

# Strategies of Survival: Lithuanian Jews and the Holocaust

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**O**n the eve of World War II, Lithuanian Jewry numbered approximately 220,000. In June 1941, the war between Germany and the Soviet Union began. Within days, Germany had occupied the entirety of Lithuania. By the end of 1941, only about 43,500 Lithuanian Jews (19.7 percent of the prewar population) remained alive, the majority of whom were kept in four ghettos (Vilnius, Kaunas, Siauliai, Svencionys). Of these 43,500 Jews, approximately 13,000 survived the war. Ultimately, it is estimated that 94 percent of Lithuanian Jewry died during the Holocaust, a percentage higher than in any other occupied Eastern European country.<sup>1</sup>

Stories of Lithuanian towns and the manner in which Lithuanian Jews responded to the genocide have been overlooked as the perpetrator-focused version of history examines only the consequences of the Holocaust. Through a study utilizing both historical analysis and testimonial information, I seek to reconstruct the histories of Lithuanian Jewish communities of smaller towns to further understand the survival strategies of their inhabitants. I examined a variety of sources, ranging from scholarly studies to government-issued pamphlets, written testimonies and video testimonials. My project centers on a collection of

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<sup>1</sup> Population estimates for Lithuanian Jews range from 200,000 to 250,000, percentages of those killed during Nazi occupation range from 90 percent to 95 percent, and approximations of the number of survivors range from 8,000 to 20,000. Here I use estimates provided by Dov Levin, a prominent international scholar of Eastern European Jewish history, in the Introduction to *Preserving Our Litvak Heritage: A History of 31 Jewish Communities in Lithuania*. Josef Rosin, *Preserving our Litvak Heritage: A History of 31 Jewish Communities in Lithuania*, ed. Joel Alpert (League City: JewishGen, Inc., 2005), ix.

testimonies taken by a Lithuanian Holocaust survivor, Leib Koniuchowsky. Immediately after the end of the war, he conducted interviews that discussed the destruction of 171 Lithuanian Jewish communities. The majority of the collection consists of collective testimonies of survivors from the same town, telling their stories from different perspectives. Koniuchowsky cross-checked facts, names, and dates mentioned by witnesses by comparing them with one another. Any differences between testimonies of individuals from the same town reflect individual experiences. The testimonies reveal detailed recollections of dates, names, and locations.<sup>2</sup> Based on the availability of information, I selected four towns (Alytus [Yiddish: Alite] and Marcinkonys of Alytus County, Jurbarkas [Yurburg] of Taurage County, and Jonava [Yanova] of Kaunas County) to study in depth and dealt with others on a more general level.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, survivors from these towns are few. Yet such low survival rates were common in Lithuania. In light of this fact, one must ask why such a high proportion of Jews was killed in Lithuania relative to other occupied Eastern European nations. What conditions fostered the massacring of one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe, in a country that had granted them arguably the greatest degree of autonomy in Europe in the years after World War I? What was the economic situation of Lithuanians and Jews during the interwar years? How did the newly created Lithuanian government treat the Jewish population? What Jewish communal institutions existed, if any? How did Sovietization affect Lithuanians and Jews after Lithuania was annexed by the Soviet Union in June 1940? Were existing communal, educational, or religious institutions affected? Did the Soviets' communist ideology influence Jews and/or Lithuanians? What was the Soviet attitude towards Jews? What were the economic effects of Sovietization?

The answers to these questions raise inquiries about Lithuanian Jews' survival strategies in the face of the genocide that ensued after the German invasion of Lithuania. What types of armed or unarmed resistance were there and what conditions fostered them? Which

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<sup>2</sup> The collection, on which no published analysis exists to date, consists of approximately 1700 pages. It was originally recorded in Yiddish, and has since been translated into English by Jonathan Boyarin, a professor of Modern Jewish Thought at The University of North Carolina. A copy of the translated collection is available at the YIVO Archive in New York, where I consulted it.

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Marcinkonys, the towns had Jewish populations ranging from 2,000 to 7,000 people. I chose to study Marcinkonys, with a population of approximately 370 Jews, given the abundant testimonial information available from survivors and the interesting distinction its story provides relative to the other selected towns.

strategies were successful and which strategies were unsuccessful and why?

