

the association's bookkeeper and the only other non-Jewish person in the group, gives words to my thoughts: "I look at these people, I see them every day, they are happy and have a good life. But one thing you should never forget: they are all orphans. When I had problems, I could always rely on my parents, my mother, but they had nobody; all their relatives were gone." Although the park had grown green where, at the end of World War II, corpses and bomb craters gave witness to the 900-day siege of Leningrad by German troops, the remnants of the past are still present. They are often invisible, yet undeniable. The lives of Frida Ped'ko, Elena Drapkina, Pavel Rubinchik, and their friends who were with me in the park had been forever marked by the experience of violence, survival, and the reconstruction of lives left in ruins after the war.

This book shows how Soviet Jews, born between the mid-1920s and the early 1930s, experienced the Nazi occupation and genocide in Belorussia, and how they remember it. This portrayal of the history and memory of systematic violence necessitates looking at the ways in which people learned to perceive and understand their lives, before, during, and after the war. Only such an integrated perspective allows us to decode how representations of the past emerge, why specific aspects are left out, and why others are emphasized. Notably, policies and debates on nationality, gender, and war determined how Soviet Jewish youths related to their society and other individuals. The breakdown of the Soviet project, and its policies' prospects and promises, as a result of the Nazi occupation is a central element of Soviet Jews' experience of the Nazi genocide.

This portrayal of survival under the Nazi genocide in eastern Belorussia is based on personal narratives. It is not only a critique and rectification of a postwar history in which many Soviet Jewish survivors were discriminated against, it also highlights how the ideological and cultural framework of Soviet society molded both how young Soviet Jews experienced the Nazi genocide and how they, as elderly women and men, represent it after the Soviet Union has ceased to exist. A collective biography of young Soviet Jews who endured Nazi persecution and often barely escaped mass murder, this book shows that surviving the Nazi genocide in German-occupied Soviet territories affected people's lives far beyond the hunger, violence, and lethal danger during the war. The Nazi regime destroyed people and places, but it also invalidated the lived reality of a prewar world where social equality and peaceful interethnic cohabitation seemed possible.

Tracking these women's and men's lives in light of broader historical and cultural tendencies set in motion by first Soviet, then Nazi, and then again Soviet rulers, the following pages reveal the shift in perspective that Soviet Jewish children and adolescents had to undergo, from a privileged position as builders of a new society to a position at the bottom of society, as bodies that could be exploited for work and then targeted for extinction. They introduce the experiences, and in later years memories, of a generation of Jews that lived through a series of upheavals, that saw the hopes inspired by Soviet prewar internationalism collapse with the German invasion, that managed to survive the Nazi extermination project, and that finally re-entered and remained in Soviet society after the war.

The story is one of repeated transformations of identity, from Soviet citizen in the prewar years to a target of genocidal violence during the war to barely accepted national minority in the postwar Soviet Union. The story is also one of multiple forms of violation piled on top of each other, beginning with Soviet nationality policies obstructing the cultural and religious framework of traditional Jewish identity, continuing to the Nazi annihilation policy eradicating Jewish people and their culture, and followed by the systematic omission of Soviet Jews' wartime experience from the official portrayal of the war within and beyond the Soviet Union.

At its core, this book is a rumination about how we can live in the present with an unbearably violent past. It is a book of memory for the women and men I met in St. Petersburg and Minsk, and for their friends, relatives, and neighbors who confronted Nazi racism and its repercussions, often left to do so on their own. Remembering this isolation cannot undo it, but it may pose important questions and suggest answers on how to live ethically with the aftermath of systematic violence and with those who suffered from it.

