THE FINAL SOLUTION

Origins and Implementation

Edited by
David Cesarani

ROUTLEDGE

London and New York

CONTENTS

v

10

THE HOLOCAUST IN LITHUANIA

Some unique aspects

Dina Porat

Historians and writers of chronicles have already related the sequence of
events in Lithuania during the Holocaust.[1] In this chapter an attempt will
be made to define the particular combination of circumstances which made
the fate of Lithuanian Jewry unique. Such an attempt should, of course,
take into consideration the general background of the time and place,
Lithuanian Jewry being one Jewish community among many under the
same Nazi occupation. Our main question here is whether this uniqueness
had implications for further developments and whether it supplied lessons
to be applied elsewhere, for the German authorities as well as for the
Jewish communities.

THE STARTING POINT OF THE FINAL SOLUTION

The Final Solution – the systematic overall physical extermination of Jewish
communities one after the other – began in Lithuania. This was not the
only country which German forces and their allies invaded on 22 June
1941, later continuing their way southward, eastward and northward, but
it was in Lithuania that the German killing squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*,
following in the footsteps of the army units, began organizing the murder
of the Jews. A report sent to Berlin by the *Einsatzgruppe* A commander,
SS General Walter Franz Stahlecker, identifies as the 'first pogrom' the
violence that took place in Kovno on the night of 25–26 June 1941, only
four days after the invasion started, when 1,500 Jews were killed.[2] Also,
the appeal to the Jewish pioneering youth to practise self-defence, written
and read out at their meeting in Vilna on 1 January 1942 by Abba Kovner,
then leader of the Hashomer Hatza'ir movement, predicted: 'The Jews of
Lithuania are fated to be the first in line.'[3] And so they were.

Other countries had been invaded by Nazi Germany before June 1941,
but the attack on the Lithuanian Jewish community was the first to occur
after the German invasion into the areas of Soviet domain, an invasion

that initiated a ruthless general lethal assault. The short time that elapsed between the invasion and the beginning of the implementation of the Final Solution, along with 'Lithuania's common border with Germany, doomed the fate of its Jews', as the Jewish Lithuanian historian Ya'acov Robinson put it.[4]

LITHUANIAN JEWS: THE FIRST IN LINE

No other Jewish community was so extensively and comprehensively affected. About 95 per cent or 96 per cent of this Jewish group was murdered following Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union.

A comparison of the different Jewish sources that try to estimate losses in Lithuania leads to the same result. According to the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (a joint effort of historians, coordinated by Yad Vashem, to present most of the available data), there were 168,000 Jews in Lithuania, excluding the Vilna area and city. On the eve of the invasion the Soviet authorities expelled some 7,000 to Siberia, and another 14,000–15,000 fled eastward when the invasion started. Out of the remaining 145,000 (plus 3,000 refugees from the Reich), 140,000–143,000, or about 94.5 per cent to 96 per cent, were killed. The Vilna area and city, which were annexed to Poland for about twenty years, between the two world wars, were returned to Lithuanian sovereignty in October 1939, as part of the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact. Including the Vilna Jews, as well as the 13,000–15,000 Polish Jewish refugees who arrived in Lithuania during the last months of 1939, there were 265,000 Jews in Lithuania, out of whom 254,000 were killed – again, about 95 per cent.[5]

The book *Lithuanian Jewry*, the most comprehensive effort of Lithuanian Jews to record their own history, estimates their number at the beginning of the German invasion at 225,000–235,000 people. The same source estimates the number of survivors in July 1944, when the Red Army liberated the Baltic countries, as being 2,000–3,000, including partisans in the forests, plus a few thousand more who had previously been evacuated to forced labour camps in Germany.[6] If the number of survivors was indeed about 8,000–9,000 altogether,[7] then the losses are again about 96 per cent.

It seems, then, that two Jewish sources, though slightly differing in detail, reach the identical conclusion that only a few thousand Lithuanian Jews survived the Holocaust. The *Lithuanian Encyclopedia*, under the entry 'Jews' (Zydai), simply makes a factual statement: a quarter of a million Jews were murdered in Lithuania. The first committee of the Jewish Historical Institute established in Vilna after the war wrote in an appeal to the Soviet authorities: 'The common estimation is that only one or one and a half per cent of the Jewish population survived, including partisans.'[8] 'One might say', recalled Yitzhak (Antek) Zukerman, one of the Warsaw

Ghetto revolt commanders, 'that from Vilna we got word [in 1942] that the disaster is total.'[9]

THE TIMING AND SCOPE OF THE MURDERS

Most of the Lithuanian Jews were murdered immediately, during the months following the invasion, between the end of June and December 1941. The *Einsatzgruppen* reports, written at that time and sent to Berlin as a record of their activities, show that about 80,000, a quarter of the Jewish population, were killed by October.[10] This figure includes the Vilna area. A later report, written towards the end of the year, reports that 136,400 Jews were already 'out of the way'.[11] This means that by the end of the year 80 per cent of Lithuanian Jews were dead, whether the Vilna area is included or not.[12] Both Jewish and German sources agree that about 175,000 out of about a million had already been killed in all areas of Lithuania by the end of the year, again 80 per cent.[13]