Knowledge of the cultural, political, and economic lives of Lithuanian Jews is essential in understanding how they responded to the Holocaust. Furthermore, Jews' relationships with their non-Jewish neighbors historically and contemporaneously, in addition to their geographical and topographical surroundings, played determining roles in chosen survival strategies.

## The Lithuanian Struggle for Independence

Lithuania existed as an independent nation for twenty years before the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Since the late eighteenth century, the territory had been a province of the Russian Empire. For the prior two centuries, Lithuania was part of a Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Despite all efforts to suppress Lithuanian culture on the part of the Poles and Russians, Lithuanian nationalism grew during these centuries until Lithuanians had the opportunity to entreat international support for their independence at the conclusion of World War I.

On December 11, 1917, in spite of much international opposition, the newly-created Lithuanian National Taryba (Lithuanian National Council) issued a declaration of independence.<sup>4</sup> Despite officially recognizing Lithuania's Declaration of Independence, the occupying German government repressed Lithuanian nationalist activities. Only in October, with the collapse of Germany, did the German government agree to transition its military occupational regime to a civil administration.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this development, the Lithuanians had to deal with another obstacle to their independence. The Poles' hope to recreate the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was favored by the Entente powers during the post-war Paris Peace Conference, hindering the Taryba's fight for recognition while exacerbating existing Polish-Lithuanian antagonisms.<sup>6</sup> Polish-Lithuanian relations were already tense given the

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<sup>4</sup> Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, 319. Alfred Erich Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 31. A second declaration of independence was made on February 16, 1918, known as the Lithuanian Act of Independence. It differed from the first in that it detailed the creation of a democratically elected parliament and omitted reference to its future relationship with Germany. Germany chose to recognize Lithuanian independence in the terms set forth in the December 11, 1917 declaration, given its more favorable terms regarding German-Lithuanian relations.

<sup>5</sup> Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania*, 38-39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42, 98. Tension existed since the fourteenth century, when the two nations were first united under a single monarch. During the centuries that they

dispute over the Vilnius territory, which Poland claimed as its own despite Lithuanians' indignant claim that it was their historic capital. Demographically, Poles, Jews, and Byelorussians dominated Vilnius, with less than 3 percent of the population identifying as ethnic Lithuanians according to the 1916 German census.<sup>7</sup>

While the new Lithuanian government was not formally recognized during the Paris Peace Conference as the Taryba had hoped, efforts to distance Lithuania from Polish aspirations to create a Polish-Lithuanian state were relatively successful. By August 1922, Lithuania had been recognized by Russia and the United States, had joined the League of Nations along with Latvia and Estonia, and had formally adopted the Lithuanian constitution.<sup>8</sup> After over three and a half centuries since the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and more than 120 years of occupation and war, Lithuania finally regained its independence.

## The Interwar Years

Having just regained independence, Lithuania attempted to develop a modern government that would be accepted by the western world. A key element of this effort was the provision of equal rights and a large degree of cultural and political autonomy for Jews, Germans, Poles, Byelorussians, Russians, Latvians, and other minorities.<sup>9</sup> Among

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were connected by this “personal union,” the intermingling of the Polish and Lithuanian people began, ultimately resulting in the Polonization of the Lithuanian aristocracy, a weakening of the Lithuanian state, and the Union of Lublin between the two nations in 1569, creating the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Poles held more political power than the Lithuanians in the Commonwealth, leading to a decline in Lithuanian strength and distinctness. Indeed, despite some Lithuanians' attempts to remain a separate, identifiable entity, many diplomats from other nations referred to the united state simply as “Poland.” Vytas Stanley Vardys, *Lithuania Under the Soviets: Portrait of a Nation, 1940-65* (New York: Praeger, 1965), 5. Owen J. C. Norem, *Timeless Lithuania* (Chicago: Amerlith Press, 1943), 49.

<sup>7</sup> Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania*, 43. The Lithuanian population was recorded at 2.6 percent for the city of Vilnius and 4.3 percent in the district as a whole. The Polish population in the city of Vilnius was reported as 50.1 percent and 89.8 percent in the district as a whole. Lithuanians continually disputed the results of the census report.