Belorussia, 1939–1944

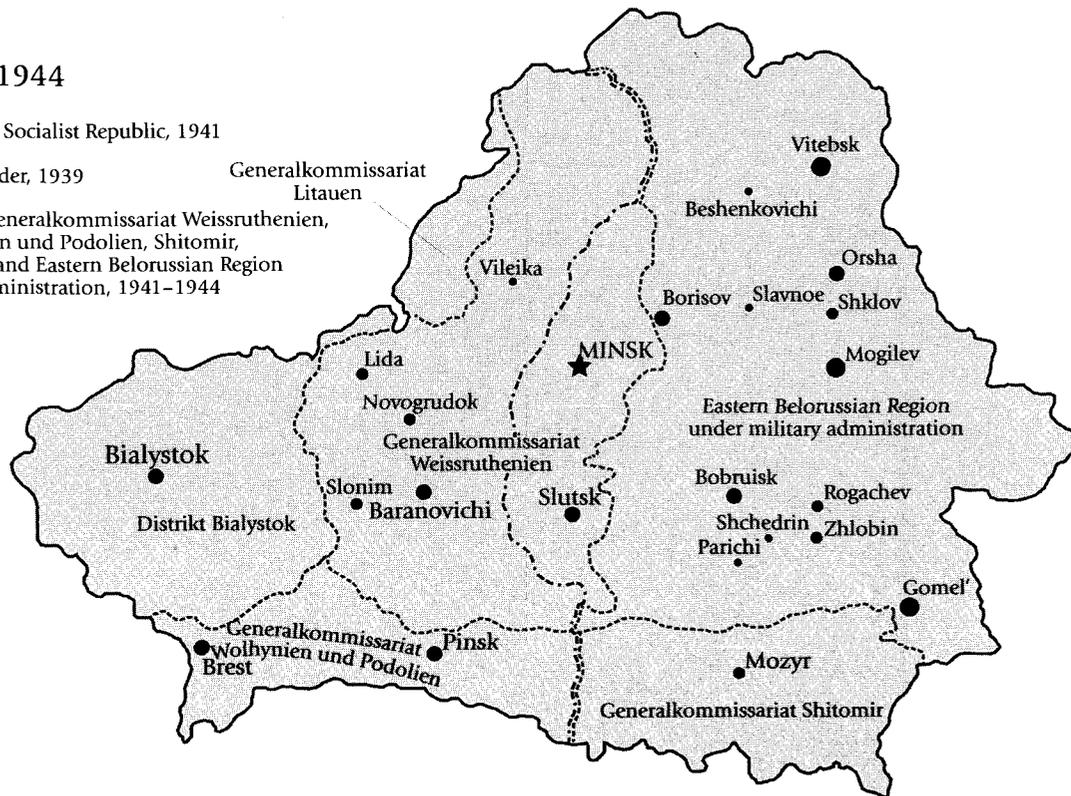
— Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, 1941

