an Israeli citizen who left Estonia for good nearly forty-five years ago.

What appear to be two parallel stories should ideally be merged into one; what we are missing is a comprehensive history of the Jews in Estonia. Hence the present book, which seeks to signpost crucial elements in the evolution of the Estonian Jewish community. Paraphrasing the question that Melvyn P. Leffler attempted to answer in his 1999 review essay on the origins of the Cold War, I ask what we now know about the Jews in Estonia, what we do not yet know, and what we ought to know.<sup>1</sup> Mine is not complete history, but a detailed analysis that may help someone to write one in the future.

Estonian Jews take pride in their contribution to culture and science, and for good reason. Rather typical for the postwar period, however, none of the most recognizable cultural and academic figures in Estonia—literary scholar Yuri Lotman (1922–1993), actor Eino Baskin (1929–2015), and conductor Eri Klas (b. 1939)—advertised their ethnic identity. Baskin and Klas “came out” as Jews only after the process of liberalization in the Soviet Union kicked in during the late 1980s. Klas embraced his Jewishness more emotionally than Baskin.<sup>2</sup> The former was among the guests attending

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<sup>1</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, “The Cold War: What Do ‘We Now Know’?” *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (April 1999): 501–24.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Eino Baskin, *Raudeesriide taga* [Behind the Iron Curtain] (Pärnu: Perona, 1993); Eri Klas, *Kes ma olen?* [Who am I?] (Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, 1999); Yuri

the opening of the Estonian Jewish Museum in December 2008. The danger here is to paint individuals like Baskin or Lotman as being more Jewish than they were willing to admit. After all is said and done, the way their careers evolved, Lotman swore by the name of Alexander Pushkin, and Baskin did not necessarily regard Solomon Mikhoels among his heroes. Eventually we have to admit that Estonia is a small country with numerically weak Jewish population. Even Lotman, who almost single-handedly created a school of semiotics, is little known outside academic circles. Perhaps the only internationally recognized figure who hailed from Estonia is architect Louis Kahn (1901–1974). Yet Kahn can hardly be described as an “Estonian Jew.” Kahn’s family moved from Estonia to the United States when he was just five, and it was in the United States where he made a name for himself as one of the quintessential modernist architects. One may approach the issue of fame and recognition altogether differently. Take Ella Amitan-Wilensky (1893–1995), who in her late seventies produced one of the first historical overviews of Estonian Jewish history in English.<sup>3</sup> Amitan-Wilensky is Israel’s beloved children’s book author, among the first to start writing in Hebrew.

Within Jewish world history, Estonia typically features as a mere footnote. For example, the first major overview, Ezra Mendelsohn’s *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* from 1983, contains exactly one page, symptomatically called “A Note on Estonian Jews.” His other work of ten years later, *On Modern Jewish Politics*, does not have even that.<sup>4</sup> Heiko Haumann’s *A History of East European Jews* squeezed the history of Jews in Estonia into two sentences, while Nora Levin’s two-volume *Paradox of Survival: The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917* has just one paragraph on Estonia’s Jews, dealing exceptionally with the period of Soviet occupation of 1940–41.<sup>5</sup> An ambitious study of nearly one

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Lotman, *Vospitanie dushi: Vospominania, interviii, besedy o russkoi kulture (televizionnye lektssii)* [Nurturing the soul: Recollections, interviews, conversations on Russian culture] (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Ella Amitan-Wilensky, “Estonian Jewry: A Historical Summary,” in *The Jews in Latvia*, ed. Mendel Bobe (Tel-Aviv: Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel, 1971), 336–37.

<sup>4</sup> Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 253–54; Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Heiko Haumann, *A History of East European Jews* (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2002), 233; Nora Levin, *Paradox of Survival: The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 353–54.

