

## Preface

Children of Holocaust survivors often sense missing family members who remain abstractly among the living; they are a presence that is not present. In my case, one of these lost relatives was my mother's brother, Elijah/Ilia (Eli) Gumener (1886–1941?). He was present in my middle name, and he appeared among my mother's photographs. And he was present in a slim clothbound book that stood virtually unnoticed among hundreds of Yiddish volumes in my parents' library. That unassuming book, entitled *A kapitl Ukraine: Tsvey yor in Podolye* (A Ukrainian Chapter: Two Years in Podolia), is an account of my Uncle Eli's experience as an aid worker during the pogroms in Podolia, Ukraine between 1918 and 1920. The title suggests that the book is more than a report; it is a lament for the victims. The word *kapitl* itself brings to mind the Jewish custom of reciting chapters (*kapitlin*) from Psalms at gravesites.

My mother, Betty Gumener Nutkiewicz (1908–85), had told me her brother was a lawyer who was murdered in the Holocaust. But she never mentioned that he had been an aid worker in Ukraine during the Russian Civil War. Nor had she mentioned that he had published a book about his experiences. This book must have had tremendous meaning for my mother as a physical reminder of her dear elder brother. But as with many survivors/refugees, her sadness made it impossible for her to share his full story with me in her lifetime. My discovery of the book after my parents' death illuminated how little I knew of my family who perished.

Even before I began to translate the memoir, a Yiddish inscription on the title page revealed how it came into my mother's hands. The dedication reads: "My friend and colleague I. Drakhler. A memento of joint experiences in Ukraine. A present from the author. November 16, 1921." Yisroel Drakhler was a Russian Jew who also served as a relief worker in Podolia. In 1922 he emigrated to Canada and then moved to Detroit, where he was an educator in Yiddish-speaking circles.<sup>1</sup> My parents lived in Canada and in Detroit during overlapping years. The Nutkiewiczs and Drakhler most certainly were members of the same social circles in both cities, and it was then that Drakhler

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<sup>1</sup> "Yisroel Drakhler," [www.yleksikon.blogspot.com](http://www.yleksikon.blogspot.com), last modified 6 December 2015.

must have given Eli's memoir to my mother. But how did it come about that by 1941 the Nutkiewiczzs were safely in North America and Eli Gumener and his family were murdered in the Soviet Union?

Reconstructing the choices made by Jews in 1930s Europe is complex. Before the concentration camps, ghettos, mass shootings, and death camps, how could they know about the imminent dangers? And even if they "smelled gunpowder in the air," as Eli poignantly notes about Podolia even before the pogrom period, what were the options for leaving? And to what destinations?

Indeed, a chilling glimpse into Eli Gumener's mind barely a year before WWII appears in a photograph among dozens my parents had saved. It depicts his family in April 1938. He wrote on the back: "Who knows if it would not have been better had I emigrated in 1921." Such a thought must have been on the minds of the hundreds of thousands of Jews who had lived through revolution, wars, and the horrific pogroms in Eastern Europe between the two world wars. Working in the border areas of Ukraine, Bessarabia (Romania), and Galicia, Gumener had seen and reported how nearly impossible it was for Jews to escape the war zone. Most hoped to migrate to Western Europe, the United States, or Palestine. But Poland and Romania were not eager to be transit sites for Jewish refugees fleeing west, the United States had passed restrictive emigration quotas in 1921 (and would again in 1924 and 1927) that favored immigrants from northern and western Europe, and Palestine had just become a British mandate. Now Gumener, like the entire Jewish world, was anxiously watching the ominous unfolding events in the 1930s.

My parents Betty and Sergei (1903–88) decided to leave Poland on the eve of the German occupation in 1939. Sergei had been a well-known leader in the Bund, the Jewish socialist party. From 1935 to 1938 he was a member of the Łódz city council elected on the Bund Party ticket. Fearing that if Nazi Germany invaded Poland, the Germans would target Jewish political leaders, they fled Warsaw for Vilna in August. Vilna was ruled by the Soviet Union after the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop pact gave Lithuania and eastern Poland (known as the *kresy* or "borderlands") to the Soviets and western Poland to Germany. Betty and Sergei were among approximately 15,000 Polish Jews who fled to Lithuania at the outbreak of the war.

Why did they go first to Vilna? Betty knew the city well, having studied art education at Vilnius University and taught at the Jewish Teachers Institute. But they did not remain there long. They soon joined Eli, who lived about 80 miles away in Nowogrodek. It had been part of Poland but was then included in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

My parents were determined to leave Europe altogether in hopes of reaching North America. It seems a bold decision since they had no relatives

there. In February 1941, Betty and Sergei were lucky to receive two rare transit visas for Japan. They took a train to Moscow, continued by the Trans-Siberian Railway to Vladivostok, boarded a Japanese ship to Tsuruga, and finally went by rail to Kobe. They lived in Kobe from February to June 1941 when they received another stroke of luck: permission to immigrate to Canada just a few months before Pearl Harbor, arriving in Vancouver on the ship *Hikawa Maru* on June 17, 1941, its last voyage before the United States and Japan went to war in December.

