

Erased from the Map:

Geography, Annexation, and the Destruction of Jewish Suwalki, Poland

Heather Rossi

Yeshiva University
May 2026

Introduction

In 1937, a visitor named Leonard Bland brought a 16mm camera to the Polish border town of Suwalki and filmed what he found: the Big Synagogue on Schul Gasse, a bustling bi-weekly market on Wesola Street, the Bet Yetomin orphanage, the Home for the Jewish Aged, and a ritual washing house at the Jewish cemetery.¹ Bland also captured on film the words "Kill the Jews" etched in fresh cement. This, combined with the fact that the local police required Bland to destroy the video of the cement and detained the Bland family for an entire day, is evidence that the world Bland was recording was already under threat.² A prominent community member identified as Mr. Eilender, a lumber merchant and Jewish Council member, appears in the film, likely the father of Kasriel Eilender, whose memoir would later become one of the few written records of Jewish Suwalki.³ Two years after Bland packed his camera, the community he documented would cease to exist. The film remains the only known moving image record of pre-war Jewish Suwalki.

The community Bland filmed was destroyed within months of the German invasion, not through the ghettoization that defined the Holocaust in most of occupied Poland, but through immediate expulsion. That distinction was not accidental.

The relationship between Nazi administrative geography and the form Jewish destruction took is well established in Holocaust scholarship. Timothy Snyder, in *Bloodlands*, identified the lands between Berlin and Moscow as the site of Europe's worst mass violence and demonstrated that the German-Soviet partition of Poland in September 1939 created fundamentally different regimes of persecution on either side of the demarcation line.⁴ In the annexed territories, Himmler's mandate as Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of Germanism demanded the immediate removal of Jews and Poles to make room for ethnic German settlers. In the General Government, the separate civil administration that governed central and southern Poland, Hans Frank's colonial administration tolerated Jewish presence, however brutally, as a source of forced labor.^{5,6} Antony Polonsky reinforced this distinction, noting that the annexed territories, with their population of 8.9 million Poles, 603,000 Jews, and only 600,000 Germans, were "marked out for ruthless Germanization, personally supervised by the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler," a policy that left no administrative space for the transitional structures that defined Jewish life under the General Government.⁷ Andreas Schulz studied the Regierungsbezirk of Zichenau, the annexed district next to Suwalki, also incorporated into East Prussia. There, Wehrmacht soldiers

¹ Harold Bland Collection, Film and Video Archive, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accession nos. irn1005048 and irn1005049, donated 2015. Record available at <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1005048>.

² Len Bland, interview by the author, Deerfield, IL, April 19, 2026. Len Bland is the nephew of Leonard Bland.

³ Harold Bland Collection, Film and Video Archive, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accession nos. irn1005048 and irn1005049. The USHMM catalog identifies a "Mr. Eilender" in the footage as a "lumber merchant and member of the Jewish Council." Kasriel K. Eilender, "The Barber of Goerlitz" (memoir), Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection, USHMM, 1-2, identifies the author's father, Josel Mordechai Ejlender, as a lumber merchant, suggesting a likely family connection.

⁴ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 127-128.

⁵ Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, vol. 3: 1914 to 2008 (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019), 364.

⁶ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 131-133.

⁷ Polonsky, *Jews in Poland and Russia*, 365.

began expelling Jews from the town of Pultusk within days of the occupation, Einsatzgruppe V terrorized Jewish and Polish civilians, and mass expulsions took place before any ghettos were established.⁸ Even in Zichenau, however, the process eventually produced nineteen ghettos before the final deportations to Auschwitz and Treblinka in late 1942. What this scholarship has not yet done is trace its implications at the level of individual communities.

Several community-level studies have begun this work. Schulz's work on Zichenau, discussed above, is one example. The Gruner and Osterloh volume on the annexed territories more broadly, and a growing body of scholarship on individual Polish-Jewish communities, have each clarified pieces of the picture. Suwalki adds three things that the literature has not yet brought together in a single case. First, it sat on the immediate fault line between the Reich and the General Government, so the same town was governed sequentially by Soviet, German civil, and Reich annexation regimes within ninety days. Second, its destruction compressed into weeks rather than years, eliminating the ghetto period that elsewhere generated the documentary record on which Holocaust scholarship most often relies. Third, its dispersal across multiple destinations, from Biala Podlaska to Vilna to the no man's land at the Lithuanian border, produced a memory landscape with no single site of destruction to anchor commemoration. These features make Suwalki a useful test case for what happens to a community when administrative geography accelerates the timeline of erasure.

Suwalki's Jewish community, which numbered around ten to eleven thousand on the eve of the Second World War,⁹ was destroyed with a speed and totality that distinguished it from the better-known ghettos of occupied Poland. When Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Suwalki sat on the border between East Prussia, Lithuania, and the Soviet zone of occupation. Following the September 1939 German-Soviet boundary agreement, Soviet forces withdrew and Suwalki was annexed directly into the German Reich as Sudauen, a district of East Prussia, rather than being placed under the General Government that administered most of occupied Poland.¹⁰ This geographic and administrative distinction proved decisive. No ghetto was established. Instead, the Nazis expelled the Jewish population outright: some fled with the retreating Soviets, others were driven into a no man's land on the Lithuanian border, and the remainder were deported in sealed trains to towns in the Lublin district by December 1939.¹¹ By the time the Warsaw ghetto was established in October 1940¹², Suwalki had been Judenrein for nearly a year.

This paper argues that Suwalki's location on the geographic fault line between the Reich and occupied Poland determined the particular character of its Jewish community's destruction.

⁸ Andreas Schulz, "Zichenau," in *The Greater German Reich and the Jews: Nazi Persecution Policies in the Annexed Territories 1935-1945*, ed. Wolf Gruner and Jörg Osterloh (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 221–222, 228.

⁹ Kasriel Eilender, "A Brief History of the Jews in Suwalki," *KehilaLinks*, JewishGen, <https://kehalalinks.jewishgen.org/suwalki/history.htm>.

¹⁰ "German Administration of Poland," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 19, 2026, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/german-administration-of-poland>; Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, vol. 3: 1914 to 2008 (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019), 365.

¹¹ "Suwalki District in Nazi Poland Depopulated of Jews," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin*, December 22, 1939.

¹² "Warsaw," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 2026, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw>.

Unlike communities in the General Government, where ghettoization, forced labor, and eventual deportation to death camps unfolded over months or years, Suwalki's Jews were subjected to immediate expulsion because the town's annexation into East Prussia placed it under a regime that sought to make its territory ethnically German from the outset. The resulting dispersal of Suwalki's Jews across multiple destinations, from Biala Podlaska to Vilna to the Lithuanian border, meant that there was no single site of destruction, no single ghetto or camp that could serve as a memorial center. Reconstructing what happened to this community requires piecing together fragments: encyclopedia entries, a survivor's memoir, an oral testimony recorded four decades later, Yizkor book columns composed by scattered survivors, and contemporaneous reports by journalists and relief workers who witnessed the expulsions as they unfolded. The tension between the community's rich pre-war life and the near-total erasure of its physical and human presence runs through every source examined here.

Two notes on sources. This paper draws on Yizkor Books, USHMM testimonies and oral histories, JTA dispatches, JDC memoranda, and survivor memoirs alongside the scholarly literature on the annexed territories. It also draws on a personal interview I conducted in April 2026 with Len Bland of Deerfield, Illinois, the nephew of the filmmaker Leonard Bland whose 1937 footage of Suwalki appears throughout this paper. The interview is cited in the footnotes; I note it here because it shaped the way the documentary and personal threads of the paper came together.

I. A Community on the Border: Jewish Suwalki Before the War

The geographic position that would seal Suwalki's fate during the Holocaust had, for more than a century, been the foundation of its Jewish community's prosperity. Situated in the northeastern corner of Poland, wedged between East Prussia to the west and Lithuania to the northeast, the town occupied a strategic crossroads that made it a natural center of trade.¹³ Jews first appeared in Suwalki's official records in 1808 with 44 Jewish residents in a town of roughly 1,200 people.¹⁴ Growth was rapid. By 1827 the Jewish population had reached 1,209, approximately one-third of the town's total, and by 1857 it had surged to 6,587, representing over 60 percent of all inhabitants. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* attributes this growth to Suwalki's commercial importance and its position on the highway between Warsaw and St. Petersburg, which made it a stopping point for traveling merchants and nobility.

¹³ Eilender, "Brief History."

¹⁴ "Suwalki," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), col. 332.

Figure 1: Jewish Population of Suwalki, 1808 - Today

Year	Jewish Population	Total Population	% Jewish
1808	44	~1,200	3.5%
1827	1,209	~3,800	32%
1857	6,587	-	62%
1921	5,747	-	34%
1931	5,811	~21,500	27%
1939	~10,000-11,000	~30,000	30%
Dec. 1939	0	-	0%
Today	0	-	0%

Sources: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, cols. 331-332; Eilender, "Brief History"; *Houston Holocaust Museum*; *JTA*, Dec. 22, 1939.

Kasriel Eilender, born in 1923 to a lumber-merchant family, remembered a "rather sophisticated community where several cultures coexisted" with "churches, synagogues, Polish elementary schools, Jewish elementary schools and one high school" alongside "concerts, lectures and sport activities such as soccer, kayaking and skating."¹⁵ Arnold Kerr, born in Suwalki in 1928 to a prominent family in the fur export business, offered a complementary portrait. His family owned multiple buildings, including one that housed the headquarters of the Polish Army in the area, and his father traveled to Leipzig, London, and Paris to buy furs.¹⁶ Kerr attended the Talmud Torah, a Polish government-recognized Jewish school where "we had all the subjects the same as a Polish school" but "also had to cover the Torah, the Chumash" and "even had studied Talmud and Hebrew."¹⁷ The town also supported a private Jewish gymnasium called Efron and a Polish state gymnasium, reflecting the community's investment in both religious and secular education. The institutional life of Jewish Suwalki extended well beyond schools and synagogues. The *Yizkor* book records a network of charitable organizations that sustained the community through war and hardships: the *Bikur Holim* medical fund, reorganized in 1920 with a budget of 7,000 zloty; the *Linat ha-Tsedek* sick care society; the *Artisans Society*; and the *Hakhnasat Orhim* hospitality inn.¹⁸ Eilender's "Brief History" lists "The Old Shul," organized in 1821, as the community's oldest institution, alongside 27 synagogues and minyans, a Talmud-Torah founded in 1851, and a *Tarbut* school for girls.¹⁹ The Bland film's visual record of the *Bet Yetomin* orphanage and the *Home for the Jewish Aged* confirms the documentary evidence: this was a community that provided for its members from cradle to grave.²⁰

Suwalki's Jews were also deeply engaged in the political movements that defined interwar Polish Jewry. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* records the presence of *Am Olam*, *Hovevei Zion*, the *Bund*, *Po'alei Zion*, and *Betar*, and the *Yizkor* book devotes entire sections to the Zionist organizations

¹⁵ Eilender, "Barber of Goerlitz," 1-2.

¹⁶ Arnold Kerr, oral testimony, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accession Number: 1995.A.1271.66, RG Number: RG-50.119.0066, April 11, 1983, Washington, D.C., during the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors Conference.

¹⁷ Kerr, oral testimony, USHMM.

¹⁸ *Yisker Bukh Suwalk arumike shtetlekh Baklerove...*, ed. Berl Kagan (Tel Aviv: Yair-Abraham Stern Publishing House, 1961), cols. 379-402.

¹⁹ Eilender, "Brief History."

²⁰ Harold Bland Collection, USHMM, accession nos. irn1005048 and irn1005049.

that flourished in the town.²¹ Pinhas Sapir, who would become Israel's finance minister, was born in Suwalki and made aliya in 1929.²² Avraham Stern, founder of the Lehi underground, was born and raised there.²³ Zalmen Gradowski, who would later write a testimony as a Sonderkommando in Birkenau, was an active member of the Betar movement in Suwalki and one of its local leaders.²⁴ From 1925 to 1939, Jews held approximately a quarter of the seats on the city council, roughly proportional to their share of the population.²⁵ That Suwalki produced a Zionist underground leader, an Israeli finance minister, and a Betar member forced to become a Sonderkommando within a single generation speaks to the intensity of a community whose political life was as varied as the fates that awaited its members.

When the Bland family visited Suwalki in 1937, they encountered more than prosperity. Alongside the synagogue and the market, Harold Bland recalls, "we had a very unpleasant incident in Suwalki. There was a market square with cement surrounding the square that had been apparently freshly laid. And while the cement was wet, somebody had written "kill the Jews" into the cement. And my brother took pictures of it with our camera. And within 10 or 15 minutes, we were picked up by the police and taken to the local police station."²⁶

Eilender's memoir corroborates the film's evidence. He recalled his Polish gymnastics teacher warning him: "You cannot afford to do these things, because you have to hold on with your hands and feet to this school since you are a Jew, and by the way, Hitler will soon come to you."²⁷ Pogroms prior to the outbreak of World War II led to waves of emigration to Palestine, South America and a smaller number to the United States.²⁸ The community that Bland filmed in 1937 was contracting. What none of its members could have predicted was the speed with which it would be annihilated.

II. Annihilation by Geography: The Destruction of Jewish Suwalki

The sophisticated communal world collapsed in a matter of weeks, not because of the gradual ghettoization that would characterize the Holocaust, but because of a line drawn on a map. When Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Suwalki was initially occupied by Soviet forces under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The JTA reported on October 9 that the Jewish population, "dreading Nazi rule, tried to escape with the retiring Russian troops" after the city fell "just inside the Nazi area under the new German-Soviet partition."²⁹ The key event was the September 28, 1939 German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty, which revised the original partition

²¹"Suwalki," Encyclopaedia Judaica, col. 332.; Yisker Bukh Suwalk, cols. 379-402.

²²"Sapir Dominated Israeli Politics and Economics Like a Colossus," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, August 13, 1975.

²³ Eilender, "Brief History."

²⁴ Arnold I. Davidson and Philippe Mesnard, "Biographical Data," in Zalmen Gradowski, *The Last Consolation Vanished: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson and Philippe Mesnard, trans. Rubye Monet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 26.

²⁵Rica Penn testimony, Josef and Edith Minberg Records, Holocaust Museum Houston, Destroyed Communities Interactive Learning Center, <https://hnh.mwmdigital.com/community/40/>.

²⁶ Harold Bland, oral history interview by Leslie Swift, February 5, 2015, RG-50.030.0831, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn104397>.

²⁷Eilender, "Barber of Goerlitz," 4.

²⁸ Eilender, "Brief History".

²⁹"Suwalki Jews, Fleeing Nazis, Seek Safety with Reds," Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin, October 9, 1939.

line. Soviet troops withdrew from Suwalki and the surrounding district, and Germany annexed the territory directly into the Reich as part of East Prussia, renaming the town Sudauen.³⁰ Polonsky notes that the annexed territories, including the Suwalki district, were marked out for ruthless Germanization personally supervised by SS chief Heinrich Himmler, a policy that left no administrative room for ghettoization.³¹

The consequences of annexation were immediate and total. Eilender, whose family had returned to Suwalki after the initial chaos of September, remembered Soviet commissars assuring the townspeople that "wherever the feet of Soviet soldiers stepped, they would never retreat. As usual, it was not true." Within days, Soviet tanks and trucks were moving toward Augustow. "Finally, the authorities admitted that this area was being incorporated into German East Prussia. Panic spread, especially among the Jewish population."³² The Soviets offered trucks to transport those willing to leave. Eilender's father, though no Communist sympathizer, "realizing that there was no future for his family under the Germans," moved the family to Augustow.³³ Approximately 3,000 Jews managed to cross into Soviet-controlled territory through similar means.³⁴

Those who could not flee, or chose to remain, faced a fate that unfolded along three simultaneous tracks: expulsion to the Lithuanian frontier, deportation to the Lublin district, and, for the elderly and disabled, execution in nearby forests. The timing is critical to the geographic thesis of this paper. Most communities were ghettoized in 1940 and 1941, with liquidations occurring primarily in 1942 and 1943. The Warsaw ghetto, established in October 1940, was not liquidated until 1942 to 1943. The ghettos of the Bialystok district, the region closest to Suwalki administratively, were established in late 1941 and early 1942.³⁵ Suwalki, by contrast, was Judenrein by December 1939, a full year before the Warsaw ghetto existed and nearly three years before the systematic deportations to death camps began. This chronological gap illustrates the operational difference between annexed Reich territory, where ethnic cleansing was immediate, and the General Government, where exploitation preceded extermination.³⁶

The first track of destruction, the expulsion to the Lithuanian frontier, produced some of the most harrowing documentation of the entire Suwalki catastrophe. Beginning in late October 1939, German authorities systematically expelled Jews from small towns throughout the Suwalki district, driving them toward the Lithuanian border. Moses Beckelman, the Lithuanian delegate of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, traveled to the frontier on November 5, 1939, and filed a memorandum that reads like a dispatch from the end of the world. At the border crossing near Vyzuonos, his commission found 31 people, including 12 women and 2 children, living under sticks covered with twigs in an open field, with one woman already dead from the

³⁰"German Administration of Poland," USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia.

³¹ Polonsky, *Jews in Poland and Russia*, 365

³²Eilender, "Barber of Goerlitz," 5.

³³Eilender, "Barber of Goerlitz," 5-6.

³⁴"Suwalki", Holocaust Museum Houston.

³⁵Crago, Rojowska, and Levin, "Augustow," in USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, vol. II, 864-866; see also the Bialystok region introduction, vol. II, 851-856.