<sup>8</sup> Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, 334. Norem, *Timeless Lithuania*, 109-112, 122.

<sup>9</sup> According to the first and only census in independent Lithuania from 1923, ethnic Lithuanians numbered a little over 1.7 million people (83.88% of the total population), Jews a little more than 153,700 (7.58%), Poles nearly 66,000 (3.23%), Russians approximately 50,000 (2.49%), Germans almost 30,000 (1.62%), Latvians about 14,000 (0.79%), and Byelorussians approximately 4,500 (0.22%). The remaining 1,600 inhabitants were comprised of peoples from

the rights provided were proportional representation in government institutions, the right to utilize their own languages in schools, the right to observe religious holidays, autonomy in internal affairs, free education in separate schools, and the recognition of minority institutions as government organs which had legislative powers over their communities and which had the right to levy taxes on their constituents.<sup>10</sup> Jews and Byelorussians were also granted representatives in the Taryba in addition to their own ministries in December of 1918.<sup>11</sup>

As the largest national minority in independent Lithuania (not including Vilnius), Jews comprised 7.6 percent of the population (approximately 153,000 people). Most Jews lived in cities (63.5 percent) with the majority of the rest living in towns and townships and a small minority living in villages.<sup>12</sup> Given the extensive autonomy granted to minorities, Jews were able to establish their own “newspapers, publishing houses, theaters, schools (Hebrew and Yiddish) and rabbinical schools.”<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, Lithuania was arguably the most generous country in Eastern Europe with respect to Jewish national autonomy in the early 1920s.<sup>14</sup>

For the most part, Jews comprised the majority of the Lithuanian middle class. Jews served in government and municipal posts and some obtained officer rank in police departments and army units.<sup>15</sup> The 1923

nineteen other nationalities, including Tatars, Romanians, and Karaites. Saulius Kaubrys, *National Minorities in Lithuania: An Outline* (Vilnius: Vaga, 2002), 43-44.

<sup>10</sup> Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 220. Karen Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania: Lithuanian Collaboration in the Final Solution, 1941-1944* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House Ltd., 2008), 38. These rights were outlined in the August 5, 1919 Paris Declaration presented at the Paris Peace Conference and incorporated into the Lithuanian Constitution on August 6, 1919. This version specified the designation of these rights to Jews, specifically, and extended them to other minorities as well. The 1922 version of the Constitution, however, did not specify the designation of rights to Jews, but simply to minorities living in Lithuania overall.

<sup>11</sup> Senn, *The Emergence of Modern Lithuania*, 49. The Poles declined the opportunity to have representatives in the Taryba, preferring to fight for a union between Lithuania and Poland.

<sup>12</sup> For details on Jewish populations in cities, see Sarunas Liekis, *"A State within a State?": Jewish Autonomy in Lithuania, 1918-1925* (Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2003), 83. For statistics on Jewish populations in rural areas, see Alfonsas Eidintas, *Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust* (Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2003), 67.

<sup>13</sup> Constantine R. Jurgla, *History of the Lithuanian Nation* (New York: Lithuanian Cultural Institute, Historical Research Section, 1947), 281.

<sup>14</sup> Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania: Lithuanian Collaboration in the Final Solution, 1941-1944*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Dov Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 7.

census shows 31.9 percent of Jews working in commerce, 22.98 percent in industry (including crafts), 5.3 percent in public works, 2.98 percent in communication and transit, and 36.84 percent employed in other jobs such as the liberal professions, peddling, banking, or agriculture.<sup>16</sup> Jews dominated the mercantile profession, owning 77 percent of the country's commercial business in addition to 22 percent of its industrial enterprises and 18 percent of communication and transportation lines. Jews also made up 35-43 percent of the physicians and 50 percent of the lawyers in Lithuania.<sup>17</sup>