thousand pages by David Vital, *A People Apart: The Jews in Europe, 1789–1939*, omits Estonia altogether. Even the best book there is, Antony Polonsky's *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, mentions Estonia only in the context of the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> If we take Polonsky's opus magnum—with a total of two thousand pages divided into three volumes—it is not that Estonia is unimportant, but that there is so much to say about the Jews elsewhere and so little is known about their life in the northernmost Baltic country. Indeed, Estonia is one of the few countries in Europe, and the only one in the Baltic, that lacks a comprehensive, up-to-date history of the Jews.<sup>7</sup> Geographical proximity does not necessarily make the three Baltic states an ideal case for comparison anyway. When it comes to migration patterns, makeup of the Jewish community, Jewish-Gentile relations, and levels of antisemitism, Estonia is perhaps closer to Finland and Norway than it is to Latvia and Lithuania, at least until 1940.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> David Vital, *A People Apart: The Jews in Europe, 1789–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia, 1914–2008*, vol. 3 (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 429–30, 494, 517, 545.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Mendel Bobe et al., eds. *The Jews in Latvia* (Tel-Aviv: Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel, 1971); Dovs Levins, *Ebreju vēsture Latvijā: No apmešanās sākumiem līdz mūsu dienām* [Latvian Jewish history: From the beginning of the settlement until today] (Rīga: Vaga, 1999); Leo Dribins, Armands Gūtmanis, and Mārgers Vestermanis, *Latvia's Jewish Community: History, Tragedy, Revival* (Riga: Institute of the History of Latvia, 2001); Leo Dribins, *Ebreji Latvijā* [Jews of Latvia] (Rīga: Elpa, 2002); Josifs Šteimanis, *History of Latvian Jews* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2002); Ulrike von Hirschhausen, *Die Grenzen der Gemeinsamkeit. Deutsche, Letten, Russen und Juden in Riga 1860–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006); Masha Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania: A History of a Remarkable Community, 1316–1945* (Jerusalem: Gefen Books, 1995); Nancy and Stuart Schoenburg, *Lithuanian Jewish Communities* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996); Dov Levin, *The Litvaks: A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2001); *Žydų gyvenimas Lietuvoje / Jewish Life in Lithuania*, exhibition catalog (Vilnius: The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, 2001); Dovid Katz, *Lithuanian Jewish Culture* (Vilnius: Baltos Lankos, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Oskar Mendelsohn, *Jødenes historie i Norge gjennom 300 år* [Jewish history in Norway over 300 years], 2 vols. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969, 1982); *Jewish Life and Culture in Norway: Wergelands Legacy*, exhibition catalog (New York: self-published, 2003); Jon Reitan, *Jødene fra Trondheim* [Jews from Trondheim], Trondheim: Tapir, 2005); Per K. Sebak, '...Vi blir neppe nogensinne mange her': *Jøder i Bergen 1851–1945* ['We are just a few here': Jews in Bergen, 1851–1945] (Bergen: Vigmostad & Bjørke, 2008); Taimi Torvinen, *Kadimah: Suomen juutalaisten historia* [Kadimah: A history of Finnish Jews] (Helsinki: Otava, 1989); Dan Kantor, Mindele London-Zweig, and Simo Muir, eds., *Le-chaim! Kuvia Suomen juutalaisten historiasta / Images From the History of Jews in*

The study of Jewish history in Estonia began as an amateur affair and has until now been largely driven by the enthusiasm of practitioners. In 1926, Kopl Jokton (1902–1957) produced the first compendious study, *Di geshikhte fun di yidn in Estland*, while finishing his law degree at the University of Tartu. This was essentially an extended essay of fifty pages with a focus on Tartu. Jokton's manuscript on Jewish student body at Tartu had remained unfinished. Exceptionally, Jokton was active as an author and secretary of the Jewish Cultural Council despite having lost both his legs as a soldier in the First World War; he died in France. Since 1992 Jokton's pamphlet has been available in the Estonian translation.<sup>9</sup> Much of what we know about the earliest Jewish history in Estonia, which goes back to 1373, is thanks to Nosson Genss (1885–1972). A Physician by profession, Genss had an antiquarian approach to history, collecting each and every piece of information he could find about Jews in Estonia, particularly in Tallinn. Genss worked through several collections at Tallinn City Archives, resulting in a thin book, *Zur Geschichte der Juden in Eesti: Die Revaler Synagoge in Zusammenhang mit der Geschichte der Juden in Reval*. Continuing with his project, three years later, in 1937, Genss published an eighty-page-long bibliography of Judaica in Estonia.<sup>10</sup> The materials used by Genss, including written notes, correspondence, and printed matters, are deposited with the Estonian National Archives in Tallinn. Abe Liebmann (1914–1990) was the only professionally trained historian who, also in 1937, defended his Master's Thesis at the University of Tartu on the preconditions for the establishment of a Jewish community in Estonia. While Genss managed to escape from Estonia in the summer of 1941 before the advancing German troops, Liebmann was mobilized in the Soviet Army. Despite his attempts to revise his thesis in order to make it sound more politically correct, he fell out with the new authorities during late Stalinism, though he eventually

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*Finland* (Helsinki: Helsinki Jewish Community, 2006); Laura K. Ekholm, "Boundaries of an Urban Minority: The Helsinki Jewish Community From the End of Imperial Russia Until the 1970s" (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Kopl Jokton, *Juutide ajalooost Eestis* [On Estonian Jewish history] (Tartu: 1926 [1992]).