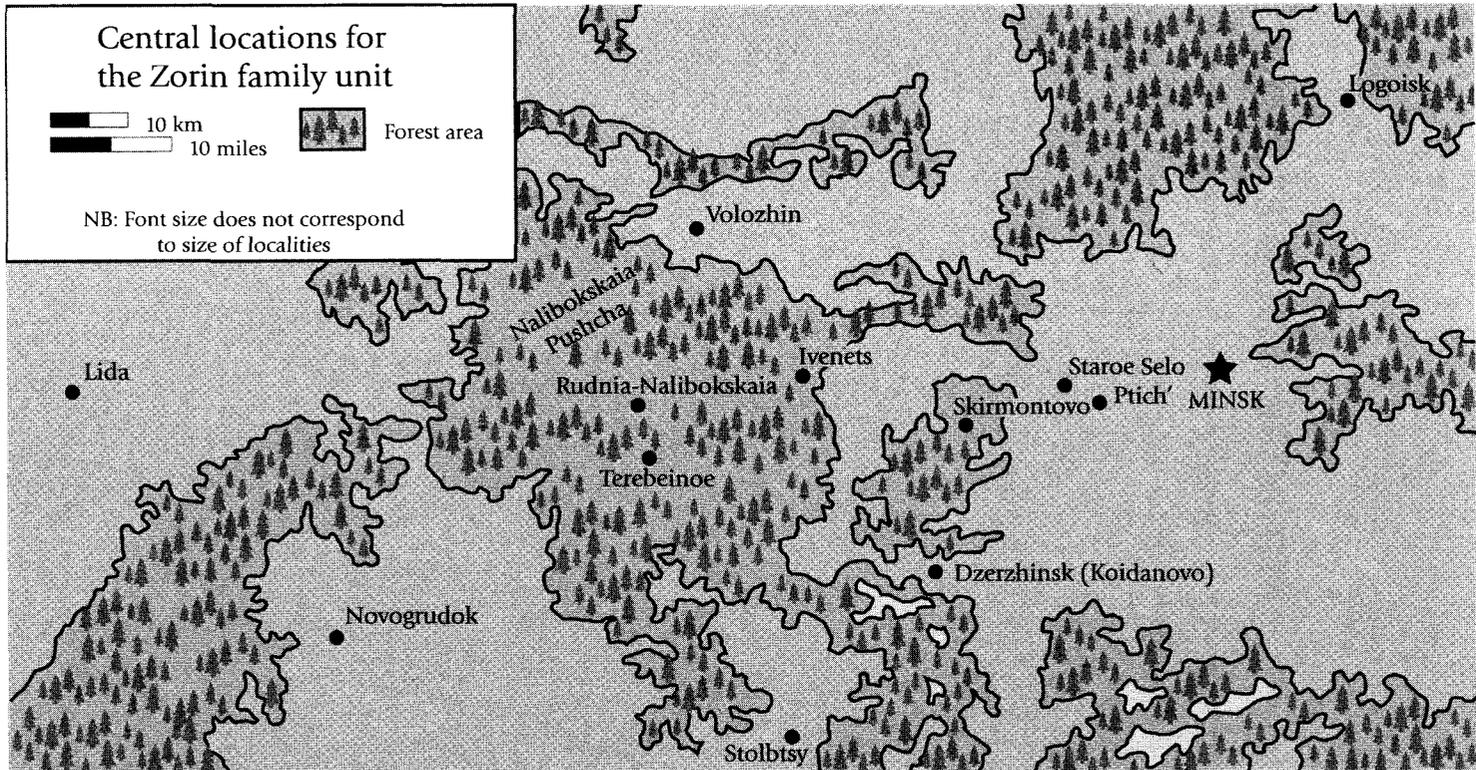
- - - - Eastern Polish border, 1939

- - - - Border between Generalkommissariat Weissruthenien, Litauen, Wolhynien und Podolien, Shitomir, Distrikt Bialystok and Eastern Belorussian Region under military administration, 1941–1944

Town population

- 800-4,200
- 5,000-20,000
- 21,000-99,000
- 100,000-170,000





Central locations for the Zorin family unit

Introduction

Frida Ped'ko has a vivid memory of the day the Jews of Slavnoe, a small town near Vitebsk, Belorussia, were killed. On the morning of March 16, 1942, Jewish women and men, adults alongside adolescents and children, were lined up and led to an execution site near the town. Asked whether she, then seven years old, understood what was happening, Ped'ko says,

I didn't really understand, when they took us and told me, "We're going to mama." I had understood that she was shot and that that was terrible, but I didn't understand that that was forever. I thought she is somewhere . . . But when my sister said, "They'll shoot us," I was terrified, asked, "What do you mean, they will shoot at me? That will hurt and will make me bleed!"¹

A few minutes before the column of people, lined up in rows of three or four, reached the borders of the town, someone pushed Frida and her sister Elena into the arms of an onlooker. Piotr I. Stasevich took the children and placed the seven- and ten-year-olds in the house of Vera and Vania Nastiporenko. Afraid that German troops would find out about the hidden Jewish children, the family asked Stasevich to move them a few days later. This he did, hiding the sisters in a hut he built in the woods outside of the small settlement. Stasevich thus rescued the two children from sure death: as many as 150 Jews residing in Slavnoe were shot on March 16, 1942, in a ditch near the village of Gliniki.²

For two and a half years, Frida and Elena scraped by in their hideout in the woods. They lived on mushrooms, berries, herbs, and whatever else they could find. Piotr Stasevich also brought food and sometimes demanded that Ms. Nastiporenko help the children as well. In addition, Frida Ped'ko says that she and her sister sometimes snuck into the Nastiporenko family's pigsty and grabbed food from the feeding troughs. Joining a partisan unit,

a formation of guerilla fighters that emerged in the forests and swamps of this Soviet republic, as many other ghetto refugees were able to do, was not an option:

Nobody took us, children were of no use to them. That would have been an additional burden. When my sister asked them, they said that they would take her; but me, being seven years old, they couldn't take me. But she couldn't abandon me and leave me behind on my own.³

In the summer of 1944, the two children were too exhausted to imagine themselves still alive the following spring. They had already survived two harsh winters, suffering illness as a result of eating poisonous mushrooms, and fearing wild animals roaming the forest at night. "We decided to go to the local commander and ask him to kill us. We were so wasted, there was no real food."⁴

During our interview, Frida Ped'ko was aware that these thoughts must appear disturbing: "It is strange, how calmly we spoke about this, that we would somehow make it through the summer, but that, if the country would not be liberated by the winter, we would surrender. We remember this often nowadays, it was so horrible."⁵ Luckily, on a trip to find food, the older sister, Elena, noticed Soviet troops in the area and, in June 1944, found out that the region had been liberated. The two sisters could safely leave their hide-out in the forest and ask for help in the nearby village.

