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Collaboration and Resistance: The Ninth Fort as a Test Case

The Ninth Fort is one of a chain of nine forts surrounding the city of Kovno, Lithuania. In connection with the Holocaust, this location, like Ponary, Babi Yar, and Rumbula, marks the first stage of the Final Solution—the annihilation of the Jewish people.

The history of this site of mass slaughtering is an extreme case of the Lithuanians' deep involvement in the systematic extermination of the Jews, as well as an extraordinary case of resistance by prisoners there.

1. Designation of the Ninth Fort as a Major Killing Site

The forts surrounding Kovno were constructed between 1887 and 1910 to protect the city from German invasion. The Ninth Fort, six kilometers northwest of the city, was considered the most important of them. In the independent Republic of Lithuania, it served as an annex of the central prison of Kovno and had a capacity of 250 prisoners. Adjacent to the fort was a state-owned farm of eighty-one hectares, where the prisoners were forced to work the fields and dig peat.¹

The Ninth Fort was chosen as the main regional execution site in advance. Its proximity to the suburb of Vilijampole (Slobodka), where the Kovno ghetto had been established, was apparently the main reason. In his final report on the extermination of Lithuanian Jews, Karl Jäger, commander of Einsatzkommando 3 and the Security Police and SD in Lithuania, noted the factors that informed his choice of killing sites (*Exekutionsplatze*):

...The carrying out of such *Aktionen* is first of all an organizational problem. The decision to clear each sub-district systematically of Jews called for a thorough preparation for each *Aktion* and the study of local conditions. The Jews had to be concentrated in one or more localities and, in accordance with their numbers, a site had to be selected and pits dug. The marching distance from

¹Z. Kondratas, *IX Fort* (Vilnius, 1961), pp. 1-19; O. Kuodyte, K. Kasparas, "Apie IX Forta," *Atgimimas* (1/1990), pp. 5-12.

the concentration points to the pits averaged 4 to 5 kms. The Jews were brought to the place of execution in groups of 500, with at least 2 kilometers distance between groups.²

The transformation of the Ninth Fort into a mass-murder site began just three weeks after the occupation and stabilization of the region and before the changeover from military government to civil administration. After Lithuanian pogroms against the Jews during the first days of occupation and murders by subunits of Einsatzgruppen A with the collaboration of the Lithuanian auxiliary police in the Kovno area, the Security Police and the SD in Kovno began to set up a central killing site at the Ninth Fort. The arrangements were made *concurrent with* the systematization of the extermination apparatus in Lithuania and as the Lithuanian police battalions were being reorganized and placed under German command.

The digging of the pits began in the second half of July 1941 and was accomplished about three months later, apparently several days before the great *Aktion* against the Jews of Kovno on October 28–29 1941.³ Fourteen pits were dug some 150 meters west of the walls of the fortress on a natural terrace on the hillside. In September 1941, Blynas, Secretary General of the Lithuanian National Party, expressed in his diary his fears of the damage that might be inflicted on the image of the Lithuanian nation by the perpetration of mass murder in public. “Today, September 18, I told Simkus⁴ that the killings had to be stopped even if the pits had already been prepared.”⁵

According to testimonies gathered by the Soviet Commission of Inquiry after the liberation, all fourteen pits had been dug by October 1941. The fact that at the end of the autumn of 1941 the pits

² Y. Arad, Y. Gutman, and A. Margalio (eds.), *Documents on the Holocaust—Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union* (Jerusalem 1981), pp. 398–400.

³ Protocol 45 of the Special Commission of Inquiry on Nazi Crimes, December 18, 1944, p. 555. Yad Vashem Archives 21-053. The Soviet commissions of inquiry were set up by an order of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet on Nov. 2, 1942, in every territory liberated from Nazi German occupation.

⁴ Commander of the First Battalion of the Lithuanian Auxiliary Police.

⁵ *Faktai Kaltina—“Gelezinis Vilkas”* (Vilnius, 1965), p. 96. In several places in his diary, Blynas expressed the fear that it was German policy to place the responsibility for the murder of Jews directly on the Lithuanians while the Germans could commit murder and keep their hands clean. For example, he wrote about the murder of the Jews of Rokiskis as follows: “The Germans did the work using our hands” (*ibid.*, pp. 85, 90).

at the site had room for more than 40,000 bodies reinforces the probability that, in the fall of 1941, the SD and the Security Police headquarters in Lithuania had planned the extermination of the entire Jewish population of Kovno—30,000 persons—along with other victims.

Before the excavation work began, the Gestapo had all criminal prisoners removed from the fort to the municipal prison in Kovno. About 1,000 Russian POWs, in groups of 100, were brought in to dig the pits. Most of them died of disease or starvation. The quota of laborers was replenished systematically by bringing additional groups of POWs to the site.⁶ In late October 1941, after the death pits had been dug, all the POWs who had been forced to dig the pits were murdered.

From then until the operation to obliterate the traces of the murders in the autumn of 1943, most forced laborers at the Ninth Fort were Jewish prisoners of war who had been separated from their comrades in POW camps in the Kovno area. Included among the forced-labor prisoners who were taken to the Ninth Fort, alongside the Jewish war prisoners, were Jews who had been arrested in the ghetto and political and criminal prisoners. Between the autumn of 1941 and the autumn of 1943, some 700 labor prisoners were taken to the fort and tasked with covering up the mass graves, maintaining service facilities at the fort, and quarrying peat.

2. The Organizational Structure and the Method of Mass Murder at the Ninth Fort during *Aktionen* against the Jews of Kovno in September-October 1941

In September and October 1941, 12,000 Jews from the Kovno ghetto were murdered at the Ninth Fort. The method used to murder the prisoners was based on a fixed “division of labor” among the German command, Lithuanian police battalions, and the permanent garrison at the Ninth Fort. The size of the forces allocated to each killing mission varied from time to time and was tailored to the needs of the particular murder operation.

a) *The German Command*

The Security Police and the SD in Lithuania, headquartered in Kovno, bore overall responsibility for organizing the murder operations. Karl Jäger, commander of Einsatzkommando 3 and commander of the Security Police and the SD after the civil administration was set up, personally assumed command of the mass murder operations at the Ninth Fort. He was assisted by Heinrich

⁶ Protocol 45 of the Special Commission of Inquiry on Nazi Crimes, Dec. 18, 1944, pp. 555–556. Yad Vashem Archives 21-053.

Schmitz, deputy commander of the Gestapo in Lithuania, and Helmut Rauca, the Gestapo officer in charge of the Kovno ghetto. Dozens of members of the Security Police and the Einsatzkommando, hundreds of Lithuanian auxiliary police, and the Lithuanian permanent garrison at the Ninth Fort served under them.

According to testimony from Lithuanians who took part in the murders, no written orders were given at the extermination site, the names of the victims were not recorded, and no accurate count of their number was made.⁷ Only a quota for each murder operation was given. This makes one wonder about the reliability of the figures given by Karl Jäger in his report⁸ of December 1, 1941, concerning the executions carried out at the Ninth Fort under his command between July 1941 and the aforementioned date. The report marks the dates on which the killings took place, identifies the victims by sex and origin, and gives precise (i.e., not round) figures. It is unclear where Jäger obtained his figures when only general estimates of the quotas and the numbers of those actually murdered at the killing site were made. Apparently he based his report on figures reported at the locations where victims were concentrated for transport.⁹

In his review of killings that took place throughout Lithuania, Jäger describes the liquidation of the Jews of Kovno as unique: “Kovno itself, where trained Lithuanian partisans are available in sufficient numbers, was comparatively speaking a shooting paradise.”¹⁰

Lithuanian Police Battalions and the Lithuanian Prison Service

In late July 1941, as the civil administration in Lithuania coalesced, the reorganization of the armed Lithuanian units was completed. The Lithuanian Partisans were disarmed and units of the Lithuanian Auxiliary Police were established in place of units of the National Labor Guard (Tautinio Darbo Apsauga). Approximately twenty police battalions (Policiniai Batalioniai) were

⁷ *Hitlerine Okupacija Lietuvoje* (Vilnius, 1961), pp. 70-71.

⁸ R. Hilberg, *Documents of Destruction—Germany and Jewry 1933-1945* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 47–55.

⁹ Reports by the Jewish police commander; lists drawn up by the Ältestenrat after the Aktion (the lists reduced the figures of those murdered so as to increase food allocations for the ghetto); and lists of deportations of Jews from the Reich that were given to Jäger by the Reich Security Main Office in Berlin.

¹⁰ R. Hilberg, *Documents of Destruction—Germany and Jewry 1933-1945* (Chicago, 1971), p. 57.

formed, all composed of volunteers, and most of the commanders were former Lithuanian Army officers, members of academia, and former members of the Iron Wolf organization.¹¹

The main murder force was comprised of members of the Lithuanian Auxiliary Police and the Lithuanian Prison Service. These units were given four main tasks:

1. to deliver Jews from the Kovno ghetto to the Ninth Fort;
2. to augment the garrison force at the Ninth Fort and on the surrounding hills;
3. to move the victims from the Fort compound to the killing site ;
4. to establish a volunteer unit that would join the Gestapo unit in the firing squad.

Dozens of Lithuanian auxiliary police, under the direct command of the German reserve police, were mobilized to transfer thousands of Jews from the Kovno ghetto to the Ninth Fort.¹² These units, accompanied by armed policemen, entered the ghetto, brought out groups of 100–500 people, and took them to the hilltop fortress. A member of the Lithuanian Auxiliary Police, Matiukas, testified about this job: “A few other policemen and I brought around 400 people out of the Viliampole ghetto. We had a rest and a smoke and then brought out more groups.”¹³ Most of the victims were forced to walk to the Ninth Fort, a distance of about six kilometers. During the Great Aktion (October 29, 1941), the convoys stretched the length of the road going up the mountainside from early morning until the afternoon. A few of those condemned to death, mainly old people and women, were trucked directly to the death pits.

The thousands of Jews brought to the fort were first concentrated in the yards inside the walled compound. The permanent garrison of the Ninth Fort, reinforced by large forces of the Lithuanian Auxiliary Police and officers from the central prison in Kovno, was assigned to guard the condemned. The supervision was tasked to Lithuanian Captain Vylius, who had been transferred from the central prison of Kovno to command the guard station at the fort and its surroundings during the period of mass murder operations. At a trial in Riga in 1946, Vylius testified:

The prison director, Ausartas, gave me orders to report to the Ninth Fort immediately to maintain the guard for a few days and ensure order while the mass killings were taking place I was appointed chief director of the mass extermination and the entire garrison at the Ninth Fort, including the commander of the Ninth Fort, Slezuraitis, were under my command. I gave orders to augment the guard. I doubled

¹¹ *Faktai Kaltina*—“*Gelezinis Vilkas*” (Vilnius, 1965), pp. 105-106.

¹² A. Tory, *Daily life in the Ghetto* (Hebrew), ed. Dina Porat (Tel Aviv, 1988), pp. 73–74.

¹³ A. Kadziulis, *Kaltina Nuzudytieji* (Vilnius, 1963), pp. 47–48.

the number of guards in the watchtowers. The names of prisoners were not recorded; they were taken out of the prison and shot without being counted.¹⁴

Vylius had authority over dozens of Lithuanian police who were positioned in the vicinity of the fort, on the walls surrounding the fort, in the watchtowers, and on the mountains nearby. In addition to guard duty, his men maintained regular telephone communication between the fortress and the Gestapo headquarters in the city, gathered the victims' clothing, and burned their documents.

The volunteer unit that would join the Gestapo unit in the firing squad was not an organic, regular unit of the Auxiliary Police. When members of the Lithuanian police battalions reported to reinforce the guards at the fort and the slaughter site nearby, the men were asked if they would join the volunteer unit. The unit was tasked with leading the victims to the slaughter site and murdering them with cold steel and as members of the firing squad. The volunteer unit, commanded by Simkus, commander of the First Lithuanian Battalion, participated in every mass-murder Aktion involving the Jews of Kovno. The size of the unit varied depending on the quota of victims planned.¹⁵

From the testimonies of the Lithuanian murderers, we learn that the First Battalion (later called the 13th Battalion) and the Second Battalion (later called the 12th Battalion) took part in the killing operations at the Ninth Fort.¹⁶ In most cases, members of the volunteer unit came from the ranks of the Company C of the First Battalion. This battalion, which also participated in the murder of 534 Jewish intellectuals who had been taken from the Kovno ghetto to the Ninth Fort in August 1941 (in the "Intelligentsia Aktion"), under the command of Lithuanian officers Barzda and Norkus, was known among members of the police battalions as "The Fort's Dread."¹⁷

¹⁴ Vylius was appointed commander of the guard, but it was Jäger, commander of the Security Police, who commanded the actual murder operation. Vylius's testimony is from M. Eglinis, *Mirties Fortuose* (Vilnius, 1957), pp. 2–3.

¹⁵ According to testimony by Vylius, deputy director of the central prison in Kovno, who commanded the guard unit during the killings at the Ninth Fort, at his trial in December 1945–January 1946 (Kadziulis, *Kaltina Nuzudytieji*, pp. 72–75).

¹⁶ Kadziulis, *Kaltina Nuzudytieji*, p. 25; J. Vicas, *SS Tarnyboje—Dokumentinis Leidinys apie Lietuviu Apsaugos Daliu Ivykdytus Nuskaltimus* (Vilnius, 1961), pp. 23–44.

¹⁷ Kadziulis, *Kaltina Nuzudytieji*, p. 69.

Most of the Lithuanian auxiliary police were assigned to guard the fort yard, man the watchtowers overlooking the killing site, and guard the periphery of the Ninth Fort area. The Lithuanians who volunteered for the murder unit received special recompense. They received bottles of vodka as they performed their duties¹⁸ and, after the murders were completed, were allowed to chose items of clothing that had belonged to victims and sometimes even valuables that had been stolen from victims before they were killed.¹⁹ Dudas, one of the policemen, gave the following testimony at his trial:

The volunteers went to shoot and liquidate the Jews. The rest of the soldiers were on guard duty. The soldiers surrounded the trenches so that the condemned could not run away. A group of soldiers went on guard duty. Another group of soldiers drove the Jews from the fort to the trenches. The shooting continued from 8:00 o'clock in the morning until 8:00 in the evening. Whoever wasn't driven into the trenches with rubber truncheons was pushed in forcibly. We took the clothes of those killed to the camp, where we divided them up among ourselves. I got one coat, a towel, a hat, and one pair of socks.²⁰

Along with the murders, the Lithuanians perpetrated cruel acts of brutality on their victims. One of the murderers testified that Norkus, one of the Third Battalion commanders, clutched a whip in one hand and a pistol in the other and shot his victims only after beating them mercilessly.²¹ A guard in the Ninth Fort garrison told the Soviet commission of inquiry about cases in which the murderers used victims as live targets: "The victims were beaten and tortured—they would put a bottle on the victim's head and shoot at it; obviously the bullet usually hit the person and not the bottle."²²

¹⁸ xxxTestimony by Dudas at a trial in Riga on July 8, 1946, in Kadziulis, *Kaltina Nuzudytieji*, p. 72.

¹⁹ Navikonio's testimony in Vicas, *SS Tarnyboje*, p. 43; Kadziulis, *Kaltina Nuzudytieji*, p. 25.

²⁰ Dudas's testimony in Vicas, *SS Tarnyboje*, pp. 43-44.

²¹ Testimony of Jonikas in Kadziulis, *Kaltina Nuzudytieji*, p. 75.

²² Protocol 45 of the Special Commission of Inquiry on Nazi Crimes, Dec. 18, 1944, pp. 66–69. Yad Vashem Archives 21-053.

c) The Lithuanian Permanent Staff at the Ninth Fort

The officers and guards of the Lithuanian Prison Service were directly in charge of the Ninth Fort—the fort itself, the killing site, and the farmland that had been annexed to it. **This seems to have been the only extermination site that was under the direct command of members of the local population.** Under German occupation, the Ninth Fort reverted to its status during the period of the independent Republic of Lithuania: a satellite facility of the central prison in Kovno. Now, however, the Prison Service was subordinate to the Gestapo and the prison area became a valley of slaughter.²³

The permanent garrison was mobilized for the organized murder operations planned for the site. **All members of the permanent staff were Lithuanians who had been recruited from the former Lithuanian Prison Service.** Some of them had been regular prison guards or held various ranks in the prison service of the independent state of Lithuania; others maintained their position under Soviet rule.²⁴ The Lithuanian permanent staff was stationed at the fort for two years (September 1941–September 1943).²⁵

The Lithuanian permanent staff of the Ninth Fort was comprised of seven senior officers and several dozen guards. The commander of the fort, Slezuraitis, was a member of the Siauliu

²³ Protocol 45 of the Special Commission of Inquiry on Nazi Crimes, Dec. 18, 1944.

²⁴ In their testimony, two members of the Lithuanian permanent staff at the Ninth Fort said that they had served at “Prison No. 1” in Kovno (the central prison in the city) “from September 1940 until the German invasion. After the occupation, we left the service but were ordered to come back, and we reported to the Ninth Fort.” Protocol 45 of the Special Commission of Inquiry on Nazi Crimes, Dec. 18, 1944.

²⁵ In the autumn of 1943, as they were being defeated on the eastern front, the Germans began an operation to conceal their murderous activities in the Ninth Fort. This was part of “Operation 1005”—an extensive operation by Reich Security Headquarters that aimed to hide from the world the evidence of the murder of millions of people in the German-occupied territories. On September 20, 1943, the Lithuanian commanders and police left the Ninth Fort and were replaced by thirty-five members of the German Security Police and the Vilna police. These forces were tasked with obscuring the traces of the murders committed at the Ninth Fort, which by this time was known as “Labor Site B1005.”

Sajunga²⁶ and had served in the prison service of independent Lithuania in 1937–1939. He had two deputies, Brauskis and Prusinskas, who held the grade of chief inspector. The commander and his deputies were in their forties. Three younger assistants, Masiunas, Pusiukas, and Milkevicius, served as duty officers. Some members of the permanent staff lived with their families in separate houses near the fort; the rest lived in town.

The garrison was tasked with preparing the site for the killing Aktionen, participating in the killing process, and guarding and securing the area of slaughter between murder operations.

The permanent staff had a large degree of autonomy throughout this time except on days when mass killings took place. During these events, the Ninth Fort guards were subordinated to the Lithuanian commanders of the central prison and the German commanders of the Security Police and the SD, who remained at the site of slaughter while the murders were taking place. The permanent staff was given three tasks during the murder operations:

1. to assist in guarding the victims who had been concentrated in the interior yard of the fort and the surrounding complex;
2. to collect the clothing of those murdered and burn the documents in their possession;
3. to guard the site of slaughter and kill such victims as remained alive after the German Security Police units and the Lithuanian Auxiliary Police battalions left the fort.

The testimonies of the perpetrators²⁷ and of Jewish prisoners who were brought in to obscure the evidence of the murder in the autumn of 1943²⁸ show us that many of the victims were not shot to death but were buried alive and died from asphyxiation. When the greater part of the murder operation had been concluded and the German Security Police forces returned to Kovno toward evening, the permanent Lithuanian garrison at the Ninth Fort assisted by reinforcements from the Lithuanian Auxiliary Police and the prison service set out for the site to complete the liquidation of victims who remained alive in the death pits. Jewish POWs who were brought in to cover the pits testified about appalling scene that confronted them: “An area of a few hundred square meters was

²⁶ Siauliu Sajunga (the Riflemen’s Association), a veterans’ association founded in 1919, which took on a Fascist complexion in the 1920s and 1930s.

²⁷ *Hitlerine Okupacija Lietuvoje* (Vilnius, 1961), pp. 73–74.

²⁸ Testimony of Michael Yitzhaki (Gelbtrunk), Massuah Archives, Testimonies/1-27; memorandum by prisoners after their escape from the Ninth Fort on Dec. 26, 1943, in Arad, Gutman, and Margaliot, *Documents on the Holocaust*, pp. 473–475.

covered with corpses. Small children were crying and the Siaulists were prodding them with their bayonets and throwing them into the pits.”²⁹

The commander of the Ninth Fort, Slezuraitis, testified about their part in the murders as follows: “After the killing, my inspectors and I myself personally had to shoot and kill old people, women, and children who were still alive and bury them alive. When we heard moans coming from underground we shot at them without pulling them out of their grave.”³⁰

Mass murder Aktionen against Jews from the Kovno ghetto at the Ninth Fort began in September–October 1941. They began after the Security Police staff had been methodically prepared and were perpetrated under its command and control. The Security Police and SD in Lithuania regarded the execution of Jews from the Reich at the Ninth Fort in November 1941 as an extension of existing instructions regarding the destruction of Jews living in the occupied areas. The German Security Police exploited the extreme cruelty of the Lithuanian Auxiliary Forces, which lay behind the “independent cleansing Aktionen” perpetrated by the Lithuanians in July 1941, for its program of systematic extermination of the Jewish population. The assignment of routine administration of the central site of slaughter at the Ninth Fort to a Lithuanian garrison reflects the special trust that the commanders of the Security Police and the SD had in the local collaborators.

Thus, the Great Aktion—the murder of 10,000 people between sunrise and sunset—became possible due to the large number of murderers and the fact that for every German it was possible to post several eager, well-trained, and highly motivated Lithuanians to the Ninth Fort.³¹

3. Prison and Killing Site—Winter 1941–Autumn 1943

In December 1941, Heinrich Lohse, the *Reichskommissar* for the Ostland, declared a moratorium in the killing of Jewish skilled workers. Although this halted the mass killings at the Ninth Fort, the enormous pits and the German-Lithuanian murder apparatus had proved their effectiveness. Executions of individuals and groups of Jews from the Kovno ghetto and the vicinity, along with

²⁹ K. Shraga, “In the Valley of the Shadow of Death—The Story of the First Escapee from the Ninth Fort” (Hebrew), in *Massuah* 6 (1978), pp. 179–180.

³⁰ Eglinis, *Mirties Fortuose*, p. 8; Naudziunas’s testimonies from Protocol 45 of the Special Commission of Inquiry on Nazi Crimes, Dec. 18, 1944, pp. 538–539, 560–561.

³¹ PS-2273, *Trial of Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg*, 1949, vol. 30, pp. 72–80.

the killing of political prisoners and POWs, continued to take place there throughout the occupation period.

From the winter of 1941 to the autumn of 1943, the German authorities' policy in Lithuania was characterized by increasing exploitation of the Jewish labor force in the ghettos. Survivors of the Kovno ghetto describe this period as one of "relative calm."

According to records from the central prison in Kovno, the Ninth Fort was one of five satellite facilities of the "prison for forced laborers at Kovno," to which prisoners were transferred after a term of detention and interrogation in the central prison.³² The number of prisoners transferred there indicates that this was the largest detention center and the only one designated for the premeditated killing of prisoners. During this time, individuals and groups from the Kovno ghetto were brought to the Ninth Fort along with Soviet POWs, political prisoners, and criminal prisoners.

Our knowledge of the operating methods at the fort and slaughtering site is based largely on the testimonies of two Jewish prisoners who survived; the diary of A. Tory, secretary of the Ältestenrat in the Kovno ghetto; and documents and testimonies in the Lithuanian Government Archives. The last-mentioned sources, opened to the public in the 1990s, include the prison logs, daily and periodic reports of the Jewish police, and testimonies of forced laborers at the Ninth Fort and victims' relatives, as collected by the staff of the Ninth Fort Museum in the 1950s and 1960s.

a. Determining Quotas for Execution by Firing Squad

The system of executions was different from that of mass-murder operations at the site. Each month, several dates were set for executions and a quota of victims for each execution was determined. The testimonies point clearly to the extremely meticulous adherence to the quotas of prisoners designated for execution by firing squad.

The commander of the Ninth Fort, Slezuraitis, began the killing operations by making a precise record of the names and the number of the doomed.³³ On execution days, the permanent staff at the Ninth Fort led a group of prisoners out of the cells in the morning or escorted prisoners from the central prison to the execution site. At the site, the staff members turned the condemned over to Gestapo men who were waiting there. The victims were lined up on the edge of one of the pits and a recount was made. If the group was larger than the quota for the day, several people were taken

³² Daily record in the Kovno central prison log, Lithuanian Government Archives in Vilnius, R731, AP 4, B 951. The other satellite facilities of the central prison in Kovno were the Sixth Fort, Kazlu-Rudas, Pravieniskes, and Jures.

³³ Tory, *Daily life in the Ghetto*, pp. 88–89.

back to the cells at the fort. When there were not enough victims, labor prisoners were brought in to make up the shortfall.³⁴

Those killed on execution days were Jews from the Kovno ghetto and political prisoners. Generally speaking, the Jews were shot first and an armed guard watched over the political prisoners until the second shooting operation took place.

Jews from the Kovno Ghetto at the Ninth Fort during the Period of “Relative Calm”

During this time, Jews were arrested and brought to the Ninth Fort for miscellaneous offenses, such as failure to wear the yellow badge, trading with Lithuanians, walking on the sidewalk, buying newspapers, smuggling food, and attempting to escape from the ghetto. Some were accused of membership in the Communist underground; others were caught trying to return to the ghetto from hiding in Lithuanian homes. A few were members of mixed families whose special permit to live outside the ghetto had been revoked.

The Germans used the Ninth Fort as a deterrent and a way to force individual Jews to reveal information about illegal activities in the ghetto.

c. Political Prisoners, Criminal Prisoners, and Prisoners of War

In the winter of 1941–1942, after the mass execution operations of Jews had been halted, Lithuanian political prisoners—members of the Communist underground,³⁵ remnants of the Soviet government apparatus in Lithuania and members of their families who had not managed to escape in the first days of the occupation,³⁶ relatives of Red Army soldiers and officers, and anyone suspected of assisting the partisans³⁷—were taken to the Ninth Fort.

³⁴ Testimony of a Lithuanian Communist Party member who had been held prisoner at the Ninth Fort in the summer of 1942; testimony of Dsienko Elena, archives of the Ninth Fort Museum, Kovno; testimony of Shraga Kalisch, Massuah Archives, Testimonies/1-25.