<sup>10</sup> Nosson Genss, *Zur Geschichte der Juden in Eesti: Die Revaler Synagoge in Zusammenhang mit der Geschichte der Juden in Reval* (Tartu: R. Selmanowitsch, 1933); Genss, *Bibliograafia Judaica Eestis / Bibliografie fun yidishe druk-oisgaben* [Judaica bibliography in Estonia] (Tallinn: Libris, 1937). See also "Eesti juudid kunstnikkude ja kirjanikkudena (Estonian Jews as artists and writers), *Rahvaleht*, December 5, 1929, available online at: <http://eja.pri.ee/Culture/juudid%20kunstis%201929.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2015).

made a successful career as a historian of the Communist Party after the death of Stalin.<sup>11</sup> The fourth individual who made a significant contribution to Jewish studies in Estonia during the interwar period was Paul Ariste (1905–1990), who could be safely described as a Judeophile. Out of curiosity, Ariste learned Yiddish from a schoolmate, eventually becoming a famous linguist and folklorist who could converse in sixteen languages. He spoke and wrote Yiddish fluently, which made him the only Gentile scholar whom the Estonian Jewish community sent as its representative to a major international conference.<sup>12</sup>

Nothing of substance appeared in print on the subject of Estonian Jewish history until the late 1970s. During the following two decades, Dov Levin (b. 1925) positioned himself as a foremost expert on the Baltic states in Israel. Levin obtained his PhD in history from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem where he ended up teaching for many years. With 540 titles listed in his bibliography, Levin primarily used sources from the Yad Vashem Archives. By the nature of survivor testimonies, his major contribution has thus been to the study of the Holocaust and Jewish life under Soviet rule.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that Levin published significantly

<sup>11</sup> Abe Liebmann, “Ajalooolised ja kultuurilised eeldused juudi koguduste tekkimiseks ja kujunemiseks Eestis” [Historical and cultural preconditions for the emergence and evolution of Jewish communities in Estonia] (MA Thesis, University of Tartu, 1937); Liebmann, “Juut-kantonistide probleem tsaari-Venemaal ja Eestis” [The issue of Jewish Cantonist soldiers in Tsarist Russia and Estonia], *Ajalooline Ajakiri* 1 (1941): 87–97; Liebmann, “Kriitilised parandused oma 1937.a. kirjutatud töös ‘Ajalooolised ja kultuurilised eeldused juudi koguduste tekkimiseks ja arenemiseks Eestis’, leiduvate väärseisukohtade ja valehinnangute revideerimise kohta” [Critical amendments to my 1937 study] (Addendum to 1937 MA Thesis, University of Tartu, 1946). See also Toomas Hiio, “Jewish Student Fraternities at the University of Tartu: A Part of Baltic Student Tradition,” paper delivered at the conference “Exceptional Estonia: Jewish Academic Life and Cultural Autonomy in the Republic of Estonia Between the Two World Wars (1918–1940), Tel Aviv University, April 10, 2014, available online at: <http://eja.pri.ee/history/Hiio.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ariste, “Juut eesti rahvasuus” [The Jew in Estonian folklore], *Eesti Kirjandus* 1, 3, 5 (1932): 1–17, 132–50, 219–28. See also Anna Verschik, “The Yiddish Language in Estonia: Past and Present,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 30, no. 2 (1999): 117–28; Verschik, “Paul Ariste jidiši keele uurijana” [Paul Ariste as a student of Yiddish], *Emakeele Seltsi aastaraamat* 51 (2005): 250–57.

<sup>13</sup> Dov Levin, “Estonian Jews in the U.S.S.R. (1941–1945),” *Yad Vashem Studies* 11 (1976): 273–97; Levin, “Estonia,” in *Pinkas ha-kehilot. Ensiklopediya shel ha-yishuvim le-min hivasdam ve-ad le-aher shoat milhemet ha-olam ha-sheniya: Latvia and Estonia*, 319–69 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988); Levin, “The Fateful Decision: The Flight of the Jews into the Soviet Interior in the Summer of 1941,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 10



more on Lithuania and Latvia than he did on Estonia. Levin examined the circumstances of Estonian Jews who fled to Russia proper in the summer of 1941 and their subsequent experiences in evacuation/exile until the end of the war. As Levin effectively stopped in 1945 in his research, we are yet to learn how the surviving Jews made it back to Estonia. Jewish migration within the Soviet Union remains altogether something of a blank spot. According to official statistics, Estonia was probably the only Soviet republic where the number of Jews increased compared to the interwar period, in fact by as much as 20 percent in 1959. The numbers went down somewhat during the 1970s due to mass emigration to Israel. In fact, some Jews from other parts of the USSR who had previously been refused exit visas traveled to Estonia in the hope to eventually leave for Israel.<sup>14</sup> It is instructive to see how Tallinn fits in the Moscow-Kiev-Riga triangle where the so-called refusenik movement came to maturity.

As sketchy as it is, Estonian Jewish history has been properly contextualized in two respects: academic life at the University of Tartu and the Holocaust. Toomas Hiio has mapped Jewish student organizations as part of a larger project, *Album Academicum Universitatis Tartuens 1918–1944*.<sup>15</sup> Tatiana Shor of the Estonian Historical Archives further expanded on this largely biographical database, in her numerous articles on the Jewish faculty and student body at Tartu since the late nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> When it comes to Jewish academics at the University of Tartu,

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(1990): 115–42; Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils: Eastern European Jewry Under the Soviet Rule, 1939–1941* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995); Levin, “Hatsalat yehudim biyedei ha-sovietim be-milhemet ha-olam ha-sheeniya—Mikre’ Estoniya” [The rescue of Jews by the Soviets in WWII: The case of Estonia], in *The Holocaust, History and Memory: Essays in Honor of Israel Gutman*, ed. Shmuel Almog et al. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2001): 133–51.

<sup>14</sup> Benor and Talla Gurfel, *Iskhod*, unpublished memoirs, 2008, available online at: <http://eja.pri.ee/stories/Gurfel%20ishod.pdf> (accessed June 1, 2015); Gennadi Gramberg, untitled paper delivered at the seminar on Estonian-Jewish relations held in Tallinn in the fall of 1994, available online at: <http://eja.pri.ee/history/Gramberg.pdf> (accessed June 1, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Toomas Hiio, “Jewish Students and Jewish Student Organizations at the University of Tartu,” in *Tartu University Museum: Annual Report 1998* (Tartu University Museum, 1999), 119–72.

<sup>16</sup> Tatiana Shor, “Evrei-prepodavateli v Tartuskom universitete (1632–1990)” [Jewish teaching staff at the University of Tartu, 1632–1990], in *Evrei v meniaushchemsia mire: materialy 3ei mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii, Riga, 25–27 oktiabria 1999 g.*, ed. Herman Branover and Ruvin Ferber (Riga: University of Latvia, 2000), 234–44; Shor, “Evrei v Tartuskom universitete (1918–1940)” [Jews at the University of Tartu, 1918–1940], in *Proceedings of the Eight Annual International Interdisciplinary Conference on*

the Judaic studies program in existence between 1934 and 1940 was by far the most consequential, duly examined by scholars and former students.<sup>17</sup>

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*Jewish Studies*, Part I / *Materialy Vosmoi Ezhegodnoi Mezhdunarodnoi Mezhdistsiplinarnoi konferentsii po iudaike*, Chast I, ed. Rashid Kaplanov and Victoria Mochalova (Moscow: Sefer, 2001), 96–106; Shor, “Istochniki po istorii obrazovaniia evreev Estonii (XIX v. –1940)” [Sources on the history of Jewish education in Estonia, 19th century–1940], in *Mezhd Vostokom i Zapadom: Evrei v russkoi i evropeiskoi culture*, ed. Sergei Dotsenko and Irina Belobrovseva (Tallinn: Tallinn Pedagogical University Press, 2000), 248–57; Shor, “The Sources in Estonia for the Jewish Education History (19th century–1940),” in *Tartu University Museum: Annual Report 1998*, 189–96; Shor, “Zhertva Kholokosta professor-slavist Leopold Silberstein (1890–1941)” [Professor of Slavic studies Leopold Silberstein as a victim of the Holocaust, 1890–1941], in *Questions of Jewish History*, Part II / *Problemy evreiskoi istorii*, Chast II, ed. Victoria Mochalova, Konstantin Burmistrov, Elena Nosenko-Shtein, Arye Olman, Vladimir Petrukhin, Evgenii Rashkovskii, Evgenia Khazdan (Moscow: Knizhniki, 2009), 150–66; Shor, “Yuriev-Tartu: Stolitsa evreiskogo studenchestva (1907–1918)” [Yuriev-Tartu as the Jewish students’ capital, 1907–1918], in *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual International Interdisciplinary Conference on Jewish Studies*, Part II / *Materialy Sheshtnadsatoi Ezhegodnoi Mezhdunarodnoi Mezhdistsiplinarnoi konferentsii po iudaike*, Chast II, ed. Victoria Mochalova, Konstantin Burmistrov, Elena Nosenko-Shtein, Arye Olman, Vladimir Petrukhin, Evgenii Rashkovskii, Evgenia Khazdan, (Moscow: Sefer, 2009), 445–60.

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As with other aspects of Jewish history in Estonia, the study of the Holocaust began as an intimate story told by survivors. Dr. Mark Dworzecki (1908–1975), a physician from Vilna (Vilnius), had gone through five Jewish forced labor camps in Estonia in 1943–44. At the Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 he recalled the conditions in the Vilna ghetto, where he had been confined prior to his deportation to Estonia.<sup>18</sup> Dworzecki wrote several books on the history of the Vilna ghetto, and in 1970 he published *White Nights and Black Days: Jewish Camps in Estonia*, available in Hebrew, Yiddish, and French. Dworzecki's personal archive is deposited with the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup> In 1960, the Tallinn Jewish congregation sought permission to place a memorial plaque commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, but was rebuked by city authorities.<sup>20</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that it took another twenty-five years for the first Estonian-language book on the Holocaust to appear. Eugenia Gurin-Loov (1922–2001) was one of the founders of the Jewish Cultural Association in Estonia, in 1988, and came to subsequently serve as deputy head of the Estonian Jewish Community. Gurin-Loov followed in the footsteps of her father, Samuel Gurin, who in 1925 assumed the position of director of the Jewish high school in Tallinn. Gurin-Loov spearheaded public commemoration of the Holocaust in Estonia. On May 2, 1989, she delivered a speech in front of few hundred people gathered in the courtyard of the former Jewish high school in Tallinn. She started off with a factual introduction and then continued:

We are talking here of memory, but what specifically do we know? We do not have complete lists; we do not know all those sites where our people were murdered. We do not have memorials: what do we know about Kalevi-Liiva? We do not know where exactly in the woods Pärnu Jews were executed. . . . Now is the time for us to give the victims their dues; their memory should be sacred to us. We do not have to, and can no longer, pass in silence this genocide that was perpetrated against the Jews. For as long as one talks and writes of some abstract "Soviet people" murdered by the Germans in death camps, we should state that they were murdered not because they were Soviet

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<sup>18</sup> Watch Dworzecki's deposition from April 5, 1961, at: [http://www.ushmm.org/online/film/display/detail.php?file\\_num=2133&clip\\_id=DE43FD50-9990-4F0C-A7C8-644DE6DAB745](http://www.ushmm.org/online/film/display/detail.php?file_num=2133&clip_id=DE43FD50-9990-4F0C-A7C8-644DE6DAB745) (accessed June 2, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Mark Dworzecki, *Vaise Nekht un Shvartse Teg: Yidn-Lagern in Estonie* [White nights and black days: Jewish camps in Estonia] (Tel Aviv: Tishlia, 1970); *Mahanot ha-yehudim ba-Estonia 1942–1944* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1970).

<sup>20</sup> See correspondence between the local Jewish congregation and Tallinn city authorities, December 4, 1968–August 22, 1969, available online at: <http://eja.pri.ee/history/Holocaust/Pamyatnik.pdf> (accessed June 8, 2015).

citizens or “enemies of the people,” no, they were murdered just because they were Jewish. . . . We came here today in order to remind the titular population, the Estonians, that Jewish tragedy also concerns them. Indeed, this was a tragedy also for the people who lived side by side in friendly relationship with Jews, this was a tragedy that took place on Estonian soil . . . Jewish blood was spilled on Estonian soil. Those tortured and murdered rest in Estonian soil. And we hope that the next year, as we gather here again, some representatives of the titular population will join us in our sorrow. We came here to show that we are still alive, that we carry forward the [spirit of] Jewish cultural autonomy, that we stay Jewish, and that our grandchildren will remain Jewish. We bow before the victims and declare: Am yisrael chai [the people of Israel are alive!]<sup>21</sup>

Gurin-Loov delivered on her promise to keep the memory of the murdered Estonian Jews alive by means of her 1994 book, *Suur Häving: Eesti juutide katastroof 1941 / Holocaust of the Estonian Jews, 1941*.<sup>22</sup>

Since then, research on the Holocaust in Estonia continued along three tracks. Ruth Bettina Birn came across this subject as part of her job description. At the time Birn was serving as chief historian in the War Crimes Division of the Canadian Justice Department. Among the individuals on her list, Birn was investigating several alleged offenders, mainly Germans, with links to Estonia; her research hence focused on the German Security Police in Estonia and SS personnel in the Jewish forced labor camps in the northeast of the country.<sup>23</sup> In 1998, the Estonian government established a Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity, which invested a considerable effort in the study of the mass murder of the Jews. As I argue in the concluding chapter of this book, the tacit objective of the commission was to straighten up Estonia’s historical record in the run up to joining the European Union and NATO. Regardless of this, a team of young Estonian scholars have produced a solid, factual account of the Holocaust in Estonia, which appeared in 2006 as part of the volume, *Estonia, 1941–1945*.

<sup>21</sup> Text of Eugenia Gurin-Loov’s speech of May 2, 1989, in Tallinn, available online at: [http://eja.pri.ee/history/Holocaust/Gurina%20kone\\_es.html](http://eja.pri.ee/history/Holocaust/Gurina%20kone_es.html) (accessed June 2, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Eugenia Gurin-Loov, Eugenia, *Suur Häving: Eesti juutide katastroof 1941 / Holocaust of the Estonian Jews, 1941* (Tallinn: Estonian Jewish Community, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Ruth Bettina Birn, “Collaboration With Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe: The Case of the Estonian Security Police,” *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 2 (2001): 181–96; Birn, *Die Sicherheitspolizei in Estland 1941–1944: Eine Studie zur Kollaboration im Osten* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006); Birn, “Konzentrationslager Vaivara,” in *Der Ort des Terrors: Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, ed. Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel, vol. 8 (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2008), 130–84; Birn, “Vaivara Main Camp,” in *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, ed. Geoffrey P. Megargee, vol. 1B (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009): 1491–1509.