³⁶"German Administration of Poland," USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia.; Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, vol. 3: 1914 to 2008 (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019), 364.

cold.³⁷ An 18-year-old girl told the commission that 281 Jews had been stripped of their coats, shoes, and valuables, and marched to the Lithuanian frontier under threat of being shot if they turned back. The suffering was unbearable: A woman, mother of two six month twins, not being able to suffer any longer, threw her children in the field and rushed into a pond. They succeeded in saving her. The Lithuanian frontier guards had pity on them and let them pass the frontier.³⁸

Beckelman's memorandum recorded 700 people stranded in this no man's land by November 2. The historian Michal Frankl, drawing on JDC archives and German Foreign Ministry records, has connected the Suwalki expulsions to a broader pattern of border violence, including the 1938 Zbaszyn deportations of Polish Jews from Germany.³⁹ A.M. Kaizer of the Anglo-Jewish Polish Refugee Fund, reporting from Lithuania in March 1940, described how "hundreds of Jews from the Suwalki district...perished in the swamps along the Lithuanian frontier."⁴⁰ Kaizer recounted an incident in which a Nazi guard seized a grandchild from an elderly man, "dashed him upon the ground and shot him dead before the aged man's eyes," then pushed the grandfather forward with the words: "Now you can keep step with them."⁴¹

The second track, deportation to the Lublin district, determined the fate of those Jews who remained in Suwalki after the initial flight and frontier expulsions. Eilender's "Brief History" records the decisive date: "Finally on December 9, 1939 all Jews remaining in Suwalki were ordered to stay in their houses. They were then picked up by heavily armed Germans, put in sealed trains and transported to several villages and towns in the middle of Poland in the region of Lublin."⁴² The JTA dispatch of December 22, 1939, confirmed that "the entire Suwalki district" had been "depopulated of Jews," with an estimated 2,700 transported to the Lublin "reservation."⁴³ The USHMM Encyclopedia's entry on Biala Podlaska documents the arrival of "about 2,000 Jews who had been deported by train from Suwalki and Serock" at the end of 1939, noting that they "were permitted to bring almost no luggage" and "were accommodated in Jewish apartments and others in the synagogues and prayer houses, which were very cold in winter."⁴⁴ The deportees' arrival in the Lublin district did not mean safety; it meant deferred murder. The Biala Podlaska ghetto, where many Suwalki Jews were concentrated, was liquidated on September 26, 1942, with its inhabitants deported to Treblinka and Miedzyrzec-Podlaski.⁴⁵ Those sent to Lukow and Kock faced similar fates. Eilender wrote bluntly about the remaining Suwalki

³⁷Moses Beckelman, "Nobody's Land: Report on Visit in Lithuanian No Man's Land," memorandum, November 10, 1939, JDC Archives, Records of the New York Office of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1933-1944, Poland, 17_00933.

³⁸Beckelman, "Nobody's Land," 2.

³⁹Michal Frankl, "Exhausted, Frozen and Only Half Alive: The Suwałki No Man's Land," We Refugees Archive, ERC "Unlikely Refuge?" project, accessed March 19, 2026, <https://en.we-refugees-archive.org/chapters/the-suwalki-no-mans-land/>.

⁴⁰"Plight of Wilno Refugees Described in London; New Details on Suwalki Ousters," Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin, March 4, 1940.

⁴¹JTA, March 4, 1940.

⁴²Eilender, "Brief History."

⁴³"Suwalki District in Nazi Poland Depopulated of Jews," JTA, December 22, 1939.

⁴⁴Katrin Reichelt and Martin Dean, "Biała Podlaska," in USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, vol. II, 615-616.

⁴⁵Reichelt and Dean, "Biała Podlaska," 617-618.

Jews: "It didn't take too long before all of them had been exterminated in one way or another." His grandmother Eiga "was just shot along with other victims in a forest at nearby Lomza."⁴⁶

The USHMM Encyclopedia's Augustow entry reveals a third thread in the dispersal pattern. When the Germans reoccupied the Augustow region after their invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, they consolidated about 100 Jews from other parts of the former Augustov region, as well as a handful of Jews still resident in Sudauen, into the Augustow ghetto.⁴⁷ This detail confirms that a small number of Jews had managed to remain in the Suwalki district even after the December 1939 expulsions. The Augustow ghetto was liquidated on November 2, 1942, and its inhabitants were deported to Treblinka via the Bogusze transit camp.⁴⁸ The Suwalki Jews who had fled to Slonim in Soviet-controlled territory fared no better. Eilender witnessed the July 17, 1941 massacre in which SS men herded approximately 1,200 young men from the Slonim ghetto and executed them in mass graves.⁴⁹

Arnold Kerr's trajectory illustrates the labyrinthine paths that Suwalki's scattered Jews followed toward destruction or, in rare cases, survival. His family fled from Suwalki to Sokolka, then to Vilna, where Kerr was bar mitzvahed at the Vilna Gaon's Kloyz. When the Germans invaded Lithuania in June 1941, the Kerrs were placed in the Vilna ghetto. Kerr was deported to Estonia in 1943, then to Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig, and finally to a subcamp called Burggraben, where he worked on submarine construction. In the final months of the war, he endured a death march into Western Pomerania, where six weeks of quarantine in a typhus-ridden camp killed 400 of 600 prisoners. He was liberated by the Red Army on March 10, 1945, the day after his seventeenth birthday.⁵⁰

The case of Zalmen Gradowski connects Suwalki's destruction to the industrial machinery of the Final Solution. Gradowski, the Betar leader who had been among the most politically active young Jews in pre-war Suwalki, fled to the town of Lunna near Grodno after the German occupation. On December 8, 1942, Gradowski was deported to Birkenau with his family. All of his relatives were gassed on the day of arrival. Gradowski was selected for the Sonderkommando, groups of Jewish prisoners forced to perform a variety of duties in the gas chambers and crematoria of the Nazi camp system⁵¹, and assigned to Crematorium III.⁵² His response to this assignment reveals the depth of religious conviction that characterized the Suwalki community he had left behind. "At the end of each day, because the Jewish faith prohibits burning bodies, Gradowski would put on his prayer shawl and phylacteries and recite the Kaddish."⁵³ Gradowski's trajectory, from Betar activist in Suwalki to Sonderkommando in Birkenau, illustrates how geographic dispersion extended the lives of Suwalki's Jews without ultimately saving them. His December 1942 deportation date, nearly three years after the town's

⁴⁶Eilender, "Barber of Goerlitz," 5-6.

⁴⁷Crago, Rojowska, and Levin, "Augustów," 865.

⁴⁸Crago, Rojowska, and Levin, "Augustów," 865.

⁴⁹Eilender, "Barber of Goerlitz," 7-8.

⁵⁰Kerr, oral testimony, USHMM.

⁵¹ "Sonderkommandos," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last edited September 17, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/sonderkommandos>.

⁵²Davidson and Mesnard, "Biographical Data," in Gradowski, *Last Consolation Vanished*, 26-27.

⁵³Davidson and Mesnard, "Biographical Data," in Gradowski, *Last Consolation Vanished*, 27.

Jewish population was expelled, demonstrates that the destruction set in motion by Suwalki's annexation into East Prussia pursued its former residents across borders and years.

Even Suwalki's Polish Catholic residents recognized the totality of what had occurred. Alex Charns, whose Polish-American grandfather Alek was imprisoned by the Gestapo for underground activities that included "smuggling Jews into Lithuania,"⁵⁴ recorded the testimony of elderly Poles who described "the horror of the roundup when the Jews were taken to the synagogue by the Nazis. They never saw them again. Only their luggage remained in front of the temple."⁵⁵ The Yizkor book's destruction chapters corroborate these accounts, documenting through survivor testimony the final days of Jewish presence in the Suwalki district.⁵⁶ The image of abandoned luggage in front of a synagogue captures the abruptness of Suwalki's destruction: there was no prolonged ghetto period, no gradual tightening of restrictions. One day the Jews were there. The next, only their belongings remained.

III. After the Silence: Suwalki and the Work of Memory

The totality of Suwalki's wartime destruction created a distinctive postwar problem: there was almost no one to return, and almost nothing to return to. Unlike communities in the General Government, where survivors sometimes trickled back to find remnants of the ghetto infrastructure or fellow survivors reorganizing communal life, Suwalki's Jews had been dispersed so widely that survivors had to search across multiple countries merely to learn who had lived and who had died. Arnold Kerr, liberated in Western Pomerania in March 1945, traveled to Bialystok because "if somebody survived, you would have gone to the hometown, to Suwalki or would at least have gone to Bialystok, where there was a big Jewish community." What he found was definitive: "I just found out that nobody survived."⁵⁷

Kerr's discovery was compounded by the dangers that awaited Jewish survivors in postwar Poland. He noted that "the right-wing Poles were killing Jews even after the war was over," a reality that made any thought of resettlement in Suwalki impossible.⁵⁸ The Yizkor book's postwar chapters, composed by survivors scattered across Israel, the United States, and South America, record the experience of those few who did visit the town after liberation. Their testimony constitutes the most emotionally direct evidence of what Suwalki's destruction meant in human terms, "There stood the same Jewish houses, but there were no Jews in them."⁵⁹ This single sentence, drawn from the Yizkor book's columns on the postwar return, distills the paradox that defined Suwalki's aftermath. The physical structures survived because the town had been annexed into the Reich, not bombed or burned in the manner of many General Government towns. The buildings stood, but the people were gone. The gap between the physical continuity of the town and the total absence of its Jewish inhabitants created a disorienting experience for returnees, as though the community had been surgically removed while the body of the town was left intact.

