

THE DESTRUCTION OF KOVNO BEGINS: THE SLOBODKA POGROM

Even to this day I cannot rid myself of my first impression of the German occupation of Lithuania. More than 50 years have passed since the 25th of June 1941, when the Lithuanian fascists, who had been looking forward to Hitler's invasion and the resulting withdrawal of the Russians from Lithuania, celebrated with a Jewish bloodbath in the old, majestic Torah town of Slobodka (called Vilijampole in Lithuanian), a mostly Jewish suburb just across the river from Kovno, Lithuania's capital city.

It was a Wednesday night several days after the outbreak of the German-Russian war. We had expected serious trouble, but none of us had imagined the horrors that would happen to us under the German occupation.

We were also shocked by the attitude of the Lithuanian populace, our "good Catholic" neighbors. I cannot remember a single person among all our Gentile neighbors in Slobodka who openly defended a Jew when more than 6,000 Slobodka Jews—with whom they had lived all their lives—became victims of a terrifying pogrom.

It is not possible to relate everything that happened the night of June 25th in Slobodka. But what I will relate is enough to show the extent of the Germans' cruelty. They were things the world had not yet seen.

We, a group of 12 rabbis and a few yeshiva students, were hidden

that night in the home of the dean of the Slobodka Yeshiva, Rav Avrohom Grodzensky. With us was the great *gaon* (genius), Rav Elchonon Wasserman. We spent that night praying and weeping. But we also discussed what we could do.

Rav Avrohom Drushkovich, an elderly man and former *mashgiach* (dean and spiritual mentor) of the Volozhin Yeshiva, one of the greatest Lithuanian yeshivos, came in to join us. From what he told us he had seen happening on the streets of Slobodka and had heard was going on in Kovno, it became clear that the Germans and Lithuanians seemed intent on killing all the Jews. What were we to do? Could we devise some sort of plan? That was the issue that wearied us that night while Jews were dying in the streets of Slobodka.

That Wednesday evening at dusk, Lithuanian Nazis, accompanied by mobs of ordinary Lithuanians, marched into the Jewish section of Slobodka with axes and saws. They began the Slobodka pogrom on Yurborger Street, moving from house to house, from apartment to apartment, from room to room, killing every Jew they encountered, old and young alike. They chopped off heads with axes, sawed people in half and—we learned afterwards—they took their time doing it in order to prolong their victims' agony.

The first stop the butchers made was at the Yurborger Street home of Mordechai Yatkunsky and his wife, Dr. Stein-Yatkunsky, a dentist. They chopped off their hands, feet, and organs, killing both of them as well as their son.

From Yurborger Street the Lithuanians headed into Yatke Street and other streets. Indiscriminately they killed every Jew they encountered—rabbis, professionals, Zionist activists, intellectuals, Communists. The butchery was overwhelming. From the streets rose horrifying screams, and rising above those screams one could make out the ancient Jewish death cry, "*Shema Yisroel*" ("Hear, O Israel"), the prayer that affirms G-d's existence.

We, the Jews who had hidden, squirmed in our hideouts. How we felt—we "lucky ones" who were not murdered that night—cannot be imagined.

One of the most terrible instances of savage butchery was the death of the venerable rabbi of Slobodka, Rav Zalman Osovsky—may G-d avenge him. The Germans bound Rav Zalman hand and foot to a chair, then laid his head upon an open volume of *gemora* (volume of the Talmud) and sawed his head off. Their brutality did not end there, for afterwards they murdered his son, the young genius Rav Yudel

Osovsky, and then shot Rav Zalman's wife.

The rabbi's five-year-old granddaughter, Esterka, was the only person at home who survived; she hid under a bed. Tragically, Esterka was subsequently killed together with her mother, Rochel, three months later on Friday the 26th of September, 1941.

When we later entered his residence, Rav Zalman's body minus its head was still "sitting" in his rabbinic chair at his desk, his *gemora* open before him at tractate *Nidah*, folio 33. The holy rabbi had been interrupted in the middle of his studying. We found his head in a window with a sign: THIS IS WHAT WE'LL DO TO ALL THE JEWS.

During that night of horrors, Reb Gershon, the sexton of the Slobodka Yeshiva, was also killed, his throat slit. As he lay dying, he gasped to someone who discovered him, "When you are liberated, relate our suffering and hell."



Found written in blood on a wall in Slobodka:
"Jews! Take Revenge!"

Another dying Jew, in his last throes, wrote on a wall with his own blood, "Jews! Take Revenge!" His writing remained on that wall for a long time.

Some Jews jumped off the bridge into the Viliya River in order to escape. And Germans stood on the bridge and used the Jews for target practice.

Many other well-known Jews were slaughtered that night, among them the *iluy* (prodigy) Rav Yona of Minsk. The Lithuanians tore out his intestines, wrapped them in a *tallis* (prayer shawl) and set it down next to the murdered *tzaddik* (righteous person). On that dreadful night dozens of Slobodka Yeshiva students were also murdered.

When the Lithuanians finished their dirty work in private homes, they went to the main commercial streets. At the corner of Yurborg Street and Shosaika, they shot the blacksmith, then lined 26 Jews against a wall and shot them. They let no Jew pass—man, woman, or child. Near the bridge leading to Kovno they buried 34 Jews alive.

The following morning along with many of the other survivors I went door to door. We gathered the dead and buried them in a mass grave in the Slobodka cemetery. We decided to do this despite the danger from the still-roving gangs of Lithuanians.

I believe I will never be able to erase the memories of that terrifying night from my mind, the night on which the annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry began.

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JEW S GO TO THEIR DEATHS WEARING *TALLEISIM* AND *TEFILLIN*

My hand trembles as I write this. How does one recount such a tragedy, such a catastrophe? How can one even mention such horrible things? And yet it is imperative to narrate those events. Everyone must be told about the final days and hours of our Jewish brothers and sisters martyred *al kiddush HaShem* (in sanctification of G-d).

After all, if one has emerged from that hell, one is obliged to pass on the final regards from those martyrs. And they sent horrible regards. These are not mere reports of murder, rather they are holy pages of Jewish martyrology, of *kiddush HaShem*.

Jews did not merely die, they sanctified G-d. They fought for Jewish honor and Jewish worth. There were others who could not fight; I will tell you about them later.



What Lithuanian Jew does not recall the old Kovno *beis hamidros* (place of study and prayer) next to the Viliya River? Much has been written about this holy synagogue where over the course of many generations Jews studied and prayed. It also served as the home of Yeshiva Ateres Tzvi, named after Rav Tzvi Hirsh Rabinovich (1848-1919), the *maggid* (preacher) and *dayan* (judge) of Jewish law in Mitow and son of the renowned Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spector (1816-1896), and Rav Spector's successor as Kovno's chief rabbi.

The old synagogue stood next to the Jewish hospital. Kovno's Jews remember well how much sanctity was connected with this *beis hamidrosh*. It was where Rav Spector, the great rabbi and *posek* (scholar who rules in halachic issues) of his generation, had prayed and studied. It was where both community members and *perushim* (scholars who separated themselves from their families and hometowns in order to study) who were great in Torah and in fear of G-d studied. It was also where Rav Yeruchom Y. Perelman of Minsk, father-in-law of Rabbi Avrohom DovBer Kahana-Shapiro—who was Kovno's chief rabbi before and during the War—studied in his youth. It was also where Rav Spector's vast library was housed.

Into this holy synagogue, early Thursday morning on June 26, 1941, marched Lithuanian and German Nazis. They found Jews there in the middle of the *Shacharis* (morning) prayer. Despite the risk, despite what had transpired the day before in Slobodka and in the center of Kovno, 25 Jewish men had gathered to pray. Some were Kovno's leading citizens. There were elderly men, and even children. Because of the shocking events of the previous day, most men prayed with greater intensity than usual. Several studied *gemoros*. Almost all the men wore *talleisim* and *tefillin* (phylacteries).

When the Lithuanians and Germans entered, their first command was, "Stop praying!" The most shattering part was that the Lithuanian who gave this order was Kovno's *Shabbos-goy* (a non-Jew who performs services for Jews on Sabbaths and holidays), a man who had been born among Jews and ostensibly had been a friend of Jews all his life. No one could believe that this man was capable of such perfidy!

When this man entered the sacred synagogue, he showed off his Yiddish for the Germans and Lithuanians accompanying him. He spoke Yiddish very well, for he had lived among Jews all his life. First he introduced the leading townspeople. He demonstrated to the Nazis that he was no mere "pogromchik," but rather a man who could be indispensable. He knew the Jews well, he knew who was who. He knew the Jewish spiritual leaders—in other words, he knew who it would be practical for the Germans to kill.

In general, the German policy in Lithuania was that the first people to be killed were the spiritual and intellectual leaders of the Jews: the rabbis, the writers, the professionals. The Lithuanians helped them greatly in this respect. The Germans would not have been able to so thoroughly destroy Lithuanian Jewry if they had not had the active

assistance of the local Lithuanian populace.

The Lithuanians offered their assistance enthusiastically. This cooperation was so unthinkable that both Jews who were there and those who heard about it later were stunned. How could it have happened? we asked ourselves repeatedly. How could we have been so deceived? How could our neighbors, with whom we had lived side by side for hundreds of years, sink to such degrading betrayal? To this day I cannot fathom it. I cannot comprehend how the Lithuanian non-Jews living in Jewish cities and towns such as Kovno and Slobodka could have become the murderers and accomplices to the murder of their Jewish neighbors. Although the Lithuanians clearly hated the Russians and were thrilled to be “liberated” from the Russian occupation by the Germans, their slaughter of the Jews was incomprehensible.

This *Shabbos-goy* wanted to show off his usefulness to the Germans. He clearly expected great panic to break out in the synagogue. When he gave his order for everyone to stop praying (this was related to me later by a Jew who escaped), he stood there officiously, waiting for the Jews he had served all his life to fall at his feet and beg him to take pity and not harm them. But the Jews remained standing. Not one of them cried or even moved. Instead, they prayed silently, moving only their lips. Many of them had probably begun reciting *Viduy* (a confessional prayer said before dying).

The Germans and Lithuanians were armed; the Jewish men were unarmed. The Jews stood there, proud, courageous, wrapped in their billowing *talleisim*, crowned with their *tefillin*, looking straight into the murderers’ faces. The Germans and Lithuanian Nazis seemed momentarily taken aback by the fearlessness of those men. But all too soon they attacked. Exactly how long the Jews were beaten and tortured, I do not know. But shortly after this senseless attack, the Jewish men were led through the streets of Kovno—in anguish, blood staining their *talleisim*. Yet even in this condition, not a single one broke down. They walked upright, wrapped in their *talleisim*, still wearing their *tefillin*—G-d’s soldiers.

They were led to the bank of the Viliya River, which runs through the center of town, where they were ordered to dig ditches. Still wearing their *talleisim* and *tefillin*—reminding them of the *echod*¹—they stood digging their own graves. They stood so tall and brave, eyewitnesses later said, it seemed as if the Germans were the captives and the Jews were the victors.

¹ *Echod* (“one”) is the last word of the verse that begins with “*Shema Yisroel, HaShem Elokaynu, HaShem Echod*—Hear, O Israel, *HaShem*, our G-d, *HaShem* is one.” This is usually the last verse a dying person recites on his or her deathbed.

Not one of those men had any illusions about what was in store for him. But even in the last minutes of their lives, they did not break down. A crowd of Lithuanian anti-Semites gathered around them. Jeering, enjoying the spectacle, they tried to provoke the helpless Jewish men, but to no avail. The Jews remained firm and recited their prayers—with greater intensity, with more passion, with more sanctity than ever before. They stood and said *Viduy* as they dug the soil for their own graves. At that moment they were no longer part of this world of falsehood—they had transcended to a higher world, the world of truth. The Germans with their machine guns, the Lithuanians with their axes and iron rods, no longer existed for them. They were part of the dirt in the corridor that is this world.

As the Germans mowed them down, the tune of Lithuanian Jewry—the heartfelt, soulful *Tehillim* (Psalms)—was heard. And so the music of the sweet singer of Israel accompanied the martyrs of the old Kovno synagogue as they fell into the graves they had been forced to dig for themselves.

After our liberation in August 1944, I returned with other survivors to the bank of the river. We dug up those graves and reinterred these martyrs in the Jewish cemetery. Some were still wrapped in the remnants of their *talleisim*. May their mention be a blessing.