Yet German and Jewish sources do not agree on the number of Jews left in the ghettos: according to the latter about 45,000 Jews were concentrated in the ghettos of Vilna (about 20,000), Kovno (17,500), Shavli (5,000), Swieciany and a number of small labour camps. All Jewish sources agree on a number of ghetto inmates that is considerably higher than estimated by the Germans. The Germans estimated the number mainly by the cards they issued, whereas the Jews hid about 8,000 more in the three main ghettos, subsisting on the same cards and food rations.[14] This discrepancy between Jewish sources and German ones, which occurs time and again regarding the number of Jews in various ghettos, as well as other issues, is a warning to historians. They should not rely too heavily for figures, at least, on German sources although these are famous for being meticulous. It was the Jewish council who had the correct figure in most cases. It seems that a full picture of the events of the Holocaust in each country arises only from the integration of the three main types of sources: Jewish, German and local. In any case, the ghettos of Lithuania ceased to exist in the summer of 1943 (Vilna and most of the small camps) and in the summer of 1944 (Kovno, Shavli and the remaining small places).

The decisive majority of Lithuanian Jews, about 80 per cent, did not undergo the preliminary stages that characterized German policy against the Jews in western, southern and central Europe. They did not experience the two or two and a half years of ghetto life before the deportations to the death camps started, as the Jews in the Polish ghettos of the General Government did. They were not even killed in the two waves of extermination practised by the Germans in most of the areas they occupied in the Soviet Union, the first until the end of 1941 and the second beginning in the spring of 1942.[15]

The wave that hit most of the Lithuanian Jews not only diminished the

major communities to half (Kovno) or even a third (Vilna) of their former size. It erased the small towns, the famous Jewish Lithuanian *Shtetles*, almost to the last person, in a few months. Like the rest of the Jews in the German-occupied areas in the Soviet Union they were shot near pits and in woods close to their former places of residence, and were not sent to death camps.

Not only Lithuanian Jews were killed there. About 5,000 Jews from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia were murdered in the pits of the Ninth Fort, one of a chain of fortresses around Kovno, at the end of 1941. At the same time, tens of thousands of Jews were deported from the Reich to the ghettos of Minsk, Riga and Lodz. Some were immediately killed, but most of them were interned in these ghettos, or in separate nearby ones. The question is, then, whether the German policy makers regarded Lithuania as an experimental killing site, both for the local Jews and for those deported from the Reich, even before the Wannsee Conference participants decided to implement the Final Solution all over Europe. A few more thousand Jews from Belgium, Holland and especially from the transit camp of Drancy, France, were executed in the Ninth Fort during 1942–4. It is also possible, though, that the Ninth Fort served as a killing site because it best suited the task, not due to its location in Lithuania. And one more possibility that cannot be ignored when considering German *operations is the constant struggles for prestige and power* among German authorities, which could have brought about a decision to send Jews to Lithuania only to be killed there and not to join, even temporarily, one of its ghettos.[16]

THE LOCAL POPULATION

Such an almost total annihilation, carried out with such speed, was possible not only because the implementation of the Final Solution began in Lithuania immediately following the German invasion. The intense involvement of the local population, in large numbers, in the murder of the Jews, entailed a fatal combination of Lithuanian motivation and German organization and thoroughness.

The reports of *Einsatzgruppe* A testify to the eagerness the Lithuanians demonstrated. This is a significant testimony because the purpose of these reports was to display German, not Lithuanian, determination and devotion to their so-called mission, despite the many 'difficulties' which the Nazi authors emphasized. The reports indicate clearly that groups of 'partisans', civil units of nationalist-rightist anti-Soviet affiliation, initiated contact with the Germans upon their entry into Kovno. The German authorities used these 'partisans' to establish a new unit, formally called the Labour National Guard, that operated all over Lithuania.[17] A German

report praises this new unit as having fulfilled its mission 'very well', especially in the planning and execution of 'the largest Aktionen'.[18]

Indeed, this unit, assisted by many other locals, performed the first massive killings of thousands of Jews in a few weeks in Kovno,[19] later in Vilna,[20] and especially in smaller towns and rural settlements. According to German reports groups with no more than one German in charge of Lithuanians numbering from eight to forty-five killed most of the Jews outside the major cities by December 1941, 'in all of Lithuania, systematically, region by region'.[21] A table annexed to the Stahlecker report lists dozens of small towns, where the Jews were murdered by Germans 'and Lithuanian Partisans', mostly during the summer of 1941, through the same means.[22]

Yet, according to Jewish sources, there was hardly any need for the presence of Germans in the small places. A declaration issued after the war by the Lithuanian Jews in the American zone in Germany regarding 'the guilt of the Lithuanian people in the extermination of Lithuanian Jewry' concludes: 'The small places in the Lithuanian provinces, without any exception, were erased by the Lithuanians.'[23] This declaration actually sums up the events detailed in *Lithuanian Jewry*, the volume on the Holocaust: the handful of survivors of 220 *Shtetles* and small towns describe how the Jews in those places were killed. Their descriptions, in which the Germans are hardly mentioned, make it quite clear that Lithuanians perpetrated most of the torture and killing, generally without any German officials on the spot. Recent research confirms Jewish sources to a large extent. The German historian Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, in his research on the *Einsatzgruppen*, assumes that 'possibly half or two-thirds' of Lithuanian Jews were killed by local units. It seems, then, that the part played by the Lithuanians was greater than the Germans could afford to admit in their reports to their headquarters.[24]

The Ninth Fort, the killing site and burial place of about 40,000 people, mostly Jews, was organized and supervised by Lithuanian police volunteers. Some of them lived in the vicinity with their families, some came to assist when needed. The German command of the *Einsatzgruppen* came to the Fort only when the great *Aktionen* of thousands at a time were taking place and left immediately after the *Aktionen* were over. (The ghettos' civil German command killed smaller numbers from time to time until 1944.) The Lithuanians in charge killed those alive, wounded or intact, in the pits or otherwise on the spot, and prepared the Fort for forthcoming activities.[25] It should be noted that this description was given after the war by the Lithuanian commanders of the Fort, in the Soviet courts that declared them war criminals who practised the killing of 'Soviet citizens'. Since it is clear that the Lithuanians were out to defend themselves and diminish their crimes, the above may be considered an accurate, if not even minimized, description of their deeds.

The activities of the Lithuanian 'partisans' were so much in line with German plans that by the end of July 1941 the German command began the establishment of twenty police battalions. About 8,400 men, all volunteers, were charged with the murder of the local Jews, under the supervision of Franz Lechthaler, commander of the 11th Battalion of the German reserve police. By the end of the year, after most of the Lithuanian Jews had been killed, some of the battalions were sent to Byelorussia and to Poland, where they perpetrated killings in a string of towns, camps and ghettos, including Treblinka and Maidanek, and took part in the annihilation of the Warsaw Ghetto with General Stroop's troops.[26] German reports include references to the cruelty manifested by the members of these battalions, both in Lithuania and outside. It seems that their deeds even surpassed the capacity of some Germans and Byelorussians. When the Germans entered Kovno, they filmed the massacre of the Jews by the Lithuanians so as to 'make clear that it was the local population that spontaneously took the first steps against the Jews'. This was done because 'it was preferable that at least at the beginning the cruel and unusual means, which might upset even German circles, would not be too conspicuous'.[27] In other words, it seems that upon commencing the mass murder, the German troops did not know what it would look like physically. They were perhaps surprised and even taken aback by the extremity of Lithuanian conduct, and worried about the reaction of German circles once they found out that these deeds were enacted in an area under German occupation. The films could also serve as evidence of the enthusiasm which the Final Solution met with in the German occupied areas, thereby legitimizing Nazi propaganda and the Germans' own cruelty.

Carl, the German Gebietskommissar in Sluzk, Byelorussia, who witnessed an *Aktion* brutally carried out in his area by the infamous 12th Lithuanian Police Battalion, under the supervision of the German reserve police battalion, had one request: to get rid of the Lithuanian battalion.[28] His argument was not an objection to the murder of Jews *per se* – this was out of the question – but rather the Lithuanians' use of methods that provoked anti-German feelings among the local population. And Wilhelm Kube, Generalkommissar of Byelorussia, sent word to Heinrich Lohse, Reichskommissar for Ostland, to find out whether

> the slaughter [of the Reich Jews sent to the east is] to be carried out by the Lithuanians and Letts, who are themselves rejected by the [Byelorussian] population here? I couldn't do it. I beg you to give clear directives [in this matter], with due consideration for the good name of our Reich and our Party, in order that the necessary action be taken in the most humane manner.[29]

These words are more than clear.

It seems that the Lithuanians were aware of these facts. 'Do we have to

be the Arch-hangmen of Europe?' asked an anti-Nazi underground Lithuanian publication in 1943. 'The Germans who shoot Jews now will shoot us later, and the world will support them because Lithuanians are hangmen and sworn sadists.'[30]

A number of questions are worth mentioning in this context. First, the possibility that Germans who served on the civil administration, and especially in reserve battalions, were more reluctant to back the Lithuanians than were other German units such as the *Einsatzgruppen*, who had quite a record for their own brutality. It seems that at least some of the civil German commanders thought that the zeal of the Lithuanian police battalions surpassed their own by far.