Credit goes in particular to Meelis Maripuu and Riho Västriku.<sup>24</sup> My own contribution has been of a purely academic nature, completed as a doctoral dissertation in 2005 and published as a book four years later. Scholarly literature from the past ten or so years lends further credence to the thesis of multiple collaboration that I have advanced in my study. Using the opportunity, though, I want to correct a single factual error that crept into the book. Basing my conclusion on the execution order issued by the German Security Police in Estonia with regard to eight Jews deported to Tallinn from Finland on November 6, 1942, I presumed all of them dead. My Finnish colleagues have subsequently alerted me to the fact that all eight had been deported farther to Auschwitz-Birkenau and one of them, Georg Kollmann, managed to survive—a hypothesis I had earlier rejected. I regret the mistake but take solace in the thought that the Holocaust had consumed one less life.<sup>25</sup>

Isidor Levin (b. 1919) is one of the few Estonian Jews who not only survived the Holocaust but also committed his life story to paper.<sup>26</sup> The major depositories of Holocaust testimony such as the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, and the University of South California Shoah Foundation have just a handful of accounts related to Estonia, mainly by so-called bystanders. One way or another, the Holocaust generation is nearly gone. Their children and grandchildren—who are sometimes referred to in the United States as “second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors”—however, constitute an important resource yet untapped. To my knowledge, no consistent effort has so far been made in Estonia to record their stories, regret-

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<sup>24</sup> See relevant chapters by Meelis Maripuu and Riho Västriku in *Estonia, 1940–1945: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity*, ed. Toomas Hiio, Meelis Maripuu, and Indrek Paavle (Tallinn: Tallinna Raamatutrukikoda, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Anton Weiss-Wendt, *Murder Without Hatred: Estonians and the Holocaust* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 214–15, 395–96; Tuulikku Vuonokari, “Jews in Finland During the Second World War” (Research paper: Tampere University, 2003), available online at: <http://www15.uta.fi/FAST/FIN/HIST/tv-jews.html> (accessed June 2, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Isidor Levin, “Minu elu- ja mõttevarast: Meenutusi” [On my life and my thoughts: recollections], *Akadeemia* 7–12 (2009): 1419–40, 1612–32, 1985–2016, 2177–2210, 2385–90; *Akadeemia* 1 (2010): 159–76; Levin, *Minu elu- ja mõttevarast* [On my life and my thoughts] (Tartu: self-published, 2010). Levin was actually born in Latvia, but in 1937 enrolled in the Judaic studies program at the University of Tartu. Professionally, Levin has been associated with St. Petersburg University yet maintained his connections to Estonia. Consequently, in 2012 he received Estonian citizenship on a merit basis.

fully. This lacuna has been filled in part by Centropa, a Jewish historical institute with a head office in Vienna. In existence since 2000, Centropa has conducted over one thousand interviews with elderly Jews across East Central Europe, including twenty-four in Estonia. Among other things, the interviewees talked about their childhood in interwar Estonia, escaping the Nazis in 1941, survival through the Soviet evacuation, the journey back home after the war, antisemitism during late Stalinism, creating a semblance of communal life in the 1950s and 1960s, the refusenik movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and finally reestablishing a Jewish community in independent Estonia.<sup>27</sup> Combined with few other existing sources, especially on the persecution of Jews in the early 1950s, it is indeed possible to get an overview, however patchy, of Jewish life in Soviet Estonia.<sup>28</sup>

The study of Jewish history in Estonia has received a major boost in the form of the Estonian Jewish Museum. Situated in the brand new synagogue building in Tallinn, the museum is a brainchild of Mark Rybak. The idea for a museum can be traced back to Rybak's interest in family history. His ancestors count among the first Jews who permanently settled in Estonia in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1972 Rybak immigrated to Israel, where he made a successful career as a computer engineer. Two of his grandparents perished in the Holocaust, which led him to support the publication of Gurin-Loov's 1994 book. Privately funded, the museum features a permanent exhibition with particular emphasis on Jewish cultural life in interwar Estonia and the community regeneration since 1988. A significant part of the exhibition deals with the Holocaust, augmented by a memorial gallery unveiled in January 2012. For the purpose of doing research, even more significant is the website maintained by Rybak and the Estonian Jewish Museum. The website offers a good selection of academic texts, memoirs, and original documents related to the history of Estonian Jews, most of them available in Estonian, Russian, and/or English translation. Collections of historical images and the photographic

<sup>27</sup> Cf. <http://www.centropa.org/search-our-database-jewish-memory> (accessed June 1, 2015). Somewhat unexpectedly, the database for Estonia is as large as that for Latvia and Lithuania combined.

