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The Holocaust in Lithuania as Reflected in Jewish Sources
– Diaries, Memoirs, Testimonies

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This presentation of the events of the Holocaust in Lithuania is based on Jewish sources, on the writings of Jews who lived in German occupied Lithuania during that tragic time, and who documented the tragic events they had witnessed. Some of these sources are diaries, written in ghettos of Lithuania during the Holocaust; others are memoirs written immediately after the Holocaust, when the events were still fresh in the minds of the survivors; another group of sources are testimonies given by the survivors, mainly those collected by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem or other institutions.

There is a large number of Jewish sources: many dozens of books – diaries and memoirs – and many hundreds of testimonies. For this presentation I selected a limited number of these sources from which I am going to quote, from the ghettos – Vilnius, Kaunas, Shauliai, Panevezys and some other ghettos'. These excerpts, although they are related to particular localities or events, are representative of the situation that prevailed that time in most of the localities in occupied Lithuania.

The sources are mainly written in Yiddish and Hebrew, thus creating a language barrier for many historians dealing with the Holocaust in Lithuania who do not speak these languages. Therefore it is important for them, as well as the public in this country, gain an insight into the Jewish perspective and learn how the survivors of the Holocaust in Lithuania saw, understood and described the situation that time.

These Jewish sources are subjective and reflect the events as they were seen, felt and understood by the Jews who witnessed them. The Jews did not see or have any knowledge of the Nazi-German leaders like von Renteln, the General commissar of Lithuania, nor Stalhacker, the commander of Einsatzgruppe A, or Jager, commander of Einsatzkommando 3, who was chief executioner in the murder of Lithuanian Jewry. The victims did not even know about Oberschurmfuhrer Hamman, commander of the small mobile unit of 8-10 German SS-men, which traveled from one locality to another throughout Lithuania, and murdered Jews using extensive help from the local Lithuanian authorities. All these Germans were unknown to the Jews. The Jews did not see them nor did they have any information about them.

The Jews did see and know the people who carried out pogroms in many towns and townships; they saw the people who caught them in the streets, who beat them and tortured them. They saw the people who kidnapped Jews, took them away to some unknown place from which they never returned. The Jews saw the people who confined them in ghettos, who led them to the killing sites. They heard what the few Jews who succeeded to escape from the killing pits, told them about the identity of the people who were guarding the execution sights and who carried out the shootings. According to Jewish sources, the overwhelming majority of these people who participated in all of the actions were Lithuanians.

The murder of the Jews in Lithuania continued all along the German occupation; there were, however, differences in the intensity of these murder actions. In this respect, the murder of the Jews in occupied Lithuania, can be divided into three periods:

A. *The first period: June 22 – December 1941.* This period was characterized by the mass murder of Lithuanian Jews.

2. *The second period: January 1942 – March 1943*

This period can be termed as a “relatively quiet period.” German policy during this period was aimed at a maximum exploitation of the Jewish labor force, which was enclosed in the ghettos of Vilnius, Kaunas, Shauliai, and Svencionys.

3. *The third period: April 1943 – July 1944.* This period is characterized by the gradual liquidation of the remaining ghettos and of the remnants of the Jews either by murder and/or deportation to camps in Germany.

In my presentation I will relate mainly to the first period, from June 22 to December 1941, when about 80 percent of the Jews in Lithuania were murdered. This was the most tragic period for Lithuanian Jewry, as reflected in their sources. It was also the most intensive in what concerns the involvement of Lithuanians in execution of Nazi Germany’s policy in Lithuania.

During the first few weeks of German occupation, a wave of pogroms initiated and carried out by local people – Lithuanian anti-Soviet partisans¹ and Lithuanian civilians – spread throughout Lithuania. It started in Kaunas and expanded to other localities. A report by Franz Stahlecker, the commander of Einsatzgruppe A, which operated in the Baltic countries, dated October 15, 1941, stated:

In the first pogrom during the nights of June 23 to 26, the Lithuanian partisans did away with more than 1,500 Jews, set fire to several synagogues... During the following nights, approximately 2,300 Jews were rendered harmless in a similar way. In other parts of Lithuania, similar actions followed the example of Kaunas, though on a smaller scale.²

Lets see what was written in Jewish sources about these events. Leib Garfunkel, one of the leaders of Lithuanian Jewry in the inter-war period and a former member of the Lithuanian Seimas, who was in Kaunas during the days of this pogrom, wrote:(I quote)

Lithuanian partisans and ordinary Lithuanians who joined them, carried out a terrible massacre of Jews in Slobodka – a suburb of Kaunas - on the night of 25-26 of June...The rioters, conducting their bloody actions, made no distinction between men and women, children and old. Their cruelty was limitless. They shot with guns, they slaughtered with knives, they killed with axes.... A house where some Jews found refuge was set on fire and the partisans did not permit the firemen who arrived to put out the fire. The miserable Jews were burned alive. People were drowned in the Vilia [Neris] river...others were forced to dig the graves for themselves...³ (end)

¹With the onset of the Nazi-German invasion of the Soviet Union, on June 22, 1941, an anti-Soviet uprising broke out in Lithuania, staged by the Lithuanian nationalist underground and units of the Lithuanian 29th Rifle Corps in the Red Army. The organization of the underground and orders for the uprising came from the anti-Soviet “Lithuanian Activist Front” (LAF), established in Germany on November 17, 1940, by representatives of most of the Lithuanian political parties who had escaped from Lithuania. The people who took part in the uprising were called “partisans” in the German documents and in Jewish sources

²Nuremberg Document L-180.

³Leib Garfunkel, *Kovna Haihudit b`Churbana* (“The Jewish Kaunas Being Ruined, Jerusalem, 1959, pp. 31, 329, 345 (hereafter Garfunkel, *Kovna Haihudit*).

During those days pogroms and massacres were carried out in Shaulai, Panevezys, Kedaniai, and dozens of places in Lithuania.⁴ The following description of the events in the small township of Linkuva in the Shauliai district, where there were about 1,000 Jews – both locals and refugees from surrounding townships – is typical of the events in other localities in Lithuania:

On the second day of the German invasion...Jews from Linkuva began to escape. On this same day Lithuanian “activists” started their actions. Their first steps were the murder of Jews. They ambushed the escaping Jews outside the township and shot them...On June 29 the Lithuanian “activists” ordered all the Jews to report to the police. The Lithuanians took over the initiative in the persecution of the Jews and they carried out the murder of the Jews in Linkuva. The commander of the police was Sintaris who had served in the Lithuanian border police in the past, and whose cohorts were the priest Biliackas and other Lithuanians. The Jews detained by the police were locked up in a stable which belonged to Yitshak Kapoliar and in some other stores... They were beaten, the beards of elderly Jews were cut off and despite the heat... they did not receive any water or food. On June 30, ten youngsters aged 18-20, were taken and shot close to the Catholic cemetery...The day after the murder of the youngsters, the Lithuanian “activists” took all the adult Jews, brought them to the Atkuciunai forest, close to the Musa river, and murdered them...On July 23...700 of the remaining Jews in Linkuva, were taken to the Atkuciunai forest and shot. Among the Lithuanians who distinguished themselves in these actions were: three sons of the pharmacist Jasukaitis...[more names of Lithuanians who participated in the murder].⁵

One of the first mass murder actions in Lithuania was carried out in the 7th Fort in Kaunas. Jager described it briefly in his summary report on 1th of December 1941:

“According to my directives and on my order, Lithuanian partisans have carried out the following executions: July 4, Kaunas, 7th fort... total 463 Jews. July 6, Kaunas, 7th fort, 2,514 Jews.”

According Jewish sources close to 10,000 men, women and children, were brought to the 7th fort and kept there for days. Jewish sources relate the events and massacre in the 7th fort in detail. The first book published on the history of the Jews in Kaunas during the Holocaust was Josef Gar’s book “Umkum fun der Yidisher Kovne” (The Destruction of Jewish Kaunas). Gar was a survivor of the Kaunas ghetto. He gave the following description of the events at the 7th fort:

“...The women and the children were closed into the Fort’s cells, whereas the men were kept under the blue sky. The terror in the Fort, before the mass execution was carried out, was terrible. The Lithuanian partisans who guarded the arrested Jews, shot them the spot without a warning in retaliation for the smallest “sin”. The men, which were kept in those hot days under the burning sun... If any man would raise his head or move to improve his position, the patrolling Lithuanians would shoot him. The [prisoners] did not receive any food all throught those days. ...the guards were drunk almost all the time. The situation of young women was particularly awful. When the night fell, the drunken Lithuanian partisans used to break into the women’s cells, take the young women and girls, rape them and consequently shoot them. The women were panicked, some of them became crazy...and I would like to stress, that

⁴Leib Garfunkel, et al, eds, *Yahadut Lita (Lithuanian Jewry)*, Tel Aviv, 1984, pp. 185, 329, 345 (hereafter, Garfunkel, *Yahadut Lita*)

⁵ Ibid., pp. 306-307.

during this entire massacre at the 7th Fort, the Lithuanians were not only the executioners, but together with the Gestapo, served as the organizers of the mass murder...”⁶

The order to shoot the Jews was given by Jager, but I may assume that the order did not include maltreatment and rape. This was the initiative of the local guards.

In the Jewish sources was very little mentioned the Lithuanian Provisinal Government which was active about six weeks, until beginning of August 1941, in Kaunas. But Garfunkel mentions a reply given by I. Matulionis, a member of this government to mr. I. Goldberg, a Jewish college from officer school, who asked him to interfere, and stop the pogroms. (I quote):

He spoke openly about a special session of the provisional government, in regard the Jewish question. According to him, there were three opinions. The extreme said that now is the time to get rid of the Jews “once and forever” and all of them should be exterminated. Some members hesitated to support this opinion, but claimed categorically that the Jews should pay with their blood and sweat for all the wrongs they have done to the Lithuanian people. And the most moderate, and they were representatives of the Catholic party, among them Matulionis, expressed their opinion, that it is forbidden to take the life from anybody, even from a Jew, but it is necessary to isolate them in a special place. “There is no power in the world which can compel us to live with you together”, finished Matulionis his words.⁷

The process of ghettoization, the closing of the Jews in ghettos, was accompanied by atrocities and extermination actions. This process is widely documented in Jewish sources. One of the important sources of the Holocaust in Lithuania, is the diary of Elieser Yerushalmi “Pinkas Shavli” (Notebook of Shauliai), which was written in the ghetto of Shauliai. Yerushalmi wrote, (I quote):

After the German occupation, the Jews were subjected to the municipality of Shauliai headed by Linkevicius, who appointed captain Stankus to be in charge of them. These two planned to deport the Jews to Zagare and established the ghetto after they did not succeed to carry out their plan. They prepared the list of the Jews and decided who would live and who would die. Their order resulted in the murder of thousands during the *action* in September 1941...Here I would need to mention Liuberskis whose activity was repulsive... he was appointed to chair the first commission in charge of the transfer of the Jews into the ghetto. In this capacity, on 8-10 of September 1941, he personally sent many families to death during the registration that was carried out before the *aktion*...He cut of the food rations allocated to the ghetto by the Germans and provided less than was designated in the license”⁸

Yerushalmi gave a very positive description of the role of a Lithuanian priest in Shauliai by the name of Lapis, who helped to return of several dozens of Jewish children who were in a youth camp in Polangen at the German border.⁹

A survivor from Utena, where about 2,500 Jews lived there, Zadok Aviatar-Bliman wrote (I quote):

I am the only survivor who lived to see the end [of the Jewish community].
The Germans entered the city on the 25th June 1941. The faces of the local

⁶Josef Gar, *Umkum fun der yidisher Kovne*, Munich, 1948, pp. 40-42.

⁷Garfunkel, *Kovna Hihudit*, p. 36

⁸Eliezer Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli, A Diary From a Lithuanian Ghetto, 1941-1944*, Jerusalem, 1958, pp. 25-26.

⁹Ibid, p. 35

Lithuanians were shining with joy. They demonstrated their feelings by breaking into Jewish houses under the pretext that they were "searching for weapons". The result was the murder of some Jews... On July 14, at six o'clock in the morning, a declaration, signed by the mayor of the city Dr. Stipanavicius and the military commandant, was published, announcing the expulsion of the Jews from Utena. The Jews were ordered to leave their houses until 12 o'clock the same day. The Lithuanians did not even wait for 12 o'clock, but raided the Jewish houses, beat up and arrested the men, robbed the Jews of the few belongings they had taken with them. Within two hours the Jews had been dislodged from their homes and taken to the Shilani forest... On the morning of August 7th... we were surrounded by a strong Lithuanian guard... As we left the city the Lithuanians forced us to run. The Jews who could not run were shot on the spot. After running for about 2 km we were ordered to lie with our faces down... shots were heard... we were ordered to rise and go. It was then that I saw this terrible sight in front of me. There were long trenches on a hillock which was surrounded by forest on three sides. A Lithuanian was positioned close to the trench,. He had a whip in his hand, and was flogging those passing him. The people, frightened by the whip, ran toward the trench, where a German shot them with a machinegun. Next to a car parked close to the trench stood the mayor of the city Z'ukas, the district physician Iasinias, and some other Lithuanian leaders from Utena. They were watching the show..."¹⁰

Aviatar escaped. After three weeks of walking he reached the ghetto in Kaunas. The fate of the Jews in Panevezys, the third in size Jewish community in Lithuania, was similar to other communities. In the encyclopedia *Yahadut Lita* (The Jewry of Lithuania), volume 4, which is devoted to the Holocaust period, is written: (I quote)

The Germans entered Panevezys on June 26th, 1941, but the atrocities against the Jews had already started on the 24th of June, before any German was seen in the city. The atrocities were organized by a Lithuanian "headquarters" under the leadership of Alisunas – director of the gymnasium, Kasperavicius – the supervisor of the gymnasium, Grigaitis - deputy district attorney, Isaitis – secretary of the district court and others. Grigaitis' and Alisunas' duties were to organize the gymnasium students, which under the command of lieutenant Izunas, were the main murderers.... Day after day Lithuanian policemen would organize a "show". Jews were marched through the streets and beaten with whips and rifle butts.... In the beginning of July the Jews were closed into a ghetto... Armed Lithuanians would break into the houses even during daytime, beating the Jews and taking whatever they liked... On August 24th, 1941, the Jews were taken out from the ghetto to Faiust (5 km from the city) for extermination. They were led in groups of 200 people. After arriving at the killing site they were forced to kneel down, they were surrounded by armed Lithuanian guards and shot. As soon as one group was murdered, a second group was brought. The infants were taken by force from their mothers and thrown into the pits. The murderers amused themselves shooting at the infants in the air, before they fell into the pit. The murderers were drunk most of the time, thus missing the infants, and many of them fell alive into the pits.... In the evening of the August 26th, the mass murder was accomplished... In

¹⁰Garfunkel, *Yahadut Lita*, pp. 238-240.

Jager's report the number of the Jews murdered in Panevezys is given as 8,745".¹¹

Between August 31th and September 2th 1941, during the preparations for the creation of a ghetto in Vilnius, the so-called "Great Provocation" *aktion* took place, in which about 3,700 Jews, men women and children were taken to Panarei and shot. A sixteen-year-old Jewish girl, Pesia Shloss, was wounded but survived Panerai. At night, after the murderers left the place, she was able to escape from the pit and returned to the ghetto. She testified to what she had seen: (I quote)

On September 2, the Lithuanians entered our apartment and ordered us to accompany them... we were taken to Lukishki [prison]...at four o'clock in the morning we were ordered to undress, they made us believe that we were being taken for work. We marched...nobody knew that the place we reached was Panerai, and what they intended do to us. But then we saw and heard shootings...the whole action was carried out by Lithuanians under the command of one German...¹² (end of quotation)

Pesia Shloss was one of six Jewish women who were only slightly wounded, and who scrambled out of the pits during the night and made their way back to Vilnius during September 3-4. What they related about the "Great Provocation" *aktion* was similar to Pesia Shloss story.¹³

At the end of September 1941, the Jews from Svencionys, Svencioneliai, Pabrade and some other townships in that area, totalling some 8,000 people, were expelled to Polygon, a deserted army camp near Svencionaliai, where they were shot on 8-9th October 1941. Lea Svirski, a young girl at the time, and her mother were among those deported to Polygon. Using bribery they succeeded to return to the small ghetto in Svencionys, where about 50 families of Jewish craftsmen had been left. Lea Svirski wrote about her story: (I quote)

... the Germans guarded all the routes using Lithuanian partisans... They were the ones who carried out the most murderous and sadistic acts against Jews. The tragic day of the 27th September arrived... The Lithuanians carried out the order. They entered the Jewish houses and brutally expelled all the people to the streets. After they checked if no one was hiding, they started to rob everything possible... The expulsion from the houses lasted the entire day... After we had already been in the barracks of Polygon for several days,...all of us had only one thought in our minds: why did they bring us to this place? ... Whoever approached the fence surrounding the camp, was shot by the Lithuanian guards... Once a Jew came from Svencionys ghetto and presented the commander of the camp with a permission from German authorities in Svencionys allowing him to take out his family... After negotiations with the Lithuanian commandant, which cost my mother two golden wedding rings and a few thousands rubels, we were put on the list of those to be released from the camp... [Once we were outside the camp] I saw two trucks with Lithuanians. They were all drunk and held rifles in their hands, and were singing and laughing. These were our murders, they were going in the direction of Polygon..."¹⁴

¹¹Garfunkel et al., *Yahadut Lita*, pp. 329-331.

¹²Herman Kruk, *Togbuch fun Vilner Ghetto (Diary of the Vilna Ghetto)*, New York, 1961, p. 53. (hereafter Kruk, *Togbuch*)

¹³*Ibid*, pp. 51-53.

¹⁴Lea Svirski, *Ich Bin Geven in Polygon (I was in Polygon)*, in *Svintzian Region Yizkor Book*, Shimon Kanc, ed., pp. 559-575.

When German troops conquered Lithuania there were there 203,000-207,000 Jews. At the end of 1941 only about 43,000 Jews (Vilnius around 20,000, Kaunas around 17,500, Shauliai around 5,000, Svencionys around 500) remained in Lithuania. About 160,000-164,000 had been exterminated between 22th June and December 1941.

From the end of 1941 until summer 1944, when the Germans were finally expelled from Lithuania, the surviving Jews were closed in several ghettos and camps, where they were isolated to a large degree from the local Lithuanian population. The mass extermination had been temporarily stopped, because Germany had not achieved its victory and was preparing itself and its economy for a prolonged war. For this purpose the German military and civilian authorities needed Jewish skilled labor, and control over the ghettos and camps which still remained, was in German hands and was being exploited according to the German needs. Consequently there so was no more need for Lithuanian police units to participate in extermination actions. The involvement of Lithuanian municipal authorities and Lithuanian enterprises in using Jewish labor was also limited. Therefore, in the Jewish sources we can find less reference to Lithuanians and their actions, and much more about Germans who were in charge of them, about life in the ghettos, the struggle with hunger and disease, underground activities and the fight for survival. This was the "relatively quite period" as I called it.

The gradual liquidation through the murder or deportation of the remaining Jews in General-kommissariat Lithuania began in spring 1943. There is a lot of reference in Jewish sources to the so-called "Kaunas action", when about 4,000 Jews from Svencionys, Oshmiana and some other localities from areas of Belorussia which had been annexed to Reichskommissariat Lithuania in 1942, were murdered in Paneriai, on 5th April 1943. In regard to this action the term "Gestapo" is much more mentioned in Jewish sources than "Lithuanians" or "partisans".¹⁵ In some entries of diaries at that period, Lithuanian anti-German activities are mentioned, like refusal to enlist the German army or forced labor, but not in connection with the fate of the Jews.¹⁶ In the Jewish sources the deportation and murder of the last remaining Jews on the eve of German retreat, in June-July 1944, refers mainly to the German SS units and less to Lithuanians.¹⁷

Less than five percent of the Lithuanian Jews who remained under German occupation, survived the war. Most of them were among those who were deported to Germany from the Kaunas and Shauliai ghettos, the others survived as partisans in the forests, and some of them were rescued with the help of local Righteous among the Nations.

To sum up, the Jewish sources, as I quoted them, were extremely critical about the role played by Lithuanians, in the first half year of the German occupation, as was subjectively perceived by the Jews during that most tragic period in the history of Lithuanian Jewry. Except for the wave of pogroms in the first weeks, when some thousands of Jews were murdered, the anti-Jewish policy and the total extermination of the Jews in Lithuania was dictated by the German rulers. But in many cases the cruel behavior and atrocities, as described above, and reflected in many other Jewish sources which I did not quote, were products of the initiative of substantial numbers of Lithuanian partisans, policemen and people of local municipal administration.

¹⁵Kruk, *Togbuch*, pp. 500, 504, 514-515.

¹⁶Ibid, pp. 475-476, 479, 481.

¹⁷Garfunkel, *Kovna Haihudit*, pp. 196-197; Yitshak Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, Jerusalem, 1980, p. 446.

As a summary I will quote Leib Garfunkel whom I mentioned above as one of the prominent Jewish leaders in Lithuania and a survivor of the ghetto in Kaunas. He wrote an article entitled "Our Reconciling with the Lithuanians": (I quote)

One of the factors which greatly amplified the suffering and distress of the Jewish community in Lithuania and worsened its tragic fate during the Holocaust was the inhuman attitude of many Lithuanians in various circles and social strata. This was a consequence of the troubled evolution of Lithuanian-Jewish relations during the period of Lithuanian independence (1919-1940), and especially during the first year of Soviet rule following the Soviet annexation of Lithuania... The overwhelming majority of Lithuanians identified the Jews with the Communists, and blamed the Jews for all the psychological and political suffering they had endured upon their loss of independence... Such was the prevailing climate among the Lithuanians toward the Jewish population when the Nazi army invaded Lithuanian territory... The truth is that many Lithuanians – including members of Lithuanian intelligentsia – stained their hands in Jewish blood with savage and inhuman cruelty in the period from 23 June 1941 to approximately the end of that year, in which 85 percent of all the Jews in Lithuania were annihilated, and to some extent afterwards as well ... It did not take long for the Lithuanian public, which had greeted the Germans with joy and cheers, to become bitterly disillusioned with the attitude of the German occupation regime toward the Lithuanians and their political, national, economic and cultural interests... especially in 1943, after the German defeat in Stalingrad... One can not say that the Lithuanians suddenly became devoted friends of the persecuted Jews, but it would be wrong to overlook the fact that the fervid hatred of the Jews, which found expression in June 1941 and for much time afterwards, began to lapse to some extent as relations between the Lithuanians and the German deteriorated... Only a small portion of Lithuanian Jewry, once a quarter of a million strong, was still alive..."¹⁸

¹⁸Garfunkel, *Yahadut Lita*, pp. 48, 58-59.