The question at stake is whether German civil and reserve units, who did not receive the training for murder given to the *Einsatzgruppen*, accepted, at least during the first months following the invasion, the Nazi regime's presentation of the killing of the Jews as a necessity – but not as a task which civilized people would indulge in with pleasure.

Second, even the *Einsatzgruppen*, after being trained for murder, were still murderers only in theory. Once the killings started, they became practical murderers, and the Lithuanians were the first ones to provide them with this transition from theory to practice. The Lithuanians showed them how to murder women and children, and perhaps made them accustomed to it.

Lithuanian conduct must have encouraged the German command to make further use of local units. It seems that when the German units became familiar with a place and situation, and when problems arose due to brutality and disorder (see Note 29), the lower echelons of the German command which were on the spot, such as Carl in Sluzk, became more reluctant to use local units. But the higher command exercised pressure to continue the practice.

Third, the question of the timetable: the above-mentioned chronology in Lithuania supports the view expressed by the Israeli historian, Yehoshua Büchler, that an order to kill Jewish men in the Soviet areas, as, or along with, communist activists, saboteurs, etc., was issued before the invasion. Indeed, at the onset of the invasion the German units killed mostly men, while the Lithuanians killed unselectively. A second order, to kill all Jews in the Soviet Union, was perhaps issued around 17 July 1941, when Himmler was appointed head of police security forces in the former Soviet areas, and issued instructions for the enrolment of locals into collaborationist units (see Note 17). Indeed this is when the Germans started organizing the Lithuanians in battalions, and progressed with the help of these units to wholesale murder of the Jews. Even if an oral, somewhat vague, order to kill everyone was issued before the invasion, it was convenient to have the Lithuanians fulfil it, and for the German units to join in when they grew more accustomed to murder, and when a clearer order was issued.

So it seems that the conduct of the Lithuanians, though anticipated in principle, encouraged the German command to press on. The scope, thoroughness and methods used by the Lithuanians made the Germans expect such support in other areas as well. Therefore this was an additional milestone towards the decision to kill all Jews in Europe.

Finally, Auschwitz became the symbol of the Holocaust due to the massive systematic murder perpetrated there. Perhaps the mass shootings by the killing pits in the Soviet Union should have become such a symbol. Auschwitz was the embodiment of a death factory, devised to avoid eye-to-eye and face-to-face contact with the children, women and elderly killed there, thus sparing the murderers all possible inconvenience. But the killing by the pits was done by direct contact, a sight that provoked drunkenness and nightmares. Nevertheless, the murders went on, and the murderers grew used to performing the horror.

One issue that lies outside the scope of this chapter concerns the explanations for the Lithuanians' extreme conduct. In short, it was a combination of a complex of factors such as national traditions and values, religion (Orthodox Catholic, in this case), severe economic problems and tragically opposed political orientations. Lithuanian Jews supported the Soviet regime in Lithuania during 1940–1, being partly of socialist inclination, and in the full knowledge that 'life imprisonment [Soviet regime] is better than life sentence [Nazi rule]', as in the Yiddish saying. By contrast, the Lithuanians fostered hopes of regaining, with German support, the national independence that the Soviets extinguished, as a reward for anti-Jewish and anti-Bolshevik stances. During the Soviet rule of Lithuania these feelings heightened and burst out following the German invasion. One might say that the Germans provided the framework and the legitimation for the killing of Lithuania's Jews, while the national aspirations and the hatred for communism provided the fuel. Still, this is not a full explanation for such brutality, especially as there was no tradition of pogroms in Lithuania. Not all Lithuanians took part in the killings, and one cannot depict all of them as murderers. At least one thousand Lithuanians sheltered Jews, thereby risking their own and their families' lives. A few tens of thousands took active part in the mass murders while the rest were either apathetic or aggravated the misery of the Jews in lesser ways than actual killing.

After the first stage of indiscriminate murder by the Lithuanians in July 1941, the Germans established the police battalions and planned a second stage. During August and September the remainder of Lithuanian Jewry was enclosed in four ghettos. During October and November, large *Aktionen* were initiated by the Germans with the active participation of the Lithuanians, in order to spare only the 'productive elements'. In December, Lohse ordered a halt to the killings of Jews because their manifold professional skills were indispensable.[31] The year 1942, and the

first part of 1943, until the German defeat at Stalingrad, were relatively quiet in the ghettos and camps of Lithuania, where about 40,000–45,000 Jews still survived.

Summing up the uniqueness of the Holocaust in Lithuania from an external point of view, that is Jews vis-à-vis Lithuanians and Germans, one might say that the combination of its position as the first place to be hit by the Final Solution and the deep involvement of many among the local population, of all classes and circles, enabled the immediate killing of Lithuanian Jews with unsurpassed speed, scope and means.