⁵⁴Alex Charns, *Listening to Chopin while Fighting Nazis: A Journey into my Family's WWII Polish Past* (Durham, NC: Bull City Law Publishing, 2023), ch. 5 (e-book, no page numbers).

⁵⁵Charns, *Listening to Chopin*, ch. 20 (e-book, no page numbers).

⁵⁶Yisker Bukh Suwalk, cols. 629-642.

⁵⁷Kerr, oral testimony, USHMM.

⁵⁸Kerr, oral testimony, USHMM.

⁵⁹Yisker Bukh Suwalk, cols. 643-654.

With return impossible and the community physically erased, Suwalki's surviving Jews reconstructed their world through the institutions of diaspora memory. The Yizkor book, published in 1961, served as the primary vehicle for this reconstruction. Edited by Berl Kagan and published by the Yair-Abraham Stern Publishing House in Tel Aviv, it spans hundreds of columns documenting every dimension of the lost community: its history, institutions, charitable organizations, religious scholars, political movements, and the destruction itself.⁶⁰ The book's very existence testifies to the breadth of the pre-war diaspora. A Suwalki Relief Committee had been established in New York as early as 1914,⁶¹ and the first waves of Suwalki immigrants to America had organized synagogues and mutual aid societies that preserved landsmanshaft ties across the Atlantic.⁶² After the war, a Suwalki Landsmanshaft in Israel continued these efforts, channeling refugee relief and preserving communal memory.⁶³

Eilender's "Brief History" provides a final accounting: "Most of the new generation of Poles who presently live in the city have never seen a Jew in their lives. The only memory of our people who lived here for 130 years is the empty silent cemetery where 32,000 Jews are buried."⁶⁴ Rica Penn's testimony at the Holocaust Museum Houston supports this claim. Born Rica Kramarska in Suwalki on December 15, 1921, Penn survived the war hiding in Lithuanian forests with her husband's family after her parents and sister Lea were murdered at Auschwitz in 1942. After the war, the Penns lived in Austria, then Italy, before emigrating to Houston.⁶⁵ Her survival, and her family's permanent resettlement abroad, was the pattern for nearly all of Suwalki's surviving Jews: displaced, scattered, and with no community to return to.

The Virtual Shtetl database maintained by the POLIN Museum confirms that no organized Jewish community has existed in Suwalki since the war.⁶⁶ The cemetery Eilender mentions remains the sole physical trace of a community that once comprised a significant portion of the town's population. In a place where Jewish life flourished for over 130 years, the silence is not merely an absence; it is the most tangible legacy of the geographic calculus that placed Suwalki on the wrong side of a border.

Conclusion

Suwalki's case challenges the dominant periodization of the Holocaust in Poland. The standard narrative moves from invasion to ghettoization to deportation to death camps, a sequence that unfolded over years in the General Government. In Suwalki, the entire process was largely compressed into weeks. The town's annexation into East Prussia meant that its Jewish population was subject not to the evolving policies of the General Government, but to the immediate imperative of making Reich territory Judenrein. This distinction carries historiographical weight: it demonstrates that the Holocaust was not a single process but multiple, overlapping processes

⁶⁰Yisker Bukh Suwalk, cols. 493-524.

⁶¹Yisker Bukh Suwalk, cols. 531-565.

⁶²Yisker Bukh Suwalk, cols. 567-581.

⁶³Yisker Bukh Suwalk, cols. 579-581.

⁶⁴Eilender, "Brief History."

⁶⁵Rica Penn testimony, Holocaust Museum Houston.

⁶⁶"History of the Community," Virtual Shtetl, POLIN Museum, accessed March 19, 2026, <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/s/686-suwalki/99-history/138098-history-of-community>.

shaped by the administrative geography of German occupation. Where a Jewish community fell on the map of German-occupied Europe determined when its destruction began and what form that destruction took.

