



THE HOLOCAUST IN THE SOVIET UNION

Studies and Sources on the
Destruction of the Jews in
the Nazi-Occupied Territories
of the USSR, 1941-1945

Edited by
Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock
With a foreword by Richard Pipes

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The Physical and Metaphysical Dimensions of the Extermination of the Jews in Lithuania

ZVI KOLITZ

The first passage of the 56th Psalm summarizes in words unsurpassed for tenderness and heartbreak the essence of what we feel about the life and death of the Jewish tribe in Lithuania. "A eulogy"—that is how we interpret here the *Lemnatzeah*—"A eulogy for a silenced dove far away." The metaphor of the dove, and even more so of the silenced dove, stands not only for gentleness, but for inwardness; it stands, in other words, for what Nietzsche refers to as "the delicate shudder which light feet in spiritual matters send into every muscle" ("The Twilight of the Gods"). It was not in vain that Nietzsche himself embraced the dove metaphor in his statement that "the thoughts that shape the world come on dove's feet." That is exactly how the *Mussar* (Ethicist) thought of Lithuania came into the Jewish world—on dove's feet—and that is also why it remained little known within Jewry, not to say in the non-Jewish world.

Lithuania itself—here we mean Christian Lithuania—knew nothing of what most characterized the distinctiveness of Lithuanian Jewry, some of whose finest young men, and they numbered in the thousands, regarded character-improvement, in the midst of a world swept by the tides of a morally neutral science, as the only way to heal the widening rift between life and the spirit. The Lithuanians could enumerate with great exactness, as they do in the *Encyclopaedia Lithuanica*, for example, the exceedingly high percentages of Jews in the free professions between the two wars, without mentioning at all the fact that when

Lithuania gained its independence from tsarist Russia right after World War I, it was so poor in resources for advanced education that the medical and legal skills of Jewish professionals were absolutely indispensable. Thus the government saw fit to grant cultural autonomy to the Jewish community and even had a Minister for Jewish Affairs. If most stores in the Lithuanian towns and villages were closed on the Sabbaths, it was the storekeepers and their families who on Mondays and Thursdays, the accepted market days, attracted the peasants from the various rural areas who came to sell their agricultural products to mostly Jewish customers. Lacking heavy industry or natural resources, Lithuania was agriculturally self-sufficient.

With the emergence, between the wars, of a Lithuanian educated class, competition developed with a better educated class of Lithuanian Jews whose representation in the free professions far exceeded their proportion in the general population. What is so astonishing is that the Lithuanians who speak of the high cultural level of the Lithuanian Jews never mention their universally recognized high ethical level. The Lithuanian Torah-academies shaped a world view which was based on the thought that character-improvement is man's contribution not only to his own perfected self, but to the perfection of the world as a whole. Gedalyahu Alon, a magnificent product of the Lithuanian Mussar Yeshiva in Slobodka, summarized it as follows: "One rule applies to all commandments and to all good deeds: any defect or sparing of oneself is a destruction of worlds." "Man's every deed is eternity." "Our Rabbis said: there are three commandments for which a man must allow himself to be killed rather than transgress them. But the Halaha states that in every aspect of our service to G. and man, we must be prepared to lay down our lives." The meaning of the Rabbinic injunction that a man should bear his friend's burden along with him is: total identification with him. If a man did not totally identify with his friend, he was considered among the shedders of blood. The Halaha, therefore, is to be as it was according to Ben-Petorah, who ruled (see Baba Metzia 62a): Two men were traveling in a wilderness and only one had a flask of water. If both would drink both would die. If one would drink he could reach inhabited land. It is better that both drink and die rather than that one drink and watch his friend die. The Halaha is not according to Rabbi Akiba, who ruled that "your life takes precedence over your friend's life."

"Once again," Gedalyahu Alon comments, "acute tension. But it is

counteracted by every shadow of a good thought in the mind and by even the slightest manifestation of kindness—the central point of the creation of the world, the source of man's nourishment."

Alon was speaking about the centrality of kindness. In Lithuanian Yiddish there was a very special word for it, a word that defies translation: *eidelkeit*. It is not refinement, not even fineness. It includes those, but goes beyond them. "*Gan Eden*," paradise, is, literally translated, "the garden of *eidelkeit*," *Adinut*, the ultimate and highest rung of spiritual perfection. Thus Rabbi Haim of Volozhin states that eternity begins right here, in this world, and that, to quote the Zohar, "Man wears in eternity the garments he had woven for himself all his life."

In the Lithuanian Mussar Yeshivoth this was paradigmatic. The idea, or ideal, was the man who justifies mankind by completing himself—a complimentary and redeeming instance of man, constantly involved in self-creation, for whose sake one can stoutly maintain his belief in mankind; but because of whom, and on account of whom one must be doubly careful lest the powers that oppose him—the powers of "De-creation"—are doubly eager to take him on.

The powers of de-creation, or evil, in the world, were never underestimated in the Mussar literature. Evil was not depicted as just a psychophysionomic force, but as a metaphysical one. Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the Lithuanian Mussar movement which produced some of the finest spirits in Jewry for almost a century and a half, dared to speak of a metaphysical evil. That is why in the Lithuanian Mussar literature, evil, metaphysical evil, was taken very seriously—so seriously, in fact, that some of the Mussar teachers were accused by their opponents of lacking that joy of life which typified Hasidism, for example. It is not in vain that the Litvak to this day is associated in the Jewish mind not only with learning and *midot*, but with an unmistakable streak of sadness. It took a world war with its fifty million victims to cause a godless philosopher like Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, to embrace the despair that comes with the realization of the almost tangible power of evil in the world. "We have been taught," he writes (in *What Is Literature?*), "to take evil seriously." "Whoever heard entire blocks screaming knows the unredeemable reality of evil."

Mussar never thought evil was unredeemable, but dangerously elusive. Reason itself may deceive us, for it almost invariably resorts to rationalizations and self-righteousness. Character perfection cannot be achieved by reason alone, but by an understanding heart—that is what

King Solomon prayed for, *Lev Shomea*—and that is what the Mussar movement held up as its banner. The Mussar movement, contrary to Hasidism, was always elitist, but so great was the shudder that “light feet in spiritual matters send into every muscle,” that every branch of Lithuanian Jewry, secular and religious alike, was imbued with *eidelkeit*. *Eidelkeit* in Lithuania was understood not only as a moral or religious but an ontological category. The opposite of *eidelkeit* was “*grobkeit*,” “*Timtum Halev*,” and *grobkeit* was something against which an education to ingenuity, even intellect, provided no cure whatsoever.

We are told time and again by historians of the Shoah that in Lithuania, where the extermination of the Jewish community was almost total, it was the Lithuanian intelligentsia that was in charge of the slaughter. We also know that some of the most vicious madmen in Nazi Germany were scientists. Forty-six percent of German physicians and 38 percent of lawyers were active members of the Nazi Party. That we know. But Nazi Germany had six years of relentless racist indoctrination before its hordes were unleashed for genocide. How are we to understand that Lithuania, with no such indoctrination, but with what is referred to as a regular education, produced such monsters? To keep on saying, as we do, “We shall never forget” is meaningless as long as we keep on talking about the evil without a major effort to identify the true nature of an education that proved no deterrent to evil and that was already at work in Germany and other lands from the second part of the nineteenth century. Erich Kahler, a German Jewish historian and social thinker, spoke (in *The Jews Among the Nations*) of a “progressive overcivilized dehumanization” which the German Jews refused to recognize for what it was. This is an astonishing insight into the nature of a malaise that still haunts our educational system and that was almost totally overlooked by those who were to become its first victims.

It was not overlooked, however, by the Lithuanian Mussarists, who kept on insisting that a bias—*neghiah*—is not eliminated by more ingenuity or even by more education; on the contrary, ingenuity and soulless intellect may infuse bias with greater authority. “We must admit,” writes Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, one of Lithuania’s last Mussar luminaries, “that the intellect is powerless to produce reliable results in any moral problem. An approach to youth can be made only insofar as the heart is cleansed of bias. And since bias is caused by character

defects, these must be eliminated and replaced by a strong, burning desire for truth and integrity."

In Lithuania, it was the bias of the Lithuanians, particularly the educated Lithuanians, that was responsible for indiscriminate slaughter, unparalleled for savagery, a slaughter which in the few months between June and December 1941 destroyed 200 Jewish communities and murdered more than 150,000 Jews. The bias of the Lithuanians was threefold: sociopolitical, cultural, and religious.

In Germany, the Jews were accused of trying to be too much like the Germans; in Lithuania of being too little like the Lithuanians, of keeping themselves too much apart. The sociopolitical bias may have fed itself on awareness of the cultural superiority of the Jews. Was that the reason why in Lithuania, more than anywhere else in Nazi-dominated Europe, the extermination campaign was directed not only against Jews as Jews, but against whatever and whoever, in persons or in institutions, was distinctly Jewish? Rabbi Ephraim Oshri, the last surviving Rav of the Ghetto in Slobodka, is not the only one who has stressed that it was the men and women of the Jewish intellectual, cultural, religious, and spiritual elite whom the Nazi Lithuanians eliminated before the rest. As a matter of fact, the Lithuanians began the mass murder of Jews in Slobodka, the small suburb of Kaunas where the world-famous Mussar Yeshivah "Knesset Israel" was located. The Lithuanians did not wait for the Germans to unleash the slaughter. By the time the Germans arrived, many thousands of Jews were dead already, among them 800 Jews in Slobodka alone.

Some aspects of the Shoah in Lithuania, presided over by members of the Lithuanian intelligentsia, were of what we may call a distinctly metaphysical nature. It is one thing to burn bodies, but to burn books—as the Nazis did at the outset of their rule—is clearly a form of metaphysical revenge, for it bespeaks an attempt, conscious or unconscious, as was the case with the original *autos-da-fé*, to set fire to the spirit. To my knowledge, book burnings, excepting Germany before the war, took place *only* in Lithuania. In Lithuania, where there were hardly any illiterate Jews, the anger of literate Lithuanians at the abundance of books among the people of the book expressed itself in what I must regard as a metaphysical, and hence irresistible, urge to burn them in public.

These book-burning ceremonies took place in several communities. I shall confine myself to one location only, Yurburg, not far from the

German border on the one side and of the Ghetto of Shavel, or Šiauliai, on the other. Thousands of books were piled up in the marketplace. Then the Holy Scrolls, the *sifrei-Torah*, were ordered to be brought from the local prayer houses. The books and the Torahs went up in flames in the presence, we are told, of the city elders, the local intelligentsia, SS men, Lithuanian "activists," and the mayor. Jews, prior to their execution, were forced to dance around the fire. The frenzied hatred of Jewish books and Torah scrolls was matched only by the frenzied hatred of religious Jews, something which belies the well-known argument of embarrassed Lithuanians that their countrymen under the Nazis were reacting, or overreacting, to the excesses of Jewish communists during the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. Did the Lithuanians not know—and we deal here, after all, with educated Lithuanians, alas!—that the Jewish community in Lithuania, particularly the religious one, had for years regarded the *Evseksiia*, the Jewish section of the Communist Party in Russia, as an abomination? But metaphysical evil is precisely an evil that feeds itself on its own self-sufficiency. Exactly as there is good for good's sake, there is evil for evil's sake.

The diabolic fervor displayed by Lithuanians in their swift campaign of genocide of the Jewish tribe in Lithuania defies anything we know about the limits of human cruelty. Here is a state in which cruelty becomes as limitless and unfathomable as its extreme opposite, which is supernatural goodness. It is one thing, as an example, to condemn two Jews, as was the case in the ghetto of Šiauliai, to hang for smuggling some bread to the starving ghetto, but to decree that the hanging must be carried out by other ghetto-Jews goes beyond the limits of human cruelty and touches upon the diabolically metaphysical. Baudelaire knew exactly what he was talking about when he said that the neatest trick Satan played upon man was to convince him that he does not exist. The order, which was complied with, belongs to the realm of supernatural evil. The pleadings of the condemned to let them be hanged by anybody but their fellow Jews makes one think of Theodor Adorno's famous line that no poetry should be written after Auschwitz. No drama could be written after those Siauliai hangings!

In my Lithuanian birthplace of Alytus, a provincial capital where my father served as rabbi between the wars, the rabbi who followed him was ordered by the local Lithuanian activist leader, Aleynis, to be brought before him, for he wanted to kill him himself. The old, sick rabbi was thrown face down into a ditch in front of Aleynis.

ordered that he be turned over so that he could face him and shoot him in the eyes, which he did.

And let us make no mistake about it: these metaphysical evils were not exceptions. The Shoah in Lithuania was one of the cruelest and meanest on record. The Nazis knew exactly what they were doing when they singled out Lithuanians and Ukrainians for special assassination-squads which they activated in other lands.

The other bias, as said, was sociopolitical. We must recount its genealogy. On 15 June 1940 the Soviet army assumed control of Lithuania. Following the takeover, the Soviets deported many thousands of Lithuanians, Jews and non-Jews, to Siberia as "enemies of the people." In this mass deportation were included, according to Dov Levin's reliable figures, 7,000 Jews, that is to say, about 3 percent of the Jewish population which swelled at the outset of the war to about 200,000. Only 1 percent of the non-Jewish population was deported. In the Lithuanian encyclopedia published in Chicago after the war, there is, however, no mention of deportation of Jews, but there is mention of the important role which Jews played in the subjugation and deportation of Lithuanians. There is no doubt that the Jewish communists in Lithuania, whose number was estimated at 900 out of a total of 2,500, were very active in expropriating properties and in the choice of the deportees. They were helped by Jewish members of the NKVD, who arrived together with the Red Army following the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty, which assigned Lithuania to the Soviets. The Jewish members of the NKVD—imbued with the self-hating spirit of the *Evseksiia*, which made Jews shudder with disgust long before the war—undoubtedly treated anybody they regarded as socially undesirable, Jew and Gentile alike, as "an enemy of the people." Lithuanians, however, many of whom have themselves collaborated with the Soviets, remember to this day what Jewish communists, whether Lithuanian or Russian, have done to Lithuanians, but completely overlook what Lithuanians have done to the Jews. The impression was given, and rumors were spread, that Soviet Russia was a Jewish power and that the communists were trying to take over Lithuania as a part of a Jewish conspiracy, whose center was in Moscow, to take over the world. It is not mentioned that (according to Dov Levin's reliable figures) 83 percent of the commercial enterprises and 57 percent of the factories that were nationalized after the Soviet takeover belonged to Jews. Nor is it recalled that the communists abolished the Hebrew

educational system, one of the finest in the world, and closed down the great Torah centers of Slobodka, Tels, and Kelem.

But that is not all. Contrary to the claim of many Lithuanian apologists that Jews occupied most of the leading positions under the Soviet regime, Leib Garfunkel asserts that the Soviets did all they could to appoint ethnic Lithuanians, even Lithuanians known for their former fascist ties, like the minister of justice in the communist regime, to high positions in the government. It was to such Lithuanian "traitors," as they were referred to by the pro-Nazi Lithuanian "activist movement" centered in Berlin, that the famous promise was made in a proclamation issued on 16 March 1941: on the day of reckoning only those Lithuanian "traitors" could hope for forgiveness who could prove that they killed at least one Jew.

That was three months before the attack on Russia. We shall never know how many communist Lithuanians, so as to qualify for mercy, killed at least one Jew. We do know that leaders of the Lithuanian community in the United States boasted that their fellow Lithuanians back home had eliminated the Soviet regime in Lithuania even before the entry of the German army. That they did, except that, since the Soviets retreated without waiting for the Germans, the Lithuanians chose to describe the remaining Jews, not the retreating Russians, as the regime they defeated. Units of Lithuanian anti-communist partisans, the *siaulistai*, as they were called (there were no Lithuanian anti-Nazi partisans), emerged from the woods even before the Germans arrived, and devoured like beasts of prey every Jewish community in the land. This metaphor, apt in itself, recalls also the warning of the great Rav Soloveichik: "It is either the Divine Image or a beast of prey." The Lithuanians, let it be said without hesitation, chose the side of the beast.

The role of the church in Lithuania during the Shoah was, at best, ambiguous. There can be no doubt that the absence of an unequivocal papal condemnation of the excesses caused many a Lithuanian Catholic to assume what many have suspected all along: that in the mind of Pius XII, a former papal nuncio in Berlin, the German attack on Marxist-atheist Russia overshadowed in importance the violence against the Jews. Yet there were a few churchmen who paid dearly for protesting the horror. One priest by the name of Kazimiras Pulaikis was executed in the Ninth Fort for his fearless sermons that warned: "A Divine punishment will come upon people who murder the innocent." However, we know of another priest by the name of Yankauskas, who was

in charge of a Lithuanian assassination squad. A leading Lithuanian churchman, Bishop Valencius, at a time when a good part of Lithuanian Jews were either dead or dying, noted in his diary: "While there have been regrettable excesses in the treatment of the Jews, one must admit that there is some truth in what Hitler maintains in *Mein Kampf* about the Marxist Jewish venom which is poisoning the nations."

A lethal bias is couched here in subtle terms of a seemingly balanced, objective approach. The few outstanding examples of sacred *subjectivity* notwithstanding, we must regard the church in Lithuania as mostly *objective* about evil.

Some say that there were no righteous gentiles in Lithuania, but there were, though fewer even than in Poland, and less often among the clergy or the so-called "educated classes" than among the peasants. Because the crimes the Lithuanians perpetrated against the Jews were so heinous, the shame that the very few righteous among them give expression to is especially moving. Ana Shimaite speaks with a profound sense of shame and sorrow about the impression created among Jews that "the Lithuanians have no heart," though she admits that those who did were few. "A shame and a curse on you, you scum of the earth," cried out Professor Mironas in an article published in Kaunas in 1945. "You who in the mornings, following your disgusting night orgies, got dressed in your best and went to church. . . . To my sorrow I admit that the stain of the great shame is embedded in me, too, for in the midst of all the unspeakable cruelties I did not cry out my passionate protest. Great is my shame that I was a guilty bystander and was not put to death for a just cause. In those horrifying days we had so many villains and so few brave souls. Alas!"

In Lithuania, writes Avraham Kariv, the inspired author of one of the most moving eulogies on Lithuanian Jewry, "the hordes of the ultimate Nazi vulgarity encountered its most implacable enemy, the standard bearers of *eidelkeit*." And who are the standard bearers of *eidelkeit* if not the bearers of the *Image*? In Lithuania, the Divine Image seemed to infuriate the beast of prey. One is almost compelled to raise the question, at the risk of exposing oneself to mystical terrors, whether it was by accident that Slobodka, where the Mussar movement had its great, nay greatest citadel, was also the place where the Lithuanian Nazis murdered 800 Jews even before the arrival of the Germans. The powers of de-creation appear to be doubly eager and doubly able, when darkness sets in, to attack the pure and the sacred in their midst.

Thus Nachmanides, after visiting Jerusalem for the first time early in the twelfth century, wrote back home to Spain that that which was most sacred suffered the greatest destruction. That is what happened in Lithuania. In the last stages of the Lithuanian Jewish experience, the few surviving luminaries of the Lithuanian Mussar movement began to feel, in their loneliness and abandonment, an increasing sense of responsibility for the world. That, after all, was Mussar's main theme: every man, with his deeds, creates and de-creates worlds. With the terrifying proliferation of de-creation in the world, Reb Nahum Yanushker, as Pessach Markus tells us in his remarkable account of the last days of Slobodka, managed to gather together—illegally, we assume, for it must have been during the last days of communist rule—some students of the Slobodka Yeshiva and asked them: "If evil is so widespread, who will keep the world going if not Slobodka?"

The students noticed something above his open shirt collar: Reb Nahum was wearing a shroud under his clothes. It is not clear whether he expected death by the Lithuanians, by the communists, or by the approaching Germans. But he expected death. His last words to his students were simple: "Remember to tell the world what a fine and decent life the Jews lived in here." The word he used for "fine" was *eidel*.

When we think of what we lost in the Shoah, not only of how many but of how they were lost, we are bound to conclude that the only thing that can still be saved from extinction is what we least speak about and perhaps what we least understand: the notion of *eidelkeit* as an ontological, not only moral or religious, category.

"Remember to tell the world what a fine and decent life the Jews lived in here."

That goes beyond remembering the dead. It speaks of a way of life that may take a lifetime to create, for man was created, in the words of Rav Soloveichik, to create himself.