*

Lithuania served as a starting point from an internal Jewish point of view as well. It was said there by Jews, for the first time, three weeks before the Wannsee Conference, that 'Hitler aims to destroy all the Jews of Europe'.[32] This was the location where Jews first understood the essence of the Final Solution as a comprehensive, systematic plan that concerned all the Jews of Europe.

It seems that the reason why they grasped this unprecedented plan first in Lithuania lies with a unique background and in a unique chain of circumstances that occurred there, directly affecting the Jewish public. The chain began with Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania, being returned to Lithuania under the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact in October 1939. This meant the reunion of the 60,000 Jews of Vilna, and the countless treasures of Jewish culture accumulated there, with the rest of Lithuanian Jewry. Moreover, Vilna was then located in an independent state, though it was quite obvious that the independence of a small country such as Lithuania between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia was bound to be shortlived. Nevertheless, about 14,000–15,000 Jews from German-occupied Poland made their way to Vilna, and then dispersed to Kovno and several smaller towns as well. They were the cream of Polish Jewry, leaders, intellectuals, activists of all parties in the political spectrum, 2,000 Talmudic students with their rabbis and another 2,000 youth movement members, mostly Zionist, with their leaders. They, too, like the Jews of Vilna, reinforced Jewish public life and thinking. These Polish refugees maintained contact with the rest of the Jewish world, especially with American Jewry and the *Yishuv* in Palestine. These contacts produced financial resources, documents and encouragement, at a time when most of European Jewry was under the Nazi or Soviet yoke.[33]

Lithuanian independence ended not long afterwards, in June 1940, when it was annexed to the Soviet Union. During the year that elapsed until June 1941, the Soviets dismantled all Jewish organizations, forbade all forms of public life, especially education and journalism, arrested leaders and deported them to Siberia, and terrorized the country. Jewish youth movements and political parties went underground, and tried to maintain

contacts and activity at least on a limited scale. Contacts were especially strong among the youth movement members who had formed an umbrella organization in 1940. So it happened that this small, active and well-organized Jewry had a year to practise underground life, facing a hostile regime.[34] True, the other two Baltic countries, as well as western Byelorussia and Ukraine, all experienced the same year of Soviet rule. But Lithuanian Jewry had Vilna, the Polish refugees and contacts with the outside world.

The process continued after the German invasion. The strong ties among members inside each of the youth movements, as well as between them, enabled the creation of an information network. It was, of course, an amateur non-professional network based on personal ties. Young people, mostly girls, serving as couriers, reached the places devastated by the Final Solution in Lithuania and even beyond its former borders. They returned to tell what they had heard and sometimes seen. Since Jews were confined to their designated places by a series of unequivocal regulations, the couriers moved slowly and weeks elapsed before their reappearance. The information was collected by the youth movement leaders, who tried to analyse it in a series of meetings and consultations. These leaders gradually concluded that the Germans, assisted by the local population, were operating the same method of killing in a succession of areas – gathering the communities and herding them to pits and woods outside towns – and that the use of this method was spreading not only in Lithuania but in other areas of German occupation as well.[35]

This conclusion was crystallized in a proclamation, read out to a meeting of the pioneering youth in Vilna on 1 January 1942, warning that 'Hitler aims to destroy all the Jews of Europe' – not only Lithuanian Jews. This warning was perhaps phrased with some exaggeration, in order to focus attention and to dispel any illusions regarding the scope of the disaster. It certainly contained quite a measure of prophecy and insight. First, the idea of total murder was then unprecedented, reached far beyond the facts in hand and was beyond all experience, even Jewish, until then. Second, the Lithuanians did most of the killings, demonstrating initiative and clear policies. This was an obstacle to understanding the fact that the overall murder plan actually originated in Berlin. Third, for many weeks after the invasion the ghettos in Lithuania were cut off from each other. In Vilna there was no information about events in Kovno or in small rural locations. Later it became known in Vilna that in Bialystok a ghetto of 40,000 people lived in relative calm, and that in Warsaw half a million were alive and active, if starving. This could have indicated that Vilna in particular, and Lithuania in general, were exceptionally unfortunate to have more murderous than usual local German commanders. Fourth, the facts gathered about the murders in Lithuania and neighbouring areas could have been seen as linked to the German anti-Bolshevik campaign and hence limited to the

former Soviet areas only, not necessarily to overall German policies in Europe in general.

It should also be taken into consideration that the massive deportation of Polish Jews from their ghettos, and of Jews from other European countries, to the death camps, only started in the spring of 1942 (though Chelmno started operating as early as the end of 1941).