<sup>28</sup> Olev Liivik, "The Persecution of Jews in Estonia in the Late 1940s and Early 1950s," in *Estonia 1940–1945*, 405–14; Meelis Maripuu, "Zur sowjetischen Wahrnehmung der Juden in Estland in den Jahren 1944–1963," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 54, no. 1 (2005): 86–97; *Otchet o rabote 2go Kontrrazvedyvatelnogo otdela Komiteta Gosbezopasnosti pri SM ESSR za period 1954–1955 gg.* [Activity report of the 2nd counterintelligence unit of the Estonian KGB for the period 1954–1955] (Tallinn: Estonian Branch State Archives, 1998), 85–88.

chronicle of the Estonian Jewish community complete the museum's website, which is indeed an indispensable resource.

When it comes to scholarship, Anu Põldsam's doctoral thesis on the intellectual legacy of Lazar Gulkowitsch is the biggest achievement to date. Defended at the University of Tartu in late 2011, Põldsam's dissertation is an excellent piece of research in its own right; to begin with, it is uncommon for graduate students in Estonia to use archival sources from five different countries on three continents. It is rather symbolic that Põldsam—who studied with the most prominent Hebraist in Estonia, Kalle Kasemaa—chose to write her thesis on professor Gulkowitsch, the head of the Judaic Studies Department at the University of Tartu. Põldsam regards the chair in Judaic studies at Tartu an ultimate manifestation of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, as it had evolved in Europe, and specifically Germany, since the early nineteenth century. Only the third dissertation in Judaic studies ever to be written in Estonia, Põldsam's study aims to synthesize Gulkowitsch's ideas by defining his contribution to scholarship as a student of linguistics, religion, and more specifically, Hasidism.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the natural desire to see the chair in Judaic studies reestablished at the University of Tartu, Põldsam is realistic in her assessment of the current situation.<sup>30</sup> I share the view that the academic interest in present-day Estonia is simply not enough to sustain a comprehensive program dedicated to the study of Jewish history, culture, and language. Yet this conclusion gives no reason for pessimism. What we observe today in Estonia is a strong sense of continuity, which compensates for the lack of institutional support. Tatiana Shor picked up where Kopl Jokton, Nosson Genss, and Abe Liebmann left off with their study of Estonian Jewish history in the 1920s and 1930s. Anna Verschik is building upon the legacy of Paul Ariste and his love affair with Yiddish. Anu Põldsam has not only

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<sup>29</sup> Anu Põldsam, "Lazar Gulkowitsch—eine vergessene Stimme der Wissenschaft des Judentums. Seine Tätigkeit, sein Werk und seine Wirkung im zeitgeschichtlichen Kontext" (PhD diss., University of Tartu, 2011). The two other dissertations are Moses Ziegler's "Das Targum Scheni nach südarabischen Handschriften" from 1937 and Anna Verschik's "Estonian Yiddish and Its Contacts with Co-territorial Languages" from 2000.

<sup>30</sup> Anu Põldsam, "Jewish Studies in Estonia: Past and Present," paper delivered at the conference "Exceptional Estonia: Jewish Academic Life and Cultural Autonomy in the Republic of Estonia Between the Two World Wars (1918–1940)," Tel Aviv University, April 10, 2014, available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXNNc2XbKnc> (accessed May 20, 2015).

given Lazar Gulkowitsch his dues but has actually continued in his footsteps. With the enthusiasm and dedication of Mark Rybak, who has built from scratch an entire institution, academic and public interest in Jewish history in Estonia is here to stay, if not grow.

What is most paradoxical about the history of Estonian Jews yet to be written is how widely available the sources are—not just in local archives and libraries, but in the comfort of one's home. As far as access to archives is concerned, the Republic of Estonia has pursued a very liberal policy. With the exception of personal NKVD/KGB files, which require prior permission, archival records in Estonia have been opened to researchers since the early 1990s. Furthermore, in 2004 the Estonian National Archives launched a comprehensive digitization program, which currently comprises over nine million frames. Among the many collections, the Estonian archivists made a particular effort to scan Judaica. The result is truly impressive: out of some 5,000 identifiable files, covering mainly the interwar period, nearly 3,000 have been digitalized. Even more significant, the digital portal Saaga enables researchers to view and download files off-site.<sup>31</sup> The digitalized files cover Jewish cultural autonomy; numerous cultural, sporting, and welfare organizations; local congregations; schools; and vital information through 1926. Especially well represented are student fraternities and sororities at the University of Tartu, and various educational and professional bodies in Tartu and Tallinn. Among the composite collections that contain records relevant to Jewish history, most significant are the Interior Ministry's files concerning Estonian citizenship, Tartu University student files, and the Soviet deportation records. For a full overview of relevant files available through Saaga, see the annex "Primary Sources on Estonian Jewish History until 1940" in this book.