The Jewish community's role in Lithuanian economic and commercial life was significantly higher than their proportion of the population in the early 1920s. Lithuanian nationalists attempted to curb Jewish influences, claiming Jews' economic power was tyrannical and an obstacle to ethnic Lithuanians' success.<sup>18</sup> Social stratification along ethnic lines thus led to hostility from Lithuanians towards their Jewish neighbors. Efforts to Lithuanize commerce and replace the Jewish middle class with a Lithuanian one were spearheaded by Lithuanian nationalists, who led a bloodless coup in December of 1926 that led to the formation of an authoritarian regime. The government issued a new constitution in the spring of 1928 that, while still guaranteeing freedom of religion, generally liquidated minority rights.<sup>19</sup> As early as 1924, the nationalist Christian Democratic majority of the Seimas curbed minority rights, seeing the Jewish social factor in particular as an obstacle to modernization. Funding for the Ministry for Jewish Affairs was removed from the national budget, resulting in the resignation of the Minister for Jewish Affairs in protest shortly after.<sup>20</sup> Jewish institutions and organizations were liquidated.<sup>21</sup> Exams and selective taxes were instituted, geared towards limiting minority presence in academic, employment, and government positions.<sup>22</sup> The effort succeeded, as Jews were crowded out of the economy, universities, government jobs, and the liberal

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<sup>16</sup> Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 226.

<sup>17</sup> Juozas Prunskis, "Lithuania's Jews and the Holocaust" (Lithuanian American Council), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Saulius Suziedelis, "The Historical Sources for Antisemitism in Lithuania and Jewish-Lithuanian Relations during the 1930s," in *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, eds. Darius Staliūnas, Alvydas Nikzentaitis and Stefan Schreiner Schreiner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 127.

<sup>19</sup> Norem, *Timeless Lithuania*, 133.

<sup>20</sup> Liekis, "*A State within a State?": Jewish Autonomy in Lithuania, 1918-1925*, 104.

<sup>21</sup> Leib Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies* (New York: YIVO Archives at the Center of Jewish History, 1945-1950), Box 1, Folder IA/1-3, Page 18-19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

professions.<sup>23</sup>

The anti-Jewish attitude continued to worsen through the second half of the 1930s. A “Lithuania for Lithuanians” campaign, organized primarily by farmers and urban economic organizations, called for a boycott of Jewish businesses. The Lithuanian government adopted many of their demands, particularly those of an economic nature. By the end of the decade, the government had opened large cooperatives and concentrated import-export activities in government companies, diminishing Jews’ role in both wholesale and retail commerce.<sup>24</sup> These circumstances turned Lithuania, which within the past decade had granted Jews the largest degree of national autonomy they had known in centuries, into a “cage without hope for the Jewish youth.”<sup>25</sup> While some Jews emigrated, the majority could not afford to and lived in increasingly impoverished conditions.<sup>26</sup>

## On the Eve of World War II

Lithuanians had forged their alliance with the Jews after World War I for political reasons. Not only had the Jews supported Lithuania’s fight for independence, but they also made up a large portion of Vilnius’ population as approximately 60,000 Jews lived in the city by the late 1930s, comprising about 30 percent of the city’s total population.<sup>27</sup> By allying with the Jews, who had no territorial claims over Vilnius as other nationalities did, Lithuanians had the opportunity to gain support in the city without risking losing control of the area to a different ethnic group. The Jews, for their part, preferred Lithuanian control of the city to what they regarded as the more oppressive, anti-Semitic Soviet or Polish regimes. Yet tensions over the Vilnius issue were still high between Poland and Lithuania in the years preceding World War II, leading to general instability in Eastern Europe. Officially, a state of war existed between the two countries as diplomatic communication was renounced by the Lithuanians. Hostility increased as the Poles continually refused to cede the territory, even after a number of powers recognized Vilnius as Lithuanian territory.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania: Lithuanian Collaboration in the Final Solution, 1941-1944*, 48-49.

<sup>24</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back*, 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Eidintas, *Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust*, 95.

<sup>27</sup> Arad, *The Murder of the Jews in German-Occupied Lithuania*, 176. Rose Cohen and Saul Issroff, *The Holocaust in Lithuania, 1941-1945: A Book of Remembrance* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2002), 20. Bubnys, *The Holocaust in Lithuania between 1941 and 1944*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, 338.

The issue came to a head just as Germany annexed Austria in the Anschluss in March of 1938. Poland used a border incident as the grounds to issue an ultimatum demanding that Lithuania restore diplomatic relