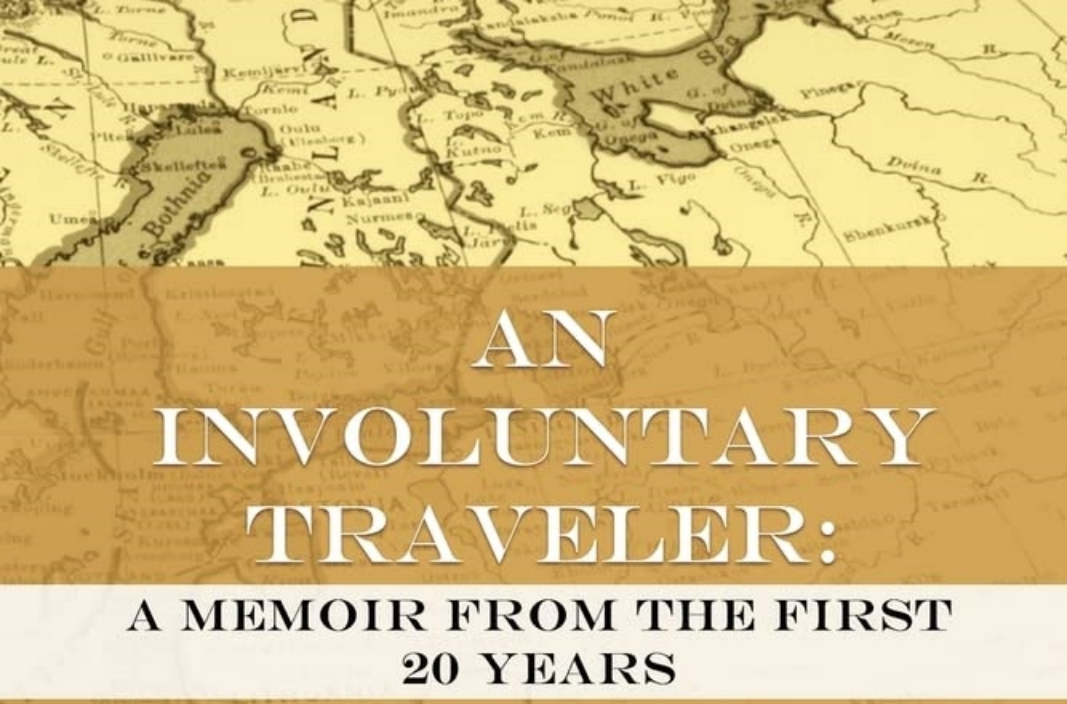
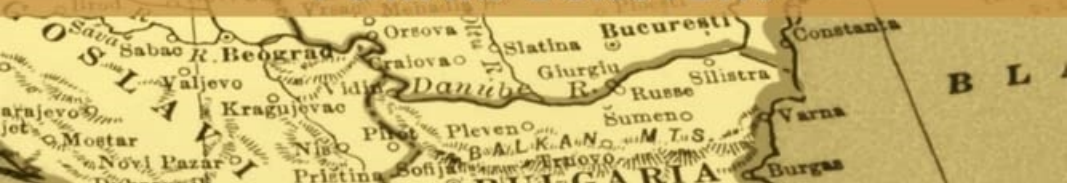


AN INVOLUNTARY TRAVELER:

A MEMOIR FROM THE FIRST 20 YEARS

YORAM ECKSTEIN



AN INVOLUNTARY TRAVELER

A Memoir from the First 20 Years

YORAM ECKSTEIN

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FOREWORD BY DR. LIDIA ZESSIN-JUREK

"A rootless tumbleweed" and "an involuntary traveler" are two colorful expressions Yoram Eckstein uses to describe his early childhood. Born shortly before the Second World War to an assimilated Polish-Jewish family in southeastern Poland, Eckstein traversed thousands of miles in his first years of childhood. The cause of these wanderings was his family's desire to escape the repressions of the German and Soviet totalitarian systems, and his fate was that of a child refugee.

Yoram Eckstein and his parents, Ester Eckstein nee Szmojsz of Łódź and Maurycy Bernard (Moshe-Dov) Eckstein of Tarnów, suffered the fate of hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens who were deported to Siberia. As Jews, they also shared the fate of early wartime Jewish refugees in eastern Poland who, in their attempt to escape the Nazi machine, fell under the crushing heel of the Soviet system. In other words, they were part of a large group of Polish Jews who, after several months spent in the Soviet-occupied part of Poland, registered to return to their homes in the German-occupied Poland. As it turned out, the registration procedure was a Soviet trap set to identify Jewish refugees from the German zone. The identified were thus marked for deportation to forced-labor camps in Siberia. The Eckstein family was deported in June 1940, in the third wave of Soviet deportations from Poland. Around eighty percent of that wave were Jews. In total, Jews made up about thirty percent of all deportees from Poland.

Two critical moments sealed the fate of Eckstein's family. A choice of thousands of Polish Jews to register for their return home, back to western Poland where they would live under the Nazi regime, was one of them. The Soviet rule, they had learnt while residing in eastern Poland, held no promise of a brighter future. Therefore, they registered and boarded the trains purportedly going west. But when the trains started moving, they took many of their passengers by surprise as they headed east. Instead of western Poland, they were taken to Siberia. Stalin deported all those who registered; in his eyes, that was a clear sign of their deep dissatisfaction with, and even disloyalty to, the Soviet government.

The other historical moment had to do with Stalin's decision to deport all Polish refugees to labor camps in the Soviet hinterland. The deportations removed Polish Jews from the territory that the Wehrmacht invaded in the summer of 1941. As paradoxical as that sounds, by deporting them, Stalin enhanced the chances of Polish Jews' survival that were close to nil in the region occupied by Nazi Germany and designated for "Operation Reinhardt." With all its hardships and a heavy human toll, the Soviet exile, as described in this book in much detail, resulted in higher prospects of survival. Terrible as they were, the Stalinist repressions did not single out the Jewish people for annihilation, as was the case in the German system. In Siberia, Polish Jews struggled to survive alongside ethnic Poles, Russians, Lithuanians, and representatives of other ethnicities and religions. There, Polish Jews depended on their health, willpower, and solidarity, just like the other exiles.

Most probably, it was because of these moments in the "deportation to life," not to almost certain death, why Yoram Eckstein saw the fate of his family as "decided by chance and world affairs over which simple man has no control whatsoever." He referred to his luck of finding himself on the right bank of a river, which often meant the difference between life and death. He ascribed his life to a "force superior" (that is, a higher power); it decided the fate of his family, he wrote. Although he spoke of the "Jewish choice of [having] no choice," his family had the luck of having taken, even if unconsciously, the right decisions. In this interpretation of his family's trajectory of survival, Eckstein touched upon the questions of fate and the room for maneuver within the context of the Second World War and the Holocaust, in which European Jewry found itself: Could Jews really decide their fate? To what extent? Answers to such questions raise painful moral dilemmas.

Survivors and researchers alike approach with caution the issue of the "freedom of choice" during the Holocaust. Many of them—Hannah Arendt, David Rousset, Zygmunt Bauman, and Laurence Langer among others—have come to the same conclusion: one cannot speak of the freedom of choice with respect to Jews during the Shoah. The Nazis wrote a script for the Jews without the latter's input or involvement, and every decision taken by Polish Jewry led ninety percent of them to the same tragic end—murder. But such was not the story of Yoram Eckstein's family. Though his interpretation is fully understandable in light of his experiences as a child refugee, he overlooks what readers of his testimony might realize: the force of his parent's initial decision to flee and their agency as refugees.

As a result of their intuition, predictions, and the means at hand, Eckstein's family left, in September 1939, their cozy home in Tarnów on the German-occu-

pied side of Poland. They crossed the River Bug to endure the first war months in Brody on the Soviet-occupied side of that country. After the Stalinist deportations, they faced daily challenges in the Siberian cold: forced labor, hunger, and swarms of insects of all kind. Then, following the Soviet "amnesty" for Polish prisoners that followed the German attack on the USSR in 1941, they decided to leave their prison in the taiga. On self-made rafts, as the Siberian winter was settling in, they floated downriver for nearly a week to Asino where they secured space in the cargo boxcar of a train heading to the warmer south. In Bukhara, however, their situation was no better. More hunger and disease awaited them, including malaria, dysentery, and a major typhus epidemic. The family stuck together regardless, assisted by a wide network of their Tarnów friends, some of whom at the time worked in local hospitals and kindergartens. Perseverance, resourcefulness, and constant readjustment—all that was needed to survive the six years of involuntary sojourn throughout the USSR. For Eckstein and his family, it was as much about the "force superior" as about human resilience.

As much as Eckstein's memoir weaves its own intricate patterns of human agency, it is no less interwoven with a larger tapestry of autobiographies about Jewish survival in the Soviet Union. After analyzing over one hundred of those published testimonies, I can say with certainty that the authors have embarked on their writing projects for many different reasons. Still, most of them succeeded in telling their stories about an extraordinary human will to persevere. All the accounts demonstrate a human need to testify about the past that, although painful, holds (as one would like to believe) important lessons for the future. It is my belief that in this way, the Jewish authors also settled some of their accounts with Nazi Germany. After all, Germany was primarily responsible for their misfortune and misery. It was because of Nazis that they fled their homes in Poland and, upon returning, hardly found anyone alive.

Naturally, most memoirists dealt with the Soviet system, too. It imprisoned them and forced them into slave labor. Yet here, between "Hitler's fury on the one hand and Stalin's mania on the other," one more protagonist comes to the fore. It is Poland, their country of origin and their homeland. In their testimonies, it features as an open wound that would not heal. The scope of German and Soviet violence was beyond anyone's imagination, but discrimination experienced at the hands of fellow countrymen in incredibly cruel times hurt no less, if not more.

Yoram Eckstein's vivid memories are interlaced with his poems, lyrically conveying his emotions about refugeedom, identity problems, and his acute sense of lost Polishness. Upon return from the USSR to Poland in 1946, the Eckstein

family did not immediately abandon their homeland for a better chance at life in Israel or the United States. Rather, it was Poland who chose to abandon its citizens of Jewish descent. Later, at the age of 19, when he eventually moved to Israel in 1957, Eckstein stopped being silent about the discrimination he suffered at the hands of his former compatriots. For them, he was "not enough of a Pole." He never could be. Eckstein wrote about that honestly. And his honesty spoke volumes about his love for Poland whose culture, history, beauty, and language remained dear to him for the rest of his life.

His 2004 "Open Letter to My Former Fellow Countrymen," signed by him as "a former Polish Jew," conveys many messages. It is a message of his undying love for Poland, as well as his disappointment with it. It is also an open invitation to a conversation about the meanings of home and refugeedom. For what happened to Yoram Eckstein was a series of involuntary displacements that turned him into "a rootless tumbleweed:" he was broken off from his roots and blown around. But he nevertheless looked for ways to go back to his former homeland: a Poland that probably never existed, but he imagined it did as a child refugee.

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