A HISTORICAL CASE STUDY: 
THE DESTRUCTION OF THE LITHUANIAN 
JEWS AT KOVNO AND VILNA

The invading Wehrmacht captured Kovno, the pre-war capital of Lithuania, on 22 June 1941. On the day before taking the city, the Soviets evacuated it, leaving it in chaos in the hands of Lithuanian nationalists. For the next several days the Jews in that community suffered greatly. And when the Germans entered the city, they intensified the atrocities; the murdering reached a peak on the night of 25 June when whole Jewish families were slaughtered in house-to-house searches.

During the first week of occupation, 6,000–7,000 Jews were murdered and buried in mass graves. Although the Nazi security police were manipulating the situation, it was the Lithuanian extremists, not the Germans themselves, who were actually committing the murders.¹

The Germans formed a ghetto for the surviving Jews on 15 August, and Dr. Elhanan Elkes, a Zionist (a Jewish nationalist) and prominent physician, became the reluctant Judenrat (the Jewish Council responsible for executing Nazi orders) leader of the Jewish people. On 27 October an assembly of Jews was formed in the ghetto, and the next morning most were marched to huge pits, shot, and covered with lime and dirt. In November of that same year, thousands of Jews who had been deported from Germany to Kovno were ordered to undress and then were shot, buried in more mass graves. After this incident, mass murder recessed in Kovno for two and a half years.²

In a 1 December 1941 report about the status of occupied territories, SS colonel Karl Jaeger, chief of Einsatzkommando 3, noted that only 15,000 Jews remained in Kovno and Vilna. Jaeger went on to state that he was proud that his troops were solving the Jewish problem; his only difficulty in carrying out more deaths was the harsh winter climate: the ground was too frozen to dig sufficient graves.³ The destruction and deportation of the Jews in Kovno continued throughout the remainder of the war. By 12 July 1944, right before the Soviets liberated the town, most of the re-
The remaining 8,000 Jews were deported to gas chambers; those who were left behind were killed in Kovno. The ghetto was then burned to the ground, and the Jewish community in Kovno ceased to exist.

The Germans captured Vilna, the pre-war "Jerusalem of Lithuania," on 22 June and quickly established two ghettos—a small one for "unproductive" Jews and another one for workers and their families. A member of the right-wing Zionist Revisionist Party, Jacob Gens, was selected as chief of police. Although he was Jewish, Gens' wife was Lithuanian and lived in the non-Jewish section of town. Throughout his tenure Gens was forced to sacrifice countless Jews in order to save other Jews. In the fall of 1942, for example, Gens agreed that all the old people in the ghetto should be given up to save the younger ones. Gilbert reports that Gens later justified his actions to fellow members of the Judenrat council, saying it was a disturbing secret that everyone must learn to keep. With such a man being able to make sacrifices of his own people, it is no wonder Vilna was such a difficult place for Jews during this nightmarish regime.

In the end, nothing could stop the Nazis from not only destroying the entire community but killing Gens as well. The Germans began deportations from Vilna to Estonian labor camps on 1 September 1943, and on 6 September Gens tried to maintain control of the ghetto by requesting that the remaining 10,000 Jews register with the Judenrat council. While many fled for the forest to resist, those who remained in the ghetto grew even more desperate as the end drew near. On 14 September 1943, Gens was summoned to the local Gestapo headquarters and shot to death. The Nazis subsequently annihilated what remained of the ghetto nine days later: 1,600 men were deported to Estonian camps, and 5,000 women and children were sent to the gas chambers at Ponar. By the end of September, only 2,000 Jews remained in Vilna, the dwindling survivors of the original 57,000 Jews who had once lived in this flourishing Jewish community. The advancing Soviet Army liberated the very last remaining Jews of Vilna, only 200 of them, on 13 July 1944. The battle for Vilna lasted for five days, and 8,000 German soldiers were killed.

Despite their eventual elimination, the Jews in Vilna did mount a resistance movement. Led by Yitzhak Wittenberg, this resistance cell managed to smuggle a large landmine out of town on 8 July 1943, blowing up a military train the next day. A member of the
group was captured within a week, and after being severely tortured he identified Wittenberg as the leader of Vilna's resistance. At a "secret" meeting with Gens, the Lithuanian police captured Wittenberg; but when fellow Jews attacked, Wittenberg managed to escape. Gens then warned the entire ghetto that Wittenberg must be turned in or the Germans would destroy the whole community. Panic and chaos ensued until Wittenberg turned himself in to the Gestapo. It was reported that Wittenberg managed to commit suicide before the Germans could inflict punishment on him.10

Although there had been brief moments of good times for the Jews in Lithuanian history, they had seemingly always been at the mercy of forces beyond their control. During World War I the Russian Tsarist government had expelled 120,000 Jews from Lithuania. After the war a democratic Lithuania allowed Jewish culture to flourish for a while; there were five Jewish daily newspapers in the early 1930s. However, a more repressive, pro-Nazi nationalist government came into power soon after Hitler took control of Germany, and anti-Semitism quickly intensified. When the German Army rolled through on its way to its own desperate destiny at Moscow and Stalingrad, the Jewish community in this part of the world disappeared. Only a mere handful of Jews live in Lithuania today.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL FRANK: A SECOND-GENERATION LITHUANIAN

(James Meredith conducted this interview with Dr. Frank on 27 and 29 January 1998 in Colorado Springs, Colorado.)

INTERVIEWER: How did you get interested in circumstances of the Jewish people in Lithuania?

FRANK: Although I'm originally from Los Angeles, my father migrated to this country from Lithuania when he was 18 years old. And before he died, I got him to record his life's story on tapes that I now have. I'm
using these tapes to write my book. You wouldn't believe some of the experiences my father and his family had to go through. He left before World War II, but life in his community during World War I was bad enough. The Germans blew up my father's hometown of Druskininkai, right before his eyes. Druskininkai, which is near Vilna and Kovno, it was shelled in September 1915 and put under siege for such a long time. My father's family had to relocate to Vilna. Vilna, now the capital of Lithuania, at that time had a tremendously large Jewish population. It was known as the "Jerusalem of Europe." They had some of the most learned Hebrew scholars, a large center for rabbinical training. It was a real center for Judaism. I think that at the outbreak of World War II, half the population of Vilna was Jewish. My father told me that he knew the meaning of hunger from those years. He had practically nothing to eat for so long, he almost starved; in fact, he went blind temporarily from malnutrition. But I think that the depravations he experienced then toughened him for the rest of his life. He was 93 years old when he died. My aunt, who migrated to this country on the same boat as my father, lived almost to be 100 years old as well. She was about seven years older than my father was. Although my father had eight other siblings, including another sister who lived in the United States, he was extremely close to his sister Sarah. They did everything together from the day he was born until the day he died. I think it was the shared suffering during World War I that made them so close. They died within a few months of each other. They knew hardship. These are some of the experiences I'm writing about in the book. When it is finished, you can read more about it all then.

INTERVIEWER: What do you know about your extended family who remained in Lithuania after your father migrated to the United States?

FRANK: To be honest, not much because so many of them and their history completely disappeared during the Holocaust. My father had left Lithuania in 1922, long before World War II broke out, and my mother was born and raised in New York City. They did not personally experience the Holocaust, except what little they knew about my father's family in Lithuania, mostly from letters until they stopped coming. It is unbelievable that so many people, so many families, could disappear completely without a trace in such a short amount of time.

As I said, my family was from Druskininkai on the Nemanus River. All that I have left is this picture of my extended family from Lithuania. It was taken in June 1936. There are 16 people in that picture—only one, Pnina (Romanoff) Igra, of them survived the slaughter that was to come; she had escaped the Holocaust because she had migrated to Palestine with a pioneer group. She's still living. She resides in Quebec, Canada. In this photo, there are three different families represented. My father's sister Frieda—she was the eldest sister of the nine children—mar-
ried a Romanoff and she is there with all her children and her grandchild. Notice how many Romanoffs were listed here. My father's sister Bashah Leah married a Kagan, and she is there with her family. My grandmother, who died not long after this photo was taken, was named Debrushka. This would be the family that would greet me when I visit Lithuania now, but they are all gone. You can imagine what it was like growing up seeing this picture, knowing what had happened to them. I traveled to Lithuania last summer to see what I could discover about my family, and what I did find was that there's not much left. Before World War II, there were 105 Jewish synagogues in Vilna; today there is one that is left standing, and the only reason it remained, I heard, was that it was used as a stable by the Nazis. The rest were obliterated. One out of 105!