In terms of further research, the second largest Estonian city and home to a major university in the Baltic, Tartu is a natural candidate for a case study. As is often the case with university centers generally, the history of Tartu—whether it incorporates the Jews or not—is usually told as the story of a city or the story of a university but rarely both. Hence, Jokton in his book focused mainly on the communal life of Tartu Jews, whereas scholars in the post-1991 period have written almost exclusively on Jewish academics. This gap has to be bridged, obviously. Particularly intriguing is that the status of Tartu University as a hub of Jewish secular education had persisted into the 1920s and 1930s, while the center of gravity for

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.ra.ee/dgs/explorer.php>



Estonians Jews as a minority group had shifted decisively after the Bolshevik Revolution from Tartu to Tallinn. The inquiry may start with the basic question what factors have accounted for this tectonic shift and how rapidly it came to be.

As a centerpiece of Jewish communal life, the synagogue has traditionally attracted the attention of historians and art historians alike. The case of Estonia is no different, generating minor works dealing with the history and architecture of two major houses of worship, in Tallinn and Tartu, as well as a mausoleum in the Jewish cemetery on Magasini Street—none of them any longer in existence.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, Judaism lives on in Estonia with the construction of the Tallinn New Synagogue. The first purpose-built Jewish sacral building in Estonia for over a hundred years, the synagogue was inaugurated in May 2007.<sup>33</sup> It would no doubt be worth compiling a history of synagogues in Estonia incorporating smaller structures in provincial cities, especially since blueprints are available from the Tallinn and Tartu archives. The same goes for Jewish cemeteries, which are briefly described in earlier historiography; the Estonian Jewish Museum, among other collections, holds a series of images of Jewish cemeteries and houses of worship across Estonia.

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The essays in this collection span twenty years of research and writing. They reflect not only my own conceptualization of Estonian Jewish history, but also my professional development as an academic. As I describe below, I came across this subject before I enrolled at university, pursued throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies, and still expanded on as a career historian.

Who were the Jews who started arriving en masse in present-day Estonia from the mid-nineteenth century onward? Where did they come from and why? How many of them ended up staying permanently, and on what (official) grounds? How did they earn their living and what professions dominated? How did they relate to each other and other ethnic groups?

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<sup>32</sup> Genss, *Zur Geschichte*; Jokton, *Juutide ajaloost Eestis*, 11, 19–20, 26–27, 31–33; Leo Genss, “Estonian Synagogues” undated paper, available online at: [http://eja.pri.ee/Religion/leo%20gens%20synagogues\\_en.pdf](http://eja.pri.ee/Religion/leo%20gens%20synagogues_en.pdf) (accessed May 20, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Gennadi Gramberg and Josef Katz, *Tallinna Uus sinagoog / The Tallinn New Synagogue / Tallinnskaia Novaia sinagoga* (Tallinn: Estonian Jewish Community, 2007).

What place did religious and secular education occupy in communal life? Did they conform in their interactions with authorities? The answers to these basic questions form the backbone of chapter 1. Using the border city of Narva as a case study, it effectively maps the identity of a prototypical Jewish community in Estonia. Starting off with an essentially antiquarian approach to history—à la who did what and when—makes sense for a number of reasons. Beginning the story in Estonia's easternmost city—then officially part of St. Petersburg province—is warranted both geographically and chronologically. Coincidentally, it is also the first piece of research on Estonian Jewish history I ever produced, as a BA student back in 1994. By chance, I recently discovered this course paper among my work files. Written twenty years ago, the paper is still relevant. In fact, we are still missing this kind of basic account when it comes to Jewish history in Estonia. This observation thus served as the basis for the present volume. As it appears in the book, chapter 1 has been completely reworked from the original paper, incorporating some new material. The only thing I was unable to change is the scientific apparatus. I had no choice but to uphold the reference system used in eastern Europe in general and Estonia in particular, in accordance with which only the document's provenance is registered, without spelling out the full name and the date of the specific archival record.

Chapter 2 originally appeared in 2009 as an article in *East European Jewish Affairs*, an area studies journal barely known among general historians. This chapter can be safely put in the category of revisionist history, as I am advancing an unorthodox thesis on the origins of Jewish cultural autonomy in Estonia. Contrary to the romantic interpretation that attributes the decision to grant non-territorial autonomy to Jews to the magnanimity of the Estonian state (and indirectly as a testimony to a harmonious coexistence between the titular population and ethnic minorities), I argue that it was rather an unintended consequence of the efforts to appease Baltic Germans and the German State that stood behind them. Otherwise, I do not detect any references to Jews as part of the original conversation on the rights of minorities in Estonia. If anything, the Estonian government proved adamant to sign up to the minorities clause in the Paris Peace Treaty of 1919. In effect, Estonian Jews benefited from power politics waged on both domestic and international levels.

Chapter 3 is adapted from an article in the 1998 volume of *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. Although originally intended for academic publication, it reflects the intellectual horizons of an undergraduate student, which I still was when I wrote it. This particular article/chapter/time pe-