I do not know why Eli did not join his sister and Sergei in their flight from Europe to Canada. It may be simply that he was unable to obtain visas for himself, his wife, and two children. Like many people, he probably did not imagine that Germany would invade the Soviet Union. He was active in Nowogrodek's Jewish community and engaged professionally in aid work for refugee children on behalf of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in various parts of Eastern Europe. By contrast, Betty and Sergei had already left their home and jobs and did not have children. Thus, Eli was still in Nowogrodek with his family when the Germans entered their city on July 4, 1941. Later that year or in early 1942, the Germans shot him, his wife Rachel (née Czacka), and their 13-year-old daughter Genia. Their son Pinchas, a university student in Lvov (in Russian; Lemberik or Lemberg in Yiddish; Lwow in Polish; Lviv in Ukrainian), escaped the fate of the rest of his family: he joined relatives in Kuibyshev (now Samara) in the lower Volga region, where the German army never reached.

Although I did not know these details about my Uncle Eli's family and history when I discovered his memoir in my parents' library, I was immediately intrigued as I began to explore its contents. I was amazed to learn that Eli and I had more in common than our name and a distant familial connection. Without even knowing about my uncle's work with refugees and survivors of armed conflict, I had spent much of my professional life working in agencies that provide help to refugees and victims of state-sponsored torture. Moreover, Gumener makes the motive for his testimony clear: "I simply want to record what I know for future historians who will want to write the bloody tragedy of a powerless people put to the sword, and of the heroic moments that make up the thorny wreath of martyrdom of Podolia."<sup>2</sup> I had also grappled with narratives of trauma while working for the Shoah Foundation collecting survivor interviews.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Eli Gumener, *A kapitl Ukraine: Tsvey yor in Podolye* [A Ukrainian chapter: Two years in Podolia] (Vilna: Sreberk Publisher, 1921), introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Nutkiewicz, "Shame, Guilt, and Anguish in Holocaust Survivor Testimony," *The Oral History Review* 30, 1 (2003): 1–22.

The “thorny wreath” described by Gumener occurred between 1918 and 1920 in Ukraine, which soon after the October 1917 Russian Revolution became the battlefield for competing powers and the scene of an estimated 1,200 to 1,500 pogroms. These armed conflicts and assaults against Jews caused the largest number of Jewish deaths and displacements in Jewish history until the Holocaust.

Why should we care about this century-old memoir that is neither part of the literature of survivors nor even meant to be a complete history of the period? The reason is that Gumener provides a bird’s-eye view of the challenges of a problem that still confronts us in the 21st century: how to adequately respond to the suffering and dislocation that inevitably accompanies war and civil strife. *A kapitl Ukraine* presents a unique perspective on the powerlessness of individuals, parties, and organizations to address a humanitarian crisis facing Jewish communities in Ukraine.

His particular focus is the most horrific period of the Russian Civil War and is illustrative of a genre of writing called “microhistory”: Gumener describes just two years in Podolia, revealing how he conducted himself within that time frame and geographical space.<sup>4</sup> His book is an ideologically tinged account of Jewish party politics, a perspective we must keep in mind as we read it through. Yet it is set in a broader context: pogroms in a particular region and the experiences of the day-to-day life of an average aid worker “in the trenches.”<sup>5</sup> It is one of the few surviving memoirs from this period by a relief worker, and as such, is a highly valuable and rare historical source about men and women who faced constant danger as they tried to alleviate the suffering of their brethren. For those reasons, *A kapitl Ukraine* is a worthy memoir to read and to ponder. I dedicate this work to the memory of Elijahu Gumener and to the hundreds of nameless and unrecognized professionals

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the better-known works of microhistory include Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Sarah Maza, *Violette Nozière: A Story of Murder in 1930s Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diary Writing and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), and her “A Terrible and Terribly Interesting Epoch”: *The Holocaust Diary of Lucien Dreyfus* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Jaclyn Granick has recently published the first account of Jewish humanitarian aid in the interwar period. See Jaclyn Granick, *International Jewish Humanitarianism in the Age of the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

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who toiled in the war zones of Ukraine and indeed across the entire Pale of Settlement between 1914 and 1921.<sup>6</sup>

*Michael Eli Nutkiewicz*

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<sup>6</sup> The Russian Empire before the Russian Revolution included the Pale of Settlement—essentially a vast “reservation” of towns and villages where Jews numbered five million and constituted more than 90 percent of the population. The territory included most of what is now Ukraine, parts of Belarus, Poland, and Lithuania.