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Refugees or Deportees?

The Semantics of the First ‘Polenaktion’, Past and Present

Abstract

In the last weekend of October 1938 approximately 17,000 Jews with Polish citizenship, many of them born in Germany, were arrested all over the Reich, transported to different towns at the Polish border and forced to cross at gunpoint. Using the method of conceptual history, this article shows how contemporaries talked and wrote about the events from very different standpoints: victims of this persecution, Jewish help organizations as well as perpetrators. By using a very wide array of sources the shift in persecution policies, which is marked by the ‘Polenaktion’, can at the same time be traced as a shift in the concepts used to understand the events. One can literally observe a *coming to terms* with the unique events. Informed by writings of Hannah Arendt and Elie Wiesel as well as Kurt Grossmann and Arieh Tartakower, this contribution pays special attention to the term “refugee”.

“Polish Jews’ Plight” – the headline of *The Times* on 1 November 1938 – was as correct as it was misleading.¹ Even though the political and economic situation of millions of Jews in Poland was deteriorating, the title referred to just a very small group, namely 17,000 Polish Jews who had been expelled from the Third Reich, many of whom were stuck between the borders. They were victims of the first bureaucratically organised mass expulsion from the Reich, foreshadowing later deportations.

The role of the first ‘Polenaktion’ within Holocaust/Shoah scholarship still remains to be determined. This article uses a novel methodological approach, as it looks into the terminology used to describe both the events and those who fell victim or were affected by the unprecedented phenomenon of a mass expulsion bordering on deportation. Two terms were already in use as early as November 1938 – refugees and deportees. Delving into a conceptual history of these terms, bound to the history of the Shoah, allows for different perspectives on the events to become visible, both within their historical context as well as in later historiography.

As I will show, terminology was unstable in 1938/39, as the novelty, the rupture of the event could only be perceived as such in retrospect. So, this article enquires: How does the struggle to find an adequate term to describe the experience of the ‘Polenaktion’ help to identify this moment as a turning point? Since the extermination of the European Jewries, a *coming to terms* has become observable in a literal as well as a metaphorical sense. There has been scholarship on the concepts of Shoah, Holocaust, Churban and the terms “victim” and “survivor” as well as difficult discussions over who was a perpetrator. There have been discussions of the present-day use of terminology as well as of the interpretation of the events. But conceptual history as a method has only very slowly been introduced into Holocaust scholarship.² This arti-

1 Polish Jews’ Plight, in: *The Times*, 1 November 1938, 1.

2 Alina Bothe/Markus Nesselrodt, *Survivor. Politics and Semantics of a Concept*, Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 61 (2016), 57-82.

cle uses as its main method the analysis of the semantic content of concepts in their chronological context. It will allow for an analysis of historical as well as the contemporary aspects and shed light on the understanding and interpretation of these by different actors. Conceptual history is a theoretical approach for analysing the semantic changes or continuities of and within given concepts, for example “the people”, “marriage”, or “history”.³ It is normally bound to one language and one national context, even though first attempts have been made for a more complex approach. One such example is the discussion of the term “survivor” after the Shoah. My approach diverges in its multilingual approach from classical conceptual history, in that it offers both a diachronic and a synchronic analysis of a term in one language, including the surrounding concepts used, and moreover looking into the semantic depths of the term used in translation in different languages. This approach aims to understand the different meanings of terms in the historical context of an acute situation as well as in the longer term. Classical conceptual history has not explored terminology relevant to the field of Shoah history, while most scholars in the field of Holocaust history mostly abstain from the methodology of conceptual history in reflecting on historical as well as contemporary language. Through this approach, conceptual history brings together the history of events with the experiences of those persecuted. Furthermore, it allows for a reflection of the personal level of individual experience within a forced collective as well as of the ‘meta’ level of international and institutional politics.

Unfortunately, in the 1970s Reinhart Koselleck and his team had other concepts in mind when they thought of the key concepts in the history of the twentieth century, which were mostly derived from social and economic history. Nowadays, concepts such as “refugee” or “expulsion” would be seen as dominant concepts of the twentieth century.⁴ Therefore, conceptual history also reflects eminent historiographic changes. As the term “refugee” is not discussed in the work *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, we have to turn to other texts to explore the concept and the consequences of being a refugee. The victims of the ‘Polenaktion’ were turned into refugees and/or deportees first by Nazi persecution policies that cut them off from their personal, social, and economic networks, in which they had still been embedded in 1938. Second, they became refugees or deportees in the eyes of the different actors who assumed responsibility for them: Polish-Jewish relief organisations, the Polish Red Cross, the broad public in the UK donating goods and money through *The Times*, the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), as well as different Polish state agents involved in maintaining and solving the crisis caused by Nazi brutality. This was a sudden transformation for those who expelled from Germany: One day, they were shopkeepers, heads of their families, and agents of their own fate within the conditions of toughening persecution, and the next day, they were helpless and had to be taken care of.

The main questions this article tackles are: How did different actors and those affected in 1938/39 see the events, as reflected in the concepts they used? Which concepts are used nowadays with which meanings attached? I will discuss the ‘Polenaktion’, as this persecution was called by the perpetrators, as a crucial turning point in the European discourse and politics on statehood and asylum in the significant

3 Reinhart Koselleck, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Vol. 1. Einleitung des verantwortlichen Redaktors, v-xxv-viii.

4 Koselleck, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, v-xxviii.

year of 1938.⁵ As Raphael Gross put it: “The year 1938 stands for a new dimension of violence against Jews, for the transformation from discrimination and deprivation of rights to systematic persecution, robbery, and eviction.”⁶ I argue that 1938 is also relevant for persecution affecting the legal status of citizenship, especially of foreign citizenship. The first time that Jews were forced to leave Germany as a group based on their citizenship took place January 1938, when Werner Best ordered the (failed) eviction of Jews with Soviet citizenship.⁷ The mass deportation to Poland was planned from April 1938 onwards in an inter-ministerial working group. In a parallel process, the same ministries tried to decide which ethnic Germans with Polish citizenship were to resettle in the Third Reich. Citizenship under pseudo-ethnic aspects, especially concerning minorities, was very much central to Polish-German relations in 1938/39. The specific situation of Danzig and the expulsion of ‘Reichsdeutsche’ (ethnic Germans) from Poland under the March law (which are explained below) are not discussed here, but need to be taken into consideration as well.

Overview and Context

On 28 October 1938, Nazi exclusionary policies once again shaped and changed European discourse, forcing international actors to respond and altering the lives of many people, this time based on citizenship and taking the form of expulsion. This date marks the first mass deportation under National Socialism and the beginning of a yearlong policy of persecution of Jews with Polish passports in the German Reich. The first ‘Polenaktion’ consisted of gathering, arresting, and deporting more than 17,000 Jews of Polish citizenship to Poland in response to the Polish March law.⁸ From late January until August 1939, a further estimated 15,000 were deported in small groups. Finally, in September 1939 more than 5,000 Jewish men with Polish passports were arrested and sent to the concentration camps of Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and Dachau.⁹ There had been expulsions of Eastern European Jewish migrants from Germany before, most notably in 1921 and 1923. But 1938 was singular in quantity as well as in quality. The persecution of Jews with Polish citizenship in the Third Reich between October 1938 and September 1939 (the first ‘Polenaktion’, the expulsions in 1939, and the second ‘Polenaktion’) reveal much about the escalation of broader Nazi policies towards Jews and in regard to Poland itself. The first ‘Polenaktion’ proved the possibilities of the “movement of population”, especially

5 In his important article on the ‘Polenaktion’, Wolf Gruner dismissed the idea of a deportation. Wolf Gruner, *Von der Kollektivausweisung zur Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland (1938–1945)*. *Neue Perspektiven und Dokumente*, in: Birthe Kundrus/Beate Meyer (ed.), *Die Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland. Pläne – Praxis – Reaktionen 1938–1945*, (=Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus, 20), Göttingen 2004, 21–62.

6 Raphael Gross, *November 1938. Die Katastrophe vor der Katastrophe*, Munich 2013, 9.

7 See for example *Archiwum Państwowe Zielona Góra* [State Archive of Zielona Góra], *Landratsamt Sorau*, 1229, 3, includes a collection of orders on the issue by Best.