At the time of our first encounter in 2000, Frida Ped'ko was filing paperwork for material compensation allocated by the German government to survivors of Nazi ghettos. She was also applying for social benefits that the Russian state granted to veterans of the war. In both instances, the claims were initially denied for lack of evidence and because Frida was considered too young to have suffered substantive damage. The loss of a mother—shot in June 1941 for being Jewish and for being a Communist Party official in the local granary—and the postwar struggle of an orphan coping with the emotional and physical traumas of surviving undernourished and exposed to the elements were insufficient grounds for her claims.⁶ Instead, bureaucrats in the local administration insulted her, arguing that "living in a ghetto wasn't that bad."⁷

Frida Ped'ko is acutely aware of how her Jewish nationality marked her as a specific target of ignorance, discrimination, and violence, compounding

the suffering and loss she experienced as a child. On the other hand, she very clearly recognizes that she shares her difficulties and many of her memories with her non-Jewish compatriots, and thus she identifies herself as part of a larger, Soviet collective:

In Belorussia, who was it who died there—everyone. It is of course a different story that almost all Jews died, but the Belorussians lost every fourth too. And if you look at the old women from my hometown who saw everything and who mourned with us—if you see how they live today, nobody helps them at all. That is why I think that everything should be distributed equally. Everybody should live well. I am an internationalist.

Remembering her life before, during, and after the war, Ped'ko emphasizes when she was singled out, but also places herself within the framework of Soviet society more generally and insists on people's equality. "Internationalism," understood here as a form of interethnic solidarity, was an important tenet of Soviet ideology.⁸ Throughout her life she actively participated in building a society based on this ideology, supporting, for instance, the local *Komsomol*, the Communist Party's youth organization, whenever possible.⁹ And she joined the Communist Party, explaining it by saying "I was thankful that the Soviet Army rescued us."

Frida Ped'ko's story exemplifies the lives of thousands of other men and women who, as children and adolescents, survived the Nazi occupation of Belorussia and the genocide that targeted them for being Jewish. Some of them survived in hiding, like Frida and her sister; others joined or were admitted into partisan units. Small numbers were evacuated to the Soviet rear when the opportunity arose, but not before they too had witnessed murder and starvation and pondered the effects of systematic physical violence.

Shocking in their frankness, young Frida's thoughts on what it means to be shot crystallize the terror and disbelief with which residents of the former Jewish Pale of Settlement—roughly comprising present-day Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Moldova, Ukraine, and parts of western Russia—confronted the onslaught of German troops in the summer of 1941. What we call the Holocaust, the murder of European Jewry, in this area happened very quickly, and very publicly. Most of the Jews in eastern Belorussia were killed by March 1942, usually falling victim to mass shootings at trenches, ravines, or pits near or in their hometowns.¹⁰ Overall, an estimated 800,000 Jewish

civilians, roughly 80 percent of the prewar population, were murdered by the Nazi regime in Belorussia.¹¹ Exact numbers and percentages are difficult to establish, because it is unclear how many Jews were physically located within Belorussian borders when German troops began the murder campaign there.¹² An influx of refugees from Poland from the beginning of the war in 1939, mass escapes and evacuations organized by the Soviet government in the summer of 1941, deportations of Jews from Germany, Austria, Hungary, and elsewhere to Belorussia by the Nazi regime, and finally the exodus of surviving Jews after the war make it impossible to say precisely how many Jews died during the occupation.

The speed and brutality of the Nazi campaign of extermination in eastern Belorussia is remarkable when compared to these campaigns elsewhere in Europe. The internal life of the ghettos in eastern Belorussia deserves attention because the role and purpose of these ghettos in the process of the so-called “final solution of the Jewish question” differed markedly from those of the ghettos in Poland and other Eastern European countries. In the Soviet territories, ghettos did not serve as transitional spaces of internment from which inmates were deported to extermination camps. Rather, they were themselves, or were in close proximity to, sites of mass murder. For the most part, they were holding pens in preparation for genocide.¹³ Stories about life in the ghettos of Slavnoe—Frida Ped’ko’s hometown—or elsewhere in eastern Belorussia and in Minsk are thus not merely “untold” stories to be added to the literature on the Holocaust: Frida Ped’ko and other Jews in eastern Belorussia witnessed, experienced, and responded to extermination campaigns differently than Jews elsewhere. In part this is, because prior to the German occupation, Jews residing in this region did not necessarily perceive themselves as members of a specific and identifiable community. This was especially true of a young generation of Jews who did not view their lives as distinct from those of their non-Jewish compatriots; a religiously or nationally defined Jewish community did not previously provide an important framework for their daily lives.¹⁴

Granted, a sense of integration, even assimilation, was widely shared among Jews across Europe. Throughout the nineteenth century, more and more Jews—in France, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere—had sought to become full members of the societies in which they lived. They limited the practice of their Jewish faith to the home, intermarried, and otherwise followed the trend to secularize their public lives.¹⁵ Albeit hampered by the

upsurge of racial antisemitism that denied Jews, for instance in Germany, the possibility of ever becoming proper German citizens, because supposedly they were different “by blood,” many European Jews were able to build a life in the midst of their non-Jewish contemporaries.¹⁶

Though Soviet Jews shared this experience, their assimilation was unique, the result of a state project that included the abolition of religious Judaism. Void of its spiritual and ritual core, “being Jewish” in the Soviet context was increasingly limited to a legal category, especially for a younger generation who had not been taught Hebrew or how to read the Torah. They were Jewish by nationality, a concept used to describe the different ethnic groups of the Soviet Union.¹⁷ In this system of thought, Russian, Ukrainian, German, Jewish, Tatar, and other nationalities were distinguished by their common heritage and shared linguistic and cultural traditions, including religious beliefs. Religious frameworks for national cultures were increasingly dismantled, however, in the 1920s and 1930s. A drive toward secularization was motivated by the hope that all Soviet citizens would adopt the ideas and values of communism, viewing themselves as members of the proletariat, makers of their own fate, and builders of a revolutionary state.¹⁸

For Frida and many of her contemporaries, the Soviet state had taken on the capacity to give meaning to an individual’s life and to determine daily and weekly schedules. In addition, it provided a frame for people to live together despite national differences between them. In this environment, “Jewish community” refers to a group of people who share the same nationality, but not to a tightly knit group that is identifiable because they perform the same rituals, visit the synagogue, or observe the Shabbat. Soviet Jews, in sum, were increasingly recognizable only by their passport, where, since 1932, each Soviet citizen’s nationality was listed as one of many identifiers.¹⁹ For young citizens like Frida, even that was irrelevant, as they would not receive a passport until they were sixteen years old. They saw themselves as Soviet children, had friends who were Belorussians or Russians, and did not conceive of themselves as people who would warrant any kind of special treatment, positively or negatively. This framework, the idea that different nationalities can live together, broke down when Germans began to kill Jews en masse and some Soviet citizens supported them.

Frida Ped’ko’s overall account echoes other survivors’ experiences and perceptions, moving from descriptions of a promising prewar life of peace, interethnic friendships with other adolescents, and her mother’s social and

economic mobility to the shock of Nazi violence and the small, if pivotal, moment of narrowly escaping execution. She further addresses postwar disappointments at state antisemitism that hindered her personal career and obstructed respectful treatment. Like many others, she balances this account by placing her wartime losses within those suffered by the Soviet population as a whole and by affirming her commitment to the Soviet state. Ped'ko's evocative memory of her and her sister's planning to have themselves killed, along with her recognition of the difficulty of grasping this decision in the present, is a powerful reminder that there is a difference between what then, during the war, seemed inevitable and how we may think about it now. What she tells us and how she narrates her story is based on a movement between the past and the present.

As a whole, life stories such as Frida Ped'ko's show how people make sense of violence and how they remember it. Rather than studying accounts exclusively focused on wartime experience, this book is based on oral histories spanning the course of a life to detect the dynamics of this sense-making and remembering.²⁰ My inquiry draws on scholarship suggesting the role of social and cultural frames for how individuals construct their memory.²¹ Narrations about personal experiences not only bring narrators' minds close to events and actions in the past, but also remind them of social rules and limits to what could be said publicly at the time of the remembered events.²² These restrictions resurface when people recall their past, as evidenced by the use of specific terms or refusal to describe intimate experiences such as sexual violence or other themes that are considered taboo. Considering these dynamics is important in order to understand the effects of social change on individual lives and how, in turn, individuals make sense of these changes or particular events and periods of their lives.

Hannah Arendt posited that it is the task of the historian to detect new elements of human history by recognizing that an "event cannot but appear as an end of [a] newly discovered beginning."²³ The study of the German occupation and Nazi genocide in the USSR (as an event) is here the catalyst to reveal "an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities" that preceded the event and, in doing so, exposes its destructive impact more fully.²⁴ Considering the unexpected landscape of the prewar period, which originally was not at the center of inquiry, produces a reevaluation of Soviet nationality policies, especially toward Jews, that suggests that internationalism was a partially lived reality that held great

promise for the future. Teasing out that this lived reality is a point of comparison for elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union—to its breakdown with the German invasion, and later on the dissolution of the USSR in 1991—this book develops a new way of looking at Holocaust-related accounts coming out of the post-Soviet context. The oral history–driven approach to understanding the Nazi genocide in the Soviet territories reveals the meaning of the Soviet project for individuals as a sincere attempt to create a society that overcomes national (racial) discrimination, and that in the 1930s it seemed possible to establish such a society. The devastation wrought by the Nazi regime turned these hopes into memories of a bright, yet forever unfulfilled, future of friendship and equality.

This book offers an inside perspective on the life of Jewish children and adolescents during the Nazi occupation of Belorussia. This is, of course, a partial account. The ongoing war, competition between various administrative bodies, and the arbitrariness with which individual soldiers, members of the SS, and collaborators treated Soviet citizens under occupation generated a highly complex and often contradictory environment that was not apparent in its entirety to individuals and groups who were trying to survive. While subjective and reflecting diverse personal experiences, the portrayal advances three major insights. Firstly, age and gender are crucial factors for experiencing, surviving, and remembering the Nazi genocide in Soviet territories. Secondly, survivors' memories in the post-Soviet context reflect a flexible sense of self, oscillating between identifying as Jewish, Soviet, or both. Lastly, the shared trauma of war and genocide in Nazi-occupied Belorussia facilitated new, and revived previously established, interpersonal bonds among Jews and between Jews and Gentiles.

These three analytical dimensions—age and gender, identity and memory, trauma and community—are deeply intertwined, yet it is helpful to tease out their specificities individually to highlight their significance. Outlining how these factors mold historical experiences and their memory and how they have been previously treated by scholars provides important background information for the stories this book seeks to tell.

Age, gender, violence

Among the 800,000 Belorussian Jews killed by Germans and their collaborators were parents, grandparents, and other relatives of thousands of young Jews who survived the war. The young Jews—girls, boys, some teenagers,

Advance praise for

PIONEERS AND PARTISANS

“In the best traditions of oral history, *Pioneers and Partisans* is the only book that brings to life the totality of the Soviet Jewish experience—from the utopian, internationalist hopes of the early Soviet period and the utter destruction of Nazi occupation to post-war Soviet silencing and then post-Soviet memory creation—from the perspective of those who lived it.”

David Shneer, Louis P. Singer Chair in Jewish History, University of Colorado,
author of *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*.

“In this gripping and intimate history, Anika Walke provides one of the first studies of Nazi genocide of Jews in the former Soviet Union. The Soviet state celebrated Soviet Jewish partisans as anti-fascist fighters, yet it erased the genocide of the Jews from its official narrative of the war. Using interviews and archives, Walke reconstructs a prewar life of socialist promise, Nazi mass murder, the partisan struggle, and the shaping of memory in the postwar Soviet Union. With deep empathy and grace, she reconstructs the lives of the survivors and the meanings they gave to their own history.”

Wendy Z. Goldman, Professor of History, Carnegie Mellon University

“*Pioneers and Partisans* draws on the life histories of now-elderly child survivors to show how the Nazi occupation and genocide in Belorussia disrupted and ultimately reconfigured Jewish and Soviet identities and communities. With remarkable sensitivity and methodological sophistication, Walke attends to hesitations and inconsistencies in interviews and oral testimonies, tracing the effects of age and gender on women’s and men’s memories of their prewar childhoods, their wartime struggles to survive and resist, and their postwar lives.”

Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, author of *Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941–1945: Myth, Memories, and Monuments*

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