Remembering the Jewish Community of

Kovno, Lithuania

Remembered by Greta Rafsky

Our Temple Israel member, Greta Rafsky, wrote the following account of her mother’s experience living in the Kovno Lithuania Ghetto. It contains several quotations from her mother’s memoirs.

Of all the Jewish communities destroyed during the Holocaust, Kovno, a town with more than 30,000 Jews before the German occupation, saw some of the most brutal treatment and execution of its Jews. Lithuania alone lost 95% of its Jews. In March 1939, when Hitler had marched into Memel, Lithuania, my mother's family had to take refuge in Kovno.

In June 1940, the Soviet armed forces occupied Lithuania. My mother, Hilda Rubinstein Green, may she rest in peace, describes:

An atmosphere of tension and unrest was experienced soon due to the sudden occupation by Russian troops. Our feelings were mixed with fear and emotions leading us to believe that we were kept in the dark about what was going to be next. People became fearful being out in the streets. During nights we experienced constant unrest. Night patrols kept breaking into cellars and storage places to continuously search for anything hidden. But even in the day-time it felt frightening to be out. Jobs were hard to find. Days and weeks went on, hopeless and depressed.

On June 22, 1941, with the violation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, German forces crossed into Lithuania. Lithuanian pro-Nazi partisans began terrorizing Jews in the city. Encouraged by the SS, ultra-nationalist Lithuanian "partisans" accelerated the pogroms
against Kovno's Jews, attacking rabbis and their followers in the suburb of Vilijampole. The partisans set fire to several synagogues and burned down some 60 houses. Between 800 and 1000 Jews were killed. From July 4 to 6, the mobile killing units, run by the Lithuanian auxiliary police, murdered 2,977 Jews in mass shootings at Fort VII, one of several imperial Russian fortifications surrounding Kovno, used as prisons and execution sites during the war.

In August, 1911 Jews were taken to Fort IV and shot. In September some 1000 ghetto inhabitants were taken from the neighborhood of the Slobodka Yeshiva to Fort IV and shot. In October Germans liquidated the Small Ghetto. After burning the contagious diseases hospital with patients and the staff inside, 1800 Jews, mostly women and children, were taken to Fort IX and killed. The end of October saw the "The Great Action," the day-long selection process whereby all ghetto Jews were forced to assemble. My mother, Hilda, wrote: "Mother, sister and I on the left side were trembling with fear when watching how friends on the right side were silently led away never to be seen again." By evening, 9200 men, women and children, more than 30% of the ghetto population had been chosen to be killed the next day at Fort IX.

My mother wrote:

All Jews had to be out of apartments and moved into the ghetto by August 1941. We had to prepare ourselves with the Stars of David, which meant another stepping stone towards our tragic destiny we were forced to cope with. Continuous discouraging events kept affecting our minds and physical condition when the actual move to the ghetto was forced upon us. End of August - the ghetto was closed; in case any Jew was seen anywhere else, he was immediately shot. Throughout the nights the nerve-wrecking shootings made me weary and frightened... any second, a bullet fired through the window may easily kill mother, sister, or me.
I still see so much confusion and distress among single people and particularly helpless children running desperately back and forth in the ghetto to search for their missing mothers, fathers or loved ones. How bitter and tragic it was not being able to help or to keep them from getting shot. I heard women scream and there were rumors of several suicide cases. People were dragged from their living quarters at dawn and driven away by trucks somewhere no one could tell. I was a witness, having seen one of my mother’s brothers, together with his wife, climb on to one of those trucks waiting in line for so many innocent people. After so many inquiries after the war I got hold of the terrible news that this transport went to Estonia where these poor souls were put to death in Tallinn.

Every day in the ghetto we had to get rid of more and more of our possessions, by piling them up in the open lot: gold, silver, jewels, ornamental items and money. The Gestapo had their dogs ready to search for hidden things. In case any person did not obey the strict orders, he was instantly shot. In no time a "Judenrat" of prominent people (a kind of Jewish police) was established to organize groups for work. We were assigned to work outside the ghetto, about a 1-1/2 hour's walk to open grounds, supposed to become an airport. After we were divided into rows, we were individually counted as our Jewish leaders were responsible for the number of people leaving and coming back. The Gestapo made us work very hard. We had to shovel sand, gravel, stone and cement; load it into heavy iron push-carriages, and then unload the carriages on the grounds. As we were constantly watched, we felt forced to do this slavery work the best we could, no matter how tiresome it was; and besides, we feared getting beaten.

One frightening experience on our march back from work will never slip my memory. On one very exhausting and dark late afternoon, we suddenly got scared to death, when noticing from the distance some fire spreading in the ghetto. We were so frightened, some nervously crying, deeply worried about family members, mostly
elderly ones. After we had entered the gate, it was found out that nothing actually serious had happened. We assumed it was one of the Nazis' tricks, to keep us more and more scared, as long as we were still among the living.

And so, life and death proceeded for almost two years. September 1943 signaled the transformation of the ghetto into a concentration camp. In July 1944, as the Soviet army neared, the Germans began the six-day liquidation of Camp Kauen, evacuating the former ghetto's remaining population by train and by barge for deportation to the Stutthof and Dachau concentration camps in Germany. The camp was set aflame to smoke out those still hiding in underground bunkers. About this event, Hilda recorded: "It was July 1944 when we were driven like sheep to the station, where cattle-trains were waiting for their mass transportation to the Stutthof concentration camp."

Reports of the atrocities in Kovno came not only from the German administrative records illustrated with elaborate charts and graphics, but also from within the confines of the Kovno Ghetto. The inmates prepared their own record of the horrors and annihilation. An extraordinary cache of documentary evidence had been prepared at great risk by the inmates and was revealed by the survivors. Two centuries before the Kovno Ghetto was created and destroyed, the Ba'al Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, wrote: "Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption." May the memories of all who perished be for a blessing.

Read about a visit to Kovno in 2004. Here is a survivor's story.