8 Trude Maurer, *Abschiebung und Attentat. Die Ausweisung der polnischen Juden und der Vorwand für die “Kristallnacht”*, in: Walter H. Pehle (ed.), *Der Judenpogrom 1938. Von der “Reichskristallnacht” zum Völkermord*, Frankfurt am Main 1988, 52–73; Sibyl Milton, *Menschen zwischen Grenzen. Die Polenausweisung*, in: Menora. *Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte*, 1990, 184–206; Yfaat Weiss, *Deutsche und polnische Juden vor dem Holocaust. Jüdische Identität zwischen Staatsbürgerschaft und Ethnizität 1933–1940*, Munich 2000, 195–204.

9 1939 has not yet been discussed properly within the context of the ‘Polenaktion’. My postdoctoral project examines the persecution of Jews with Polish citizenship in the Third Reich from 1938 to 1940. Preliminary results regarding 1939 have been published in: Alina Bothe, *Forced over the Border*, in: *Yearbook of the Simon Dubnow Institute* 2018 (forthcoming).

towards the East.¹⁰ The second ‘Polenaktion’ was the first concentration camp action against this group of the population and showed the newly gained powers of the war-time Third Reich. Following the ‘Anschluß’ of Austria, the Sejm passed a law on citizenship, the so-called March law. Citizens who lived abroad and had not re-entered Poland for at least the last five years could be stripped of their citizenship. The law was neutral in language, but it was clearly aimed at the Polish Jews living in Austria and Germany. Polish politicians were afraid of mass immigration of pauperised Jewish migrants who had lost their property in the Reich and the annexed territories. The law had already been prepared since October 1937, otherwise it could not have been processed this fast. Mixing antisemitic and economic arguments, the Sejm and the Polish Government were interested in stopping a possible mass immigration of Jews with Polish citizenship from Austria and Germany. This aim was to be secured, as argued by Jerzy Tomaszewski, by revoking their citizenship.¹¹ After an extensive exchange of notes in which Germany demanded the revocation of the March law, the ‘Ausländerpolizeiverordnung’ (decree concerning the police’s handling of ‘foreigners’) was passed on 22 August 1938. If the Jews with Polish citizenship living in Germany were to have their citizenship revoked by the Polish administration following the March law, they would have their resident permit for Germany revoked at the same moment. Some of the later deportees realised the danger of the new Polish and German laws and regulations very early in 1938 and tried harder to emigrate, as we know from letters and testimonies.¹² On 26 October 1938, Reichsführer SS and Chief of German Police, Heinrich Himmler, gave the order for the mass deportation to the subordinated authorities of the Reich. Between 27 and 29 October, the affected persons were arrested across the whole country. The deportations stopped on 29 October 1938 because Poland had threatened to expel ethnic Germans from Poland in return. Those already deported had to stay in Poland, many thousand in the border

10 Alina Bothe, “... wird gegen Sie ein Aufenthaltsverbot für das Reich erlassen”. Die Deportation von Jüdinnen und Juden polnischer Staatsangehörigkeit aus Berlin im Oktober 1938, in: Borggräfe, Henning (ed.), *Wege, Orte und Räume der NS-Verfolgung*, Freilegungen 5, Göttingen 2016, 83-105, here 105.

11 Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Auftakt zur Vernichtung. Die Vertreibung polnischer Juden aus Deutschland im Jahre 1938*, (=KLIO in Polen 9), Osnabrück 2002, 73.

12 As one telling example put it: “I said to my father – this measure is directly intended against us Polish Jews and I told him, I am afraid, that I am convinced the Nazi Government would [...] take some action.” USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Buck, Julius. Interview 37719. © 1997, Segment 34-35, Min. 4:31-5:01 Buck urged his father to go with him to the Verband der polnischen Juden, where his fears were confirmed, but they were told that there were others in greater need, as they had already been placed in concentration camps. Buck, aged 15, tried to persuade his parents to pursue emigration options, but his father, as a former officer in the First World War (fighting for the Habsburg Empire), did not think it necessary. Only after the expulsion did Buck’s mother, in his recollection, take measures into her own hands and secure him a place on one of the at least three kindertransports organised by the Polish Jewish Refuge Fund from Gdynia to London. His father was allowed to return briefly to Berlin in July 1939, while his mother had also been issued an expulsion order by the Berlin Foreign Police. In early August 1939, Buck’s parents left Germany, crossing over to Italy and from there to Aix-en-Provence, where they were jailed for a year as illegal immigrants. In 1942, his mother was first brought to Rivesaltes and from there was deported through Drancy to Auschwitz. His father survived in France. Another example would be the Adler family from Berlin, who had already received immigration papers to the US earlier after 1933, but gave them to a more endangered family. Once the new Polish legislation came into effect, they tried hard to receive new papers, which arrived in April 1939, a few weeks after the last members still in Berlin had been forced to leave. There are moreover a number of cases in which people knew about the upcoming expulsion measures and either tried to get to Poland beforehand on their own or were able to evade the expulsion, but smuggled themselves into Poland right after the “Polenaktion”. See Carolin Raabe/Constanze Seifert-Hartz, *Familie Bachner*, “Wir waren unter denen, die wirklich Glück hatten.”, in: Alina Bothe/Gertrud Pickhan, *Ausgewiesen! Berlin, 28. 10. 1938. Die Geschichte der “Polenaktion”*, Berlin 2018, 78-85. This is also indicated by the correspondence files of the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde in Vienna, which in 1938 and 1939 was in contact with a number of Viennese Jews with Polish citizenship who had either been expelled or had fled to Poland. See also Alina Bothe/Christine Meibeck, *Familie Buck. Bürgerliches Leben in Steglitz*, in: Bothe/Pickhan: *Ausgewiesen!*, 98-105.

town of Zbąszyń (Bentschen), to which Saul Friedländer referred as an internment camp.¹³ This is the brutal chapter of a binational conflict about the citizenship of a minority. While the Polish state was not interested in having Polish Jews migrating and some of them returning to Poland, the Polish embassy in Berlin intervened regularly on behalf of Polish Jews in Germany from 1933 onwards.

Refugee or Deportee? Considering a Term

As mentioned above, the 1930s were a special decade in the development of refugee policies. Matthew Frank and Jessica Reinisch put it like this: “The decade saw co-ordination between states to guard against refugees: a negative form of international cooperation based on a sort of competitive restrictionism.”¹⁴ Michal Frankl stated (referring specifically to the Czechoslovakian case, but with striking similarities to the Polish situation): “The refugee question became increasingly intertwined with citizenship, ethnicity and minority rights.”¹⁵

Three texts serve in the following as the point of departure to discuss the term refugee: Hannah Arendt’s *We Refugees* (1943),¹⁶ Arieh Tartakower and Kurt Grossman’s *The Jewish Refugee* from 1944,¹⁷ and Elie Wiesel’s *The Refugee* from forty years later.¹⁸ All authors were refugees in their own right, Elie Wiesel having been the only one who had survived the death camps. They were all European Jews who had lost the citizenship due to Nazi persecution between 1933 and 1945. While these authors agreed on some basic semantic and everyday elements of the term refugee as well as of the refugee experience, the differences in argumentation are noteworthy. Tartakower and Grossmann’s *Jewish Refugee* from 1944 helps to differentiate the terms. The authors defined three different groups of people who leave or are forced to leave their countries of origin:

1. An “emigrant” decides voluntarily to move to another country.
2. “A refugee is a person, who leaves his place of abode not of his own free will, but because he is driven to do so by fear of persecution, or by actual persecution, on account of his race, religion or political convictions.”¹⁹
3. “All trace of voluntarism is lost in the case of the third category of displaced people, the deportees. These are persons compelled by physical force to leave their homes and go elsewhere. They are free neither to choose the time of their departure nor – with very few exceptions – to go wherever they like. As a rule, both their emigration and their new place of residence are fixed for them by the deporting authorities.”²⁰ They added that a deportation is mostly accompanied by the confiscation of property.

Given these defining aspects of the deportee as someone who is “compelled by physical force to leave their homes and go elsewhere”, one can safely designate those

13 Saul Friedländer, *Das Dritte Reich und die Juden. 1933–1945*, Munich 2013, 131.

14 Matthew Frank/Jessica Reinisch, *Refugees and the Nation State in Europe 1919–1959*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 49 (2014) 3, 477–490.

15 Michal Frankl, *Prejudiced Asylum. Czechoslovak Refugee Policy, 1918–60*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 49 (2014) 3, 537–555.

16 Hannah Arendt, *We Refugees*, in: Mark Robinson, *Altogether Elsewhere. Writers in Exile*, Philadelphia 1996, 110–119.

17 Arieh Tartakower/Kurt Grossmann, *The Jewish Refugee*, New York 1944.

18 Elie Wiesel, *The Refugee*, in: *Cross Currents* 34 (Winter 1984/85), 385–390.

19 Tartakower/Grossmann, *The Jewish Refugee*, 2.

20 *Ibid.*, 3.

who were brought to the Polish border in October 1938 as deportees. But the picture became confused when Tartakower and Grossmann analysed the first mass deportation. First they wrote: “On the night of October 28, 1938, over 15,000 Polish Jews long resident in Germany were arrested and deported to Poland.” Someone who is deported is a deportee. A few sentences later we can read the following: “At first the Polish authorities allowed the refugees to proceed to the interior, where they could at least expect to receive temporary help from friends or relatives; but after a few days the authorities had a change of heart and interned over 5,000 refugees at Zbonszyn.”²¹ Now, we have refugees who were deported and are subsequently interned. This little semantic analysis shows that, in 1938 as well as in 1944, when Tartakower and Grossmann wrote their book, the legal and political situation of the victims was hard to grasp. They were literally what Sybil Milton later called people “between borders.”²²

Hannah Arendt pointed out in 1943 that the refugees did not like to be called refugees, but preferred the term immigrants, especially before the war.²³ She thus succinctly also pointed to the power and perception contained within a concept. At this point, it was considered better to be named an immigrant rather than a refugee. Elie Wiesel complemented Arendt’s argument with his very personal perception of the term:

“What has been done to the word refuge? In the beginning the word sounded beautiful. A refuge meant ‘home.’ It welcomed you, protected you, gave you warmth and hospitality. Then we added one single phoneme, one letter, e, and the positive term refuge became refugee, connoting something negative.”²⁴

As Arendt noted wryly: “Refugees need to be helped”²⁵ by refugee committees. A refugee had lost the ability to take care of themselves. This was exactly the response of the Polish Jewish charities to the Jews expelled from Germany. They saw a group a people, more than ten thousand, in dire need of help, as they could not care for themselves under the circumstances. Arendt did not dwell on what made her or the others she included in her “we” a refugee, but paid more attention to the consequences of this situation, while Elie Wiesel gave a very short and clear answer: “Now what is the characteristic of a refugee? It is that she or he has no citizenship.”²⁶

Arendt wrote: “We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life.”²⁷ Arendt was herself a refugee, but crossed the border, while being threatened, on her own. By contrast, the victims of the first ‘Polenaktion’ were transported to the border under threat, so the journey over the border, which made them refugees, was different. While the result – having to leave their country of residence – was the same, the process and the agency of the individuals involved differed enormously. The refugee beforehand acted upon their own decision to cross the borders, often forced by threat, but not actually expelled. They did not arrive in masses, but in small groups, and needed to orientate and organise themselves. Even if they did not want to leave, they were in the mind-set of seeking refuge or exile.²⁸

21 Ibid.

22 Sibyl Milton, *Menschen zwischen Grenzen. Die Polenausweisung*, in: *Menora. Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte* (1990), 184-206.

23 Arendt, *We Refugees*, 110.

24 Wiesel, *The Refugee*, 388.

25 Arendt, *We Refugees*, 110.

26 Wiesel, *The Refugee*, 388.

27 Arendt, *We Refugees*, 110.

28 For the broader context, refer to David Jünger, *Jahre der Ungewissheit. Emigrationspläne deutscher Juden 1933–1938*, Göttingen 2016, who discussed the shift from emigration to flight.

“We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world.”²⁹ This experience was also often reported after the ‘Polenaktion’, with the refugees often losing their businesses, having been forced to close them down. After the expulsion, most of those affected had no possibility to rebuild their professional lives, having left them in a hurry with few economic resources to rely on. This could have grave consequences, as the story of Heinz Baran shows. He was transported to Poland from Berlin together with his father at the age of sixteen. In 1939, his father left him alone in Poland, and emigrated with the younger brother and their mother to South America, hoping that it would be easier to send emigration papers to his son from there. Heinz went to live with distant relatives in the town of Kutno. In his letters, he begged his parents from the beginning of the occupation onwards to send him money, because to their relatives he was “der Schnorrer” (the mooch).³⁰ He was last heard from in late 1941. “We lost our language.”³¹ Not only was a language lost, but families had to find a new language within short phone calls and in the written word, which is evident from many letters of the deportees and their loved ones.

Agents and Terms

Conceptual history investigates the genesis of a term as well as the development of its meaning. The examples discussed here serve the goal of generating a broad overview, allowing semantic nuances to be discerned. First, however, one needs to consider language. I here focus on German, English, and Yiddish. In a broader discussion, it would be valuable to also include Polish. To make the article readable, the terms and quotations needed to be translated, with the necessary shifts that occur in translation. The question of the term used is not purely academic, but is grounded in the experiences of those affected, who needed to argue for recognition of their sufferings after the events. It is to be assumed that they were already forced to find words for what they were going through during the persecution. These words were hard to find and many relied on press images and texts that spoke of “the plight of the Polish Jews”.³² First, I will consider the terminology used by the perpetrators, before looking into the wording of victims and other agents involved.

For the German Foreign Office, the situation was complicated. While the Ministry of the Interior wanted to expel the “Ostjuden” as soon as possible, the Foreign Office pressed for a diplomatic option, without showing signs of weakness towards other German authorities.³³ The language the officials at the Foreign Office chose was bureaucratic: They spoke about Polish nationals, Polish Jewish nationals, or Polish nationals of Jewish race.³⁴ Right after the deportation, they changed the wording and further spoke about “Polish Jews who were the property of the Polish State” and expellees.³⁵ In official perpetrator documents, the term “Ausweisung”³⁶ (expulsion) was used. Internal documents of the Foreign Office deployed a different terminol-

29 Arendt, *We Refugees*, 110.

30 Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten Berlin, Entschädigungsbehörde, Entschädigungsakte 317679, M. 58.

31 Arendt, *We Refugees*, 110.

32 *The Times*, 30 October 1938, 1.

33 The term „Ostjuden“ was regularly used in official documents. Politisches Archiv Berlin, Ausweisung von Ostjuden aus Deutschland 1925–36, Schreiben Regierungspräsident Düsseldorf, 1935, R 82778.

34 See for example: Politisches Archiv, R 82778.

35 Politisches Archiv Berlin, R 28881, 250.

36 Politisches Archiv Berlin, R 28881, 250.

ogy, demonstrating both a semantic shift as well as a shift in meaning. In a memorandum from early November 1938, the State Secretary Ernst von Weizsäcker pencilled in the words “Abtransport”³⁷ (removal) and “Massen-Abtransport”³⁸ (mass removal), yet the term “Ausweisungs-Aktion”³⁹ (expulsion campaign) was also used within the Foreign Office. An expulsion (*Ausweisung*) is a juridical act, based on the sovereign right of a state to terminate the residence of a foreign citizen. “Aktion” (campaign) hints at the extent of the measure. When von Weizsäcker scribbled down “Abtransport” and “Massen-Abtransport”, he used a language of dehumanisation rather than of a juridical measure. Those still described as “Ausgewiesene” (expellees) in the Foreign Office documents become objectified and depersonalised. Moreover, the term “Abtransport” has an underlying semantic connection to military transports. Both terms were used for later deportations, see for example the various “Transportlisten” (transport lists) from the collection camps on the way to Auschwitz or the transit camps.

As discussed elsewhere, the ‘Polenaktion’ was implemented extremely differently in different states, cities, and districts. So, for Saxony, the terms were “Abtransport” (removal) and “abtransportierte Juden” (removed Jews), while in Braunschweig the term used was “Ausgewiesene” (expellees).⁴⁰ These small semantic differences could point to a different understanding of the campaign by lower level administrations tasked with its implementation. The different terms used in the official German documents produced by the relevant ministries and agents of the bureaucracy shows that the situation was in a certain way a semantic challenge for the perpetrators and their language as well. This was a novel situation, for which no clear and unified semantic arsenal (vocabulary) existed at that point.

Those who fell victim within the first weeks used different terminology to describe the events and their new personal situation. Quite a few relied on the German technical term “Ausweisung” (expulsion) or used phrases or descriptions like “nach Polen fahren muss” (have to go to Poland). In a letter to a relative dated 17 November 1938, Max Karp, a Berliner with a very tight grasp on his language, described the entire series of events in different phases. The first step was the “Verhaftung” (arrest) on his doorstep; next came the “Sammelaktion in den einzelnen Städten” (the collection campaign in the individual towns). The public was seen on the streets as he was transferred to a train station, as they watched the “historische Austreibung der Juden aus Deutschland” (the historic expulsion of the Jews from Germany). Having arrived in Neu Bentschen (today Zbąszynek in Poland), he reported “weitere einlaufende Transporte” (the arrival of further transports) and another train of “Zwangsmigrierten” (forced migrants). After a “Marsch” (march), actually more of a “Treibjagd” (battue or hunt), he was among many who reached the Polish border. At this moment, his language changed very interestingly: “Wir mussten einige hundert Meter weiterlaufen, damit sich der ganze Flüchtlingsstrom auf polnischem Gebiet befand.” (We had to walk a few hundred metres, until the entire flow of refugees had reached Polish territory.) A few sentences later, he again noted the change of status, once the border was crossed: “Inzwischen kamen immer mehr Flüchtlinge (aus D. Vertriebene) an.” (In the meantime, ever more refugees arrived /expellees from Germany/.) In the later parts of the letter, too, he used the term “Vertriebene” (expellee) when speak-

37 Politisches Archiv Berlin, R 28881, 265.

38 Ibid.

39 Politisches Archiv Berlin, R 288881, 331.

40 Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv Wolfenbüttel, Neu 13, no. 1578, unpaginated; Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Ministerium des Innern, no. 11687, 116.

ing about the experience within Germany. But once he referred to the pogroms in Germany, he clearly observed that refugees, as they were no longer in the country, were by then a distinct group with different experiences. Following Max Karp in his reflective language, the status of the refugee became a special status once the victims of the “Polenaktion” arrived in Poland and describes their situation within Poland. “Vertriebene” meanwhile was the term used in connection to Germany.⁴¹ This argument is strengthened by the language used by Lothar Wellner in a letter from Zbąszyń to Rabbi Erwin Zimet sent as late as June 1939. Within days of their expulsion, Zimet and Wellner had joined the efforts to organise help.⁴² Zimet was able to emigrate as a rabbi on the US non-quota and continued to correspond with Wellner in Zbąszyń. In his letter, Wellner wrote to Zimet praising the “gewaltige Hilfeleistung des polnischen Judentums für unsere Flüchtlinge” (massive assistance of Polish Jewry for our refugees).⁴³ Wellner’s use of “our refugees” entailed a mixture of paternalism and solidarity that many of those who were pushed into Poland felt. Two Polish Jewish committees were immediately prepared to help those who had been deported. In the Yiddish press, which was heavily invested in the rescue movement, the terms “pleytim” (refugee) and “aroysgeshikte” (banished), sometimes also “fartribene” (expellees) were used.⁴⁴ While the term “pleytim”, a Hebraism in Yiddish, reflected the consequence of the situation, “aroysgeshikte” reflected the process of expulsion.

Different terminology was used by the JDC in their annual report of 1938. The overview of events in 1938 in the Foreword already stated: “October brought with it the shocking deportation from Germany of 20,000 Jews of Polish nationality over the Polish-German border.”⁴⁵ A few pages later, an additional page about “The Deportees” offered further insight into the situation in Poland. Without referring to them as refugees, the JDC clearly considered the act of eviction in the form of a 1938 deportation as more important. But, at one point, the word refugee was used to describe the “unfortunate”.