INTERVIEWER: How much work have you done on reconstructing what happened to your family in Lithuania?

FRANK: I don't think that I've done very much, but there's not enough left to do very much with. To give you an example, when I was in Lithuania, I took a bus from Vilna down to Druskininkai, which is really a nice resort town. It was completely destroyed both during World War I and World War II, but now it is a rather new, clean town. It is well known for its mineral baths. There doesn't seem to be a trace of what life was like in that town during the early twentieth century. I went to Druskininkai specifically to see a Jewish museum that I saw listed in the tourist guide that I had. Well, when I went to this museum, it was closed, so I kept coming back to it, and it was still closed. Later, after returning to Vilna, I had some local people that I knew call them to set up an appointment when I could get there and visit the place. I finally got in only to find there was nothing there. Not even one picture. I think most of the records were completely destroyed. It is amazing!

Let me give you another example. Before his family moved to Druskininkai, my father was actually born in a very little village about two miles southeast of town, right on the Lithuanian/Belarusan border. Fortunately, it was just inside the Lithuanian border because if it were in Belarus I couldn't go there without a visa, and they are hard to get for an American tourist. So I visited this little village when I was over there, and I mean it really looked like an old, turn-of-the-century farming village. I walked around it a little bit, but there was no way for me to communicate with the people there. Except that someone mentioned that there was an old Jewish cemetery there in town. They said that it was the only Jewish cemetery for many miles around. I went there, and it was really strange, overgrown. The tombstones were scattered; they weren't really tombstones. They were irregular, pointed, jagged rocks. Not like we see in this country at all. The graves weren't in rows or anything. They had some
Hebrew writing on them, but I couldn't read it. I'm a totally assimilated American boy. I can't read or understand much Hebrew. A lot of the writing was faded anyway.

INTERVIEWER: You don't have any idea how old this cemetery was, do you?

FRANK: It was an old cemetery. I'm pretty sure that my grandparents were buried there. They both died before the Holocaust. So they never left the hometown there, and since that was the only Jewish cemetery for miles, they had to be buried there. I felt that I was close to their grave. Exactly which one of those irregular stones marked their grave, I had no idea. There were a couple hundred graves there. This cemetery had no building connected to it; it was just an opening in the woods. Stones marked the border of the cemetery.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a Jewish community around there?

FRANK: No, not there, but in Vilna—a small Jewish community was starting back there. On my first day in Vilna, I was standing on the street, looking confused with my guidebook in my hand. I see coming toward me two young Orthodox Jewish men. I saw them coming, and I thought about starting a conversation with them, but I didn't think we could understand each other. All of a sudden, one of them spoke to me, "What are you doing here, looking confused?" He spoke in perfect English. I answered, "Are you talking to me?" And he said, "Yes, you." He told me that I was obviously an American Jewish tourist, trying to trace his family's roots. It turns out that he was the local rabbi who was born and raised in Boston. He was trying to re-establish a Jewish community in Vilna. There were now only 6,000 Jews in Vilna.

On the outskirts of town, there are a few sights marking the mass graves of the Jews who were murdered in Vilna. They have a few monuments commemorating the slaughtered. Shrines. I didn't spend a lot of time there because I really didn't feel the need to visit these mass graves. It is too much for me.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for sharing your family's history with me. I truly appreciate the time we've spent talking about you and your family. Good luck with your book. I look forward to reading it soon.

FRANK: You're welcome.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 185.
7. Ibid., 608.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 699.
10. Ibid., 593.
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