³⁵ Testimonies of political prisoners and relatives of the prisoners collected by members of the Ninth Fort Museum in the 1950s and 1960s: Orlovos Marianos Ivano; Navikaites Tekeles; Janinos Cizinauskaites; Testimonies Division, Ninth Fort Museum, Kovno.

³⁶ Testimonies of Vyganauskaites Reginos; Elizbiet Zalomskienes; Testimonies Division, Ninth Fort Museum, Kovno.

³⁷ Testimonies of Paulaviciaus Kleopas; Orlovos Marianos Ivano; Cerikas Pavilas; Testimonies Division, Ninth Fort Museum, Kovno.

Political prisoners were held for three or four months before being transferred from the central prison to the Ninth Fort for hard labor. Unlike Jewish prisoners, political prisoners were allowed to correspond with their families.³⁸ Some of them were sent home; others were transferred to other labor camps in Lithuania or to concentration or labor camps in Germany and France.

Arrests of suspected political opponents expanded in the spring and summer of 1943 after the Wehrmacht suffered reversals in early 1943 and the political orientation of Lithuanian nationalist circles changed. When their hopes of establishing an independent Lithuanian state under Nazi German protection were dashed, many Lithuanian nationalists were inclined to throw in their lot with the Western powers. Concurrently, the Lithuanian Communist underground hoped that by means of Germany's collapse a democratic Lithuanian republic would be established. Furthermore, relations between the government and the people became strained in 1943 following an attempt to send young people to work in Germany and the closure of high schools and institutions of higher education. That summer, the Germans sought to conscript 30,000 Lithuanian workers for harsh labor—an attempt that stirred up unrest among the local population even though it failed.³⁹

The political prisoners executed were not tried before their fate was sealed. The German Security Police determined the fate of those condemned to death. In March 1943, the governor of the Kovno district, SS Colonel Lenzen, wrote to the public prosecutor in Kovno about the “executions.” In his document, he notes the proliferation of inquiries to the Security Police and the SD from relatives of prisoners who had been shot, demanding an inquiry into the circumstances and the determination of those responsible. The district governor instructed the public prosecutor in vehement terms to stanch any legal inquiry and to pass the complaints on to the Security Police commander. “The executions,” he said, “were carried out on the orders of the Security Police and the SD and they reserve the right to discuss every political event on its own merits.”⁴⁰

³⁸ According to the testimony of Vyganaukaites Reginos, Testimonies Division, Ninth Fort Museum, Kovno.

³⁹ Vicas, *SS Tarnyboje*, pp. 100–101; *Hitlerine Okupacija Lietuvoje*, p. 177

⁴⁰ B. Baranauskas and K. Ruksenas (eds.), *Documents Accuse* (Vilnius, 1970), pp. 270–271. In the records of the central prison in Kovno, all that was entered beside the names of prisoners transferred from the central prison to the Ninth Fort for execution was a note: “Transferred to the Security Police.” Log of the central prison in Kovno 1942–1944, Lithuanian Government Archives, R731, AP 4, B 951.

The first testimony about the execution of political prisoners carries the early date of November 29, 1941, when the second group of Jews deported from the Reich was murdered at the Ninth Fort. It appears that the Security Police exploited their special deployment at the execution site to kill also political prisoners who had been delivered from the central prison the same night.⁴¹

A special group of victims of the Ninth Fort was composed of criminal prisoners who were brought in from the central prison in Kovno. According to the testimony of Shraga Kalisch, a Jewish forced-labor prisoner who managed to escape on his own in May 1943, a group of repeat convicts were taken to the fort in the spring of 1943. Several days after their internment there, they were taken to the pit, chained one to another, and burned alive.⁴²

Dozens of senior officers, included among the prisoners of war who were taken to the Ninth Fort from POW camps around Kovno, were murdered in similar fashion.⁴³ Some were brought out of the trucks in shackles and shot at the edge of the pit; others were forced into the pits and murdered by grenades thrown in on top of them.

d. Forced Labor Prisoners at the Ninth Fort

Between the autumn of 1941 and the autumn of 1943, some 700 Jewish POWs were taken to the Ninth Fort as forced laborers, between eleven and 124 at any given time. The conditions of their confinement were unbearably harsh— cold and musty accommodations, no sanitation, starvation rations, and grueling labor amidst brutalization by members of the garrison force.

The topography in the fort area, the meticulous guard regime inside and outside, and the isolated nature of the fort—several kilometers from any settlement—made escape almost impossible. Even so, Jewish POWs made two escape attempts before the organized attempt by all prisoners at the fort on December 25, 1943. In May 1942, five prisoners of war fled after overpowering the deputy commander of the fort, Inspector Barkauskas, who was notorious for his

⁴¹ According to the testimony of Navickaite, whose brother was shot at the Ninth Fort with 24 comrades from the Communist underground, on Nov. 29, 1941. Testimonies Division, Ninth Fort Museum.

⁴² K. Shraga, “In the Valley of the Shadow of Death—The Story of the First Escapee from the Ninth Fort” (Hebrew), in *Massuah* 6 (1978), p. 195.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 186–187; Testimony of Dzienko Elena, who was imprisoned in the Ninth Fort in the summer of 1942, Testimonies Division, Ninth Fort Museum, Kovno.

brutality.⁴⁴ The authorities revealed their attitude toward the escape in an article that appeared in the Lithuanian nationalist paper *I Laisve* on May 16, 1942. The article describes the prisoners' escape and ends with a warning: "The death sentence imposed by the special court shows that ... whoever acts against the Reich or the local government in the eastern territories, against Germans of the Reich, members of the German nation, the German army, or their Auxiliary Police ... whoever dares to harm a single hair on the head of a German or Lithuanian working in the service of the Germans will be punished mercilessly."⁴⁵ After the escape, the Jewish POWs who remained at the fort were interrogated by the Gestapo in Kovno and punished collectively. Approximately thirty prisoners who had been cellmates of the five escapees were put to death by lethal injection administered by a physician from Kovno. At the end of the interrogation, the prisoners were promised that they would have better living conditions henceforth. "Medical care" was intended to be an indication of the garrison force's good intentions. The next day, the eleven surviving Jewish POWs buried their comrades at the execution site.⁴⁶ The collective punishment deterred further escapes apart from an individual prisoner who escaped in May 1943. The episode remained etched in the minds of the surviving prisoners and the legend was passed down to groups of prisoners who were taken to the fort in 1942-1943.

For nearly two years, from December 1941 to September 1943, the Ninth Fort played a double role for the Security Police and SD in Lithuania: a prison for forced laborers, holding Jewish prisoners of war and political prisoners, and an active murder site.

After the Germans' defeat in Stalingrad and developments at the front when the Germans began to retreat, the Security Police toughened its policies against potential opponents and the volume of arrests and murders of civilians and prisoners of war at the Ninth Fort grew significantly.

Scheduled executions of Jews, political prisoners, POWs who were senior officers, and criminal prisoners took place in the area close to the fort. Records of the victims that were made at the time were destroyed in "Operation 1005," which sought to obscure all traces of the murders. Without the records, it is hard to determine the number of those murdered. According to the

⁴⁴ Barkauskas was placed on trial in January 1945. B. Baranauskas and E. Rozauskas (eds.), *Masines Zudynes Lietuvoje 1941–1944 Dokumentu Rinkinys*, 1 dalis (Vilnius, 1965), p. 255.

⁴⁵ *I. Laisve* 139 (May 16, 1942), Ninth Fort Archives.

⁴⁶ K. Shraga, "In the Valley of the Shadow of Death," pp. 191–192; Tory, *Daily Life in the Ghetto*, p. 89.

information in our possession, in the interval between the end of the mass-murder Aktionen in the winter of 1941 and “Operation 1005” in the autumn of 1943, hundreds of political prisoners and prisoners of war, hundreds of inhabitants of the Kovno ghetto, and 700 Jewish POW forced laborers were killed.

4. Mass Escape during “Operation 1005”

Preparations to obliterate all traces of the mass murders at the Ninth Fort execution site began in the autumn of 1943. In Operation 1005, command of the fort was transferred from the Lithuanian permanent staff, which had administered the prison and adjacent killing site for two years, to the SD. Operation 1005 began at the fort, which was now known as Labor Site B1005, on September 1, 1943, and was scheduled to end on February 1, 1944.

Sixty-four prisoners, including sixty Jews (prisoners of war, members of the Kovno ghetto underground who had been captured on their way to the forest, and prisoners from the Kovno ghetto) and four non-Jews, were brought to the fort to perform the horrendous task of opening up the mass graves, removing the bodies, and cremating them.

On the night of Christmas Day, 1943, according to a detailed and complicated plan, all sixty-four prisoners who had been tasked with incinerating the bodies at the 1005B site escaped from the Ninth Fort. This amazing act of bravery succeeded due to cooperation between a group from the Kovno ghetto underground organization and the prisoners of war. This was the most complex and successful act of resistance among all uprisings attempted by any Operation 1005 unit; it was also the only one in which prisoners managed to plan and implement an organized escape of an entire company of forced laborers.

It took over three weeks to prepare the escape route, saw the bars, drill through the steel door leading from the cells to the tunnel that penetrated the inner complex of the fort, and prepare camouflage material and other escape aids. The escape was scheduled for Christmas Day, when the guards would be less attentive than usual. The organizing group kept the escape plan secret; the other prisoners were informed about it only when the time to implement it approached.

The fact that the German command at the Ninth Fort had not replaced the forced laborers during Operation 1005 gave them time to develop trusting relations despite their different backgrounds, to study the local conditions, and to organize the escape operation. The choice of

physically robust prisoners for Operation 1005, and coupled with the Kovno ghetto underground affiliations of many of them, increased their potential to rebel.⁴⁷

No matter how strenuously the Germans attempted to deceive them, the prisoners—who had been exposed to the full intensity of the horrors of the mass murders and the attempts to eradicate the evidence—did not believe the promises that they would left alive at end of the horrific task. Methods of deception that had sometimes succeeded in the early days of the occupation were no longer relevant for victims toward the end because they were the last survivors of entire communities. However, similar to resistance attempts in ghettos and extermination camps, in some cases the prisoners at Operation 1005 sites attempted to resist only when they found themselves at the end of the road. The fact that the prisoners did not delay their escape from the Ninth Fort until they were at the final stage of their work distinguishes this escape from the attempts of resistance and escape at other Operation 1005 sites.

Only twenty-eight of the sixty-four escapees managed to reach shelter. The rest were captured by the Germans in an extensive manhunt or by Lithuanian collaborators as they made their way to the forests. The most conspicuous escapees among the twenty-eight were a group that decided to return to the Kovno ghetto, feeling it their duty to inform people about the extent of the mass murders at the Ninth Fort.⁴⁸ They were concealed in the ghetto by members of the underground, with the help of the chairman of the Ältestenrat and officers in the Jewish police, and were smuggled out to the forest several days later.

⁴⁷ Testimony of Michael Yitzhaki (Gelbtrunk), Yad Vashem Archives 375-033; Michael Gelbtrunk, “The Fortress of Death” (Yiddish), *Undzer Veg* 16 (Jan. 18, 1945), *Undzer Veg* 17 (Jan. 25, 1946); Report of the Soviet Commission of Inquiry, Yad Vashem Archives 21-053; Dov Levin and Zvie Bar-On, *The History of an Underground* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1962), pp. 152–153; Alex Feitelson, *In Storm and Struggle* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1964).

⁴⁸ The day after their arrival in the ghetto, eleven of the escapees wrote a “memorandum”, in Russian, about the mass murders and the cover-up operation at the Ninth Fort. Two copies of the document were produced; one was stored in the underground archive in the ghetto and the other passed to the headquarters of the partisan units in Rudninkai. From there it was taken to Moscow and read out on Radio Moscow a few days later. Archive of the Ninth Fort Museum; Arad, Gutman, and Margaliot, *Holocaust Documentation*, pp. 377–378.

5. Executions on the Verge of Liberation

In late March 1944, dozens of members of the Kovno ghetto Jewish police and several hundred children who had been found hiding in the ghetto were killed at the Ninth Fort on the second day of an Aktion against children and old people.

The last victims of the fort of death were 878 Jewish men who were deported in Transport 73 from Drancy, France, to Kovno on May 18, 1944. They were transferred to the Ninth Fort, where of them scratched their names on the cell walls, and several of them were later removed to Pravieniskes, another camp of the central prison in Kovno. According to testimonies of Lithuanian prisoners and prison guards, the French Jews were killed on July 10, 1944.⁴⁹

On the eve of the liberation, as the Red Army was poised to enter Kovno, the Lithuanians in the Prison Service and the German Security police continued to murder Jews. Collaboration between Lithuanians and Germans continued at the prisons and execution sites even when it was clear to the Lithuanians that the war had been won.

Conclusion

An examination of the Ninth Fort execution site as a test case, reveals typical aspects of the German-Lithuanian collaboration in executing the policy of systematic extermination of the entire Jewish population of Lithuania as well as the special difficulties facing the Jews of Lithuania in their attempts to resist the German occupation.

I believe that the successful escape in December 1943 illustrates just how limited were the opportunities for the Jews of Lithuania to resist. The escape succeeded only because of an exceptional conjunction of circumstances. There is an obvious and essential difference between how Jews and non-Jews could react to the occupation. The Lithuanians could choose accommodation, collaboration, or resistance. The imprisonment of political opponents in the Ninth Fort might testify for the variety of the option to protest, refuse to cooperate, or offer active resistance, that were chosen by only a minority of the Lithuanian people. This fact intensifies the active assistance given to the Germans by many circles throughout Lithuania, which reflected the lust for profit as well as an ideological and practical identification with the goals of the occupying power vis-à-vis the Jewish population.

⁴⁹ B. Baranauskas and E. Rozauskas (eds.), *Masines Zudynes Lietuvoje 1941–1944 Dokumentu Rinkinys*, 2 dalis (Vilnius 1973), pp. 369–372.

The Ninth Fort was a preplanned central killing site created for the Final Solution to the Jewish problem. Only after the Germans decided to call a temporary halt to the mass murder of Jews that the murder apparatus and the site that had been prepared near the fort were first used for the execution of political and local prisoners *as well*, in keeping with the policy of repressing all ideologically-motivated elements and liquidating potential opponents of the German regime. About 45,000 people were murdered there—30,000 Jews who lived in the Kovno ghetto or had been brought there from Central and Western Europe, along with 15,000 Soviet war prisoners, political prisoners, and Lithuanian criminals.

Mass killings at the Ninth Fort were halted in December 1941. The enormous pits prepared for the mass murder of Jews and the German-Lithuanian murder apparatus made up the infrastructure of a permanent killing site that operated throughout the German occupation of Lithuania.

The Ninth Fort is the ultimate example of how deeply involved the Lithuanians were in the murder of the Jews. The killing site was established outside the fort, several kilometers from Kovno. Convoys of Jews from the Kovno ghetto and from Central and Western Europe—men, women, and children—were escorted roughly through the streets of the town by members of Lithuanian Auxiliary Police battalions in broad daylight, in full view of their Lithuanian neighbors. Evidently this was the only extermination site that was ever under the direct command of members of the local population.

Even toward the end of this period, the stench of thousands of burning bodies fouling the air for six months and the Red Army poised at the borders of Lithuania, cooperation at the Ninth Fort between the Lithuanians and the German perpetrators continued uninterrupted.

An examination of the Einsatzgruppen reports and the testimonies of Lithuanians who performed the murder operations, given when they were brought to trial after the war, reveal the extreme cruelty, high motivation, and passionate enthusiasm that many Lithuanians brought to the task of murdering Jews.

The roots of this fervor were deeply embedded in the Lithuanian cultural and religious tradition, in economic, social, and political developments in Lithuania in the 1920s and 1930s, and in the violent hatred that intensified under Soviet rule. The active involvement of local people in the murder of Jews did much to seal the fate of Lithuanian Jewry and was among the reasons for the high percentage of victims in this community.