When we include the documents and testimonies of survivors, and often also their descendants, from the compensation files of the 1950s and 1960s, a highly important source pool with regard to language and content, the picture becomes slightly less clear. Relatives who possessed no further knowledge about the fate of their loved ones after the ‘Polenaktion’ often used the term “Deportation”, while those who had further knowledge distinguished between 1938 and later deportations.⁴⁶ The use of the term “Deportation” here seems to have been a necessary tool for claiming compensation, especially as the German compensation authorities rejected the interpretation of the “Polenaktion” as a “nationalsozialistische Unrechtsmaßnahme”⁴⁷ (an official Nazi policy that amounted to an injustice). As the “Polenaktion” targeted people with foreign citizenship without a legal basis concerning, for example, property, many compensation authorities rejected requests for compensation. This urged the victims-turned-“Antragssteller” (applicant) to discuss the events and their interpretation in writing in the 1950s and 1960s. One stunning example is by Gertrud K.

41 Jewish Museum Berlin, letter from Max Karp, 2006/78/3.

42 Jewish Museum Berlin, Collection Erwin Zimet, 200/104/1, f. 18.

43 Ibid.

44 See for example *Der Moment*, 3 November 1938, 1, and *Der Moment*, 16 June 1939, 6.

45 American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (ed.), *Aid to Jews Overseas. Report on the Activities of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee for the year 1938 (1939)*, 7.

46 See for example Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten Berlin, Entschädigungsbehörde, Entschädigungsakten 311.339, 311.340, 172.409.

47 See for example Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep. 025-02, Wiedergutmachungsakten, Nr.: 1353/55, Bl. 64.

from Braunschweig. She was detained along with her husband and her ten-year-old daughter on the evening of 27 October 1938 and after a few hours in prison were shipped to the Polish border. They had to stay in Zbąszyń for months, until Gertrud became one of the few who received the permission to return in July of the following to liquidate shops and apartments. She did not return before the German invasion of Poland on 1 September and her husband died that November, leaving her young daughter alone. She lost all trace of her daughter in 1942 and about ten years later applied for her to be declared dead and asked for compensation.⁴⁸ She was not awarded any compensation for her husband's death nor for the confiscation of her property, but only received a small sum for the loss of her daughter. In plain but gripping words she summarised how the "Polenaktion" had affected her:

"Now I ask you kindly, did an unlawful detention take place or not, because, assuming the former rulers had not taken over, I could still be together with my family and my husband would still be alive. As it is, I lost everything through the action of the unprincipled rulers; apartment, furniture, husband, and everything."⁴⁹

Gertrud K. saw her family rightly as the victims of an unlawful campaign by the regime. She had to be very careful in her argumentation due to citizenship matters. She was born in 1900 into German citizenship and received Polish citizenship through her marriage in 1924. In 1948, she remarried and regained her German citizenship through her second husband. Had she made a strong argument about their persecution as Jews with Polish passports, she would not have been eligible for compensation. This is why she settled for the basic human argument concerning the destruction of her family. Gertrud K. here argued on the basis of the result of the events, which was sufficient and convincing in her case. But the picture gets more complicated when turning to other victims. For many of the families, the experience of October 1938 was an impetus to accelerate their plans to emigrate as quickly as possible.

Conclusion

This article focussed on terminology and shifts in language in 1938 and afterwards regarding the unique phenomenon of the first "Polenaktion" and those affected by it. The shifts in language and meaning are seen as a tool to interpret the historical situation from the contemporary as well as retrospective perspective. In the sources discussed here, a non-homogenous use of wording can be observed – on all sides involved, affected or witnessing. This shows clearly that the events were hard to grasp for the agents involved, to understand that they had reached a turning point. Nonetheless, the usage of unusual terminology, as shown above, implies those agents were *coming to terms* with the newness of the situation. Second, we see through language a process of *becoming* a refugee, a figuration that is different in interpretation for the refugees themselves as for the welfare and care organisations, different state agents, and further institutions involved.

In this short article, I chose to reflect on the vocabulary of very different actors in order to broaden the topic. This means that the semantic analysis was necessarily

48 Her daughter had in fact survived in the Soviet Union but the two only learned about each other's survival in 1957, after which they started to exchange letters.

49 Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv Wolfenbüttel, 4 Nds 1908/1907.

brief. But the approach used here allows for more meanings and shifts in meaning to be demonstrated, while the multi-voice perspective hints at the possibilities of an *integrated* conceptual history, following Saul Friedländer's important call for an "integrated" history of the Shoah. By this multi-vocal and multi-language approach, it is possible to identify the first 'Polenaktion' as a crucial shift in Nazi persecution policies from emigration to deportation.

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