The sources examined in this paper reveal the human consequences of that geographic calculus. Eilender's memoir, Kerr's oral testimony, the Bland film, the Beckelman memorandum, the JTA dispatches, and the Yizkor book columns do not merely document what happened to Suwalki's Jews. They collectively demonstrate how a community's memory persists even when every physical trace of its existence has been erased. The Yizkor book, assembled from the testimonies of survivors dispersed across three continents, recreates in text what the Nazis destroyed in fact: a complete Jewish world, with its synagogues and schools, its merchants and scholars, its charitable societies and political movements. That this world must now be reconstructed entirely from written and filmed fragments, rather than from living memory or surviving institutions, is itself a measure of the destruction's completeness.

Zalmen Gradowski, reciting Kaddish over the bodies he was forced to burn in Birkenau's crematoria, carried forward in the most extreme circumstances the religious tradition that had sustained Suwalki's community for more than a century. His gesture connected the destroyed world of Jewish Suwalki to the machinery of the Final Solution, and his clandestine writings ensured that the connection would be preserved for posterity. In Suwalki today, the Jewish cemetery stands silent, its stones the only witnesses to a community that once filled the town's streets, markets, and synagogues. The empty houses that greeted postwar visitors still stand, monuments not to survival but to the particular cruelty of a destruction so swift that it left the buildings intact while eliminating every person who had given them meaning.

Bibliography

- Beckelman, Moses. "Nobody's Land: Report on Visit in Lithuanian No Man's Land." Memorandum, November 10, 1939. JDC Archives, Records of the New York Office of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1933-1944, Poland, 17_00933.
- Bland, Harold. Oral history interview by Leslie Swift. February 5, 2015. RG-50.030.0831. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC.
<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn104397>.
- Charns, Alex. *Listening to Chopin while Fighting Nazis: A Journey into my Family's WWII Polish Past*. Durham, NC: Bull City Law Publishing, 2023.
- Crago, Laura, Elzbieta Rojowska, and Sala Levin. "Augustów." In *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945. Vol. II: Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe*, edited by Martin Dean, 864-866. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- Eilender, Kasriel. "A Brief History of the Jews in Suwalki." *KehilaLinks, JewishGen*.
<https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/suwalki/history.htm>.
- Eilender, Kasriel K. "The Barber of Goerlitz." *Memoir. Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
- Frankl, Michal. "Exhausted, Frozen and Only Half Alive: The Suwalki No Man's Land." *We Refugees Archive, ERC "Unlikely Refuge?" project*.
<https://en.we-refugees-archive.org/chapters/the-suwalki-no-mans-land/>.
- "German Administration of Poland." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/german-administration-of-poland>.
- Gradowski, Zalmen. *The Last Consolation Vanished: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson and Philippe Mesnard. Translated by Rubye Monet. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022.
- Harold Bland Collection. *Film and Video Archive*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accession nos. irn1005048 and irn1005049.
<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1005048>.
- "History of the Community." *Virtual Shtetl, POLIN Museum*.
<https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/s/686-suwalki/99-history/138098-history-of-community>.
- Kagan, Berl, ed. *Yisker Bukh Suvalk un di arumike shtetlekh Baklerove....* Tel Aviv: Yair-Abraham Stern Publishing House, 1961.
- Kerr, Arnold. Oral testimony. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Accession Number: 1995.A.1271.66. RG Number: RG-50.119.0066. April 11, 1983, Washington, D.C.
- Polonsky, Antony. *The Jews in Poland and Russia. Vol. 3: 1914 to 2008*. London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019.
- "Plight of Wilno Refugees Described in London; New Details on Suwalki Ousters." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin*, March 4, 1940.

- Reichelt, Katrin, and Martin Dean. "Biała Podlaska." In USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945. Vol. II, 615-619.
- Rica Penn testimony and "Suwalki". Josef and Edith Minberg Records, Holocaust Museum Houston. <https://hmh.mwmdigital.com/community/40/>.
- "Sapir Dominated Israeli Politics and Economics Like a Colossus" Jewish Telegraphic Agency, August 13, 1975.
- Schulz, Andreas. "Zichenau." In *The Greater German Reich and the Jews: Nazi Persecution Policies in the Annexed Territories 1935-1945*, edited by Wolf Gruner and Jörg Osterloh, 219-238. New York: Berghahn Books, 2015.
- Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
- "Suwalki." Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. Cols. 331-332.
- "Suwalki District in Nazi Poland Depopulated of Jews." Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin, December 22, 1939.
- "Suwalki Jews, Fleeing Nazis, Seek Safety with Reds." Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin, October 9, 1939.
- "Warsaw." Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed March 2026. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw>.