The announcement of such a prediction to a doomed public was the result both of the afore-described circumstances and of the personal courage of the youth movements' leaders, particularly Abba Kovner, who formulated the proclamation and read it out.[36] The proclamation was then sent by courier to Warsaw, the largest ghetto and the centre of Jewish organizations. Also, word was spread from Warsaw to a number of other ghettos.[37]

It so happened, then, that the existence of the Final Solution embracing all Europe was grasped by a Jewish public on 1 January 1942, three weeks before the Wannsee Conference. This was no coincidence, but rather the parallel results of, on the German side, the invasion of Soviet Russia and the beginning of the murder there;[38] and, for the Jews, the circumstances that enabled at least some of the Lithuanian Jews, especially its Zionist youth movements, to see events correctly as the implementation of the first stage in a comprehensive plan.

Did this conclusion, first reached in Vilna, convince the other Jewish communities in Lithuania? Did the fact that the Lithuanian community was the first to be hit by the Final Solution affect other Jewish communities? Long painful deliberations took place even among the Vilna youth movement members, before and after 1 January 1942. Once most of these members accepted the idea that total annihilation awaited each and every Jew, their way was clear. Youth movement members in other places such as Warsaw were deeply shocked by the news from Vilna, yet each ghetto needed its own experience to reach the same conclusions. And most of the older Jewish public, who could not join the underground or leave for the forest, because they were responsible for children and parents, still hoped to survive through work and hold on till German defeat.

Comprehension of the situation led to the next stage. The proclamation called upon Jewish youth to defend itself and its community. Indeed, an underground movement was established in each of the four ghettos of Lithuania. The largest one was in Vilna, a coalition of all the forces in the Jewish population, including the Bund and the communists. The latter were instrumental in maintaining contacts with the communist underground outside the ghettos, in the Lithuanian cities of Vilna and Kovno and later in the forests. A small amount of arms and ammunition was smuggled in with great risk and served to train the members, mainly during the year that elapsed beween mid-1942 and mid-1943.

These four undergrounds began organizing and building in 1942. This

fact demands attention, because 1942 was a relatively quiet year. No more large *Aktionen* took place after Lohse's order to stop the killing until the ghettos were transferred, in the summer of 1943, from the civil administration to the SS. It seemed that Jewish labour was indeed necessary, because workshops and factories were put up in the ghettos, and Jewish labourers worked there as well as in German enterprises outside the ghetto. The *Wehrmacht* needed various products and services that Lithuanians could not supply, and there was at least some room for hope that Jewish labour would help spare the rest of Lithuanian Jewry. The remnant of the Jewish communities, being given a short breathing space, developed cultural, religious and social activities, even a theatre (in Vilna) and a court of justice (in Kovno). The Jewish councils tried to maintain at least a semblance of normality. Indeed, there were no epidemics in the Lithuanian ghettos. The essence of daily life was the struggle for food but there was no famine or death by hunger; the streets were clean, and violation of public regulations was punished. These achievements were perhaps another result of the cohesiveness and inner organization that developed in the small Jewish community in Lithuania long before the war started.

Yet it was during 1942 despite the fact that it was a year of relative calm and hope that the youth movements were transformed into active underground organizations. Contact with the outside world, including with Palestine, was cut off a few months before the invasion. The couriers' route to the General Government and back became increasingly difficult as the pace of extermination accelerated in Poland and more than a quarter of a million people were deported from Warsaw to Treblinka in the summer of 1942. The Jewish local hinterland ceased to exist, once the Jews in the small towns were almost all dead. The Jewish underground in Lithuania had to cope with isolation, lack of information and, more important, with the illusion that naturally took hold of people when the killings stopped. Under these circumstances it was a lot more difficult to adhere to the basic conclusion that the Final Solution would not spare anyone in the long run, and that the halt was only temporary.[39] Perhaps the fact that the realization of German intentions first emerged in Lithuania gave the underground strength to insist on the stance they formulated.

The severe conflicts within the Vilna underground, between the public in the ghetto and the Jewish council, or the good relations that existed between these three elements in the ghettos of Kovno and Shavli, cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say that the German authorities were aware of the unrest in Vilna and of the determination of its underground and feared another variation of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt. They were worried about the increase of Soviet or Soviet-oriented partisans in eastern Lithuania and in Byelorussia in the summer of 1943 and their ties with the ghetto underground. With a few acts of deception the Germans ended the existence of the ghetto before the underground could act.[40] The calmer

ghettos in Shavli and Kovno were turned into concentration camps that resumed work until the German retreat in the summer of 1944.

One may conclude that Jewish organized resistance in the ghettos of eastern Europe began, at least as an idea, with an analysis of the situation in Lithuania, an analysis of German plans and the transmission of the conclusions to other ghettos in 1941–2. The conditions which made this analysis and these conclusions possible came into being much earlier. They formed, in fact, about 300 years before the Holocaust, when the 'Litvak' type appeared on the Jewish stage, and his special blend of logic and knowledge of the Halacha created a school of rabbinical thought. This *school, still in existence today, made Lithuanian Yeshivas (Talmudic aca-*demics) the acknowledged powerhouse of Jewish Talmudic studies for about two centuries, and the centre of *Mismagdim* – opponents – of the Hassidic movement. The Haskala (Enlightenment), the socialist and the Zionist movements that strengthened in Lithuania in the nineteenth century, fostered an active public life with parties and youth movements spanning right and left, a fine system of education that encompassed 90 per cent of Jewish children between the wars, an extensive press and prolific literature, in both Yiddish and living Hebrew, let alone the largest library in the east European Jewish world, the Strashun library, the Yivo, the first and only institute for Jewish research and studies, the first Jewish press, music institute, pen club, technicum, high school that taught in Yiddish, and the second in the world to teach in Hebrew (the first was in Jerusalem). All this occurred in Vilna, the city nicknamed the Jerusalem of Lithuania.

It seems logical to assume that this specific background influenced the way Lithuanian Jews handled their affairs during the Holocaust in the ghettos. The best proof is the fact the survivors of ghettos and camps, gathered after the liberation in the American Zone in Germany, elected the few surviving leaders of the Kovno ghetto as their representatives, press editors and chairmen of committees. Leib Garfunkel for instance, vice-chairman of the Jewish council in the Kovno ghetto, became one of the leading figures in the camps in Germany, and later in Italy. The Vilna partisans, headed by Abba Kovner and joined by the Kovno fighters of the Lithuanian Division, led the surviving partisans. This expression of respect which other Jews had for Lithuanian Jewry seemed confirmation that it was a unique population in its life and in its death.

NOTES

1 See the list of publications in: Yitzhak Arad, *The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews of Vilna* (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 409–14 (Hebrew); Dov Levin, 'Jews of the Baltic countries in ripeness and in destruction', *Masua*, 12 (April 1984), pp. 40–1 (Hebrew); Abraham Tory, *Ghetto Everyday, Diary and Documents*

from the Kovno Ghetto, ed. with introduction and notes Dina Porat (Tel Aviv, 1988), pp. 589–90 (Hebrew). On Lithuania in general, see *Lithuanian Jewry*, vol. IV *The Holocaust, 1941–1945* (Tel Aviv, 1984) (Hebrew).

2 See the 31 January 1942 Stahlecker report in *The Final Solution, Documents on the Destruction of European Jewry by Nazi Germany* (Tel Aviv, 1960), pp. 22–5 (Hebrew). See also Yosef Gar, 'Details on the destruction of Lithuania as reflected in the Einsatzgruppen reports in "The Walter Stahlecker Report" and in Karl Jaeger's Conclusive List', *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, pp. 21–6.

3 *Documents on the Holocaust*, ed. Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman and Avraham Margaliot (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1981), p. 433.

4 Ya'acov Robinson, 'The destruction of Lithuanian Jewry as part of the Holocaust in general', *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, p. 19.

5 *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, ed. Y. Gutman (Tel Aviv, 1990), vol. V, pp. 1282, 1284 (Hebrew).

6 Yitzhak Arad, 'Policies and implementation of the "Final Solution" in Lithuania', *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, p. 47.

7 *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, 'Lithuania', by Dov Levin, vol. III, p. 638. The figure of 8,000 given here is not quite clear. See Dov Levin, 'On the relations between Jews and Lithuanians during World War II', *Kivunim*, 2 (February 1979), p. 30: 92 per cent (Hebrew).

8 Zydai, *Lietuviu Enciklopedija*, vol. 35 (Boston, Mass., 1966), p. 293. See the appeal, written at the beginning of November 1944, in Abba Kovner, 'The beginning of the "Bricha" [escape] as a mass movement', *Yalkut Moreshet*, 37 (June 1984), pp. 17–18.

9 Itzchak Zuckerman (Antek), *Those Seven Years, 1939–1946, The Ghetto Fighters' House* (1990), p. 137 (Hebrew).

10 Stahlecker report, *The Final Solution*, p. 25, a balance sheet.

11 Jaeger report, *The Final Solution*, p. 29. SS Standarten-führer (between colonel and brigadier-general) Karl Jaeger, commander of the *Einsatzkommando* 3 of *Einsatzgruppe* A, wrote his report on 1 December 1941.

12 The second report, reproduced in *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, p. 26, contains a map which excludes the Vilna area. The figure 136,400, out of 148,000, seems too high. Perhaps different boundaries of regions could account for that.

13 *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, p. 56 and Levin, 'Jews and Lithuanians', 85 per cent. Cf. Levin and Arad, *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, pp. 31, 39 respectively: 80 per cent.

14 The Jaeger report estimates the number of Jews in the ghettos at 15,000 each in Vilna and Kovno, and 4,500 in Shavli. There are a number of other errors in this report. See Dina Porat, 'The legend of the struggle of Jews from the Third Reich in the Ninth Fort near Kovno, 1941–1942', *Tel-Aviver Jahrbuch für Deutsche Geschichte*, 1991, pp. 363–92. (See English full text of the report in *Documents Accuse*, compiled and with annotations by B. Baranaukas and K. Ruksenas (Vilnius, 1970), pp. 230–8.)

15 The small Estonian community, that numbered 1,000 Jews when the German occupation started, was also killed by the end of 1941.

16 Porat, 'Jews from the Third Reich'.

17 In Lithuanian: Tautinio Darbo Apsauga; in fact it was a national security service. See Sara Nishmit, 'Between collaboration and uprising – to the history of German occupation in Lithuania', *Dapim Leheker Ha'Shoa Vehameri*, second series, vol. I, *The Ghetto Fighters' House* (1970), pp. 152–79 (Hebrew). As to the stages in the formation of local units in the Soviet-occupied territories, see Yehoshua Büchler, 'Local police units – Schutzmannschaften – in the murder campaign in the Soviet Union' (to be published).

18 Stahlecker report, *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, p. 25.
19 See the *Einsatzgruppe* A (EK 1b) report no. 8, of 30 June 1941, in *The Einsatzgruppen Reports*, ed. Y. Arad, Shmuel Krakowski and Shmuel Spector (New York, 1989), p. 1; 'During the last three days Lithuanian partisan groups have already killed several thousand Jews.'
20 ibid., pp. 3, 5, 13–15, 22–3.
21 Jaeger report, *The Final Solution*, p. 29. About forty-five Lithuanians headed by one German, see Levin, 'Jews and Lithuanians', p. 39.
22 'The Jaeger conclusive list', *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, p. 24; Yosef Gar, *The Destruction of Jewish Kovno* (Munich, 1948), pp. 268–9 (Yiddish).
23 *Unzer veg*, Munich, 22 July 1947 (Yiddish).
24 *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, pp. 237–373; Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges* (Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 596–7.
25 Porat, 'Jews from the Third Reich'. Regarding the killing of small numbers of Jews from Kovno until 1944, see Tory, *Ghetto Everyday*.
26 See *Masinēs Zudynēs Lietuvojé, 1941–1944* (Mass Murder in Lithuania) (Vilnius, 1965), part I, Document 29 (Lithuanian). This is a collection of proceedings of Soviet trials against Lithuanian war criminals. These details are often mentioned. See, for example, *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, pp. 19, 25, 52–3, 451. Hereafter: 'Mass murder'. According to Alexei Michailovitch Litvin, 'The Jewish question in Byelorussia during the fascist occupation' (paper presented at the Historical Institute of the Ukraine conference on 'The Holocaust in the Soviet Union' in Kiev in October 1991), the Lithuanian battalions killed 40,000 Jews in Byelorussia. According to Krausnick and Wilhelm, *Die Truppe*, p. 169, by the end of 1942 there were eight Ukrainian, four Lithuanian, two Latvian and only one Byelorussian battalions in Byelorussia.
27 Stachlecker report, *Lithuanian Jewry*, p. 25.
28 'Mass murder', Document 235; '*Schöne Zeiten*', *Judenmord aus der Sicht der Tater und Gaffer*, ed. Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen and Volker Riess (Frankfurt, 1988), pp. 164–7, the full Carl report.
29 *Documents on the Holocaust*, pp. 408–9. On German reserve units, and their reactions to brutality demonstrated by local units, see Jean Ancel, 'The solution of the "Jewish problem" in Bessarabia', *Yad Vashem Studies*, XIX (1988), pp. 187–232, especially p. 19. Ancel's article is based on *Documents Concerning the Fate of Rumanian Jewry*, selected and edited by Jean Ancel (New York, 1985), vol. VI, pp. 546–75, where the full report of the German reserve unit is given.
30 Levin, 'Jews and Lithuanians', p. 41.
31 Arad, *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, pp. 42–3.
32 *Documents on the Holocaust*, p. 433.
33 Dina Porat, 'The concentration of Jewish refugees from Poland in Vilna, 1939–1941', MA thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1974 (Hebrew).
34 Dov Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet-Annexed Territories, 1939–1941* (Tel Aviv, 1989).
35 For a first-hand description, see Reizl Korchak (Ruzke), *Flames in Ash* (Merchavia, 1965), pp. 46–53 (Hebrew).
36 ibid., p. 53. Abba Kovner's part in the formulation of the proclamation is well established. Still, in his testimony, given to me on 5 January 1989, in Tel Aviv University, Nissan Reznik, also a member of the underground command, emphasized the consultations and the team work prior to the formulation of the proclamation.
37 Zuckerman, *Those Seven Years*, pp. 130–49.

38 The historians' dispute regarding the Germans' motivation to start the mass murder of the Jews because of their victories in the Soviet Union, or because of their failure to go on as planned, is outside our scope.

39 The Vilna underground proclamation of April 1942 warned that the economic interest would not bring salvation. First published in Reizl Korchak, *Flames in Ash* (Merchavia, 1946), p. 288.

40 Arad, *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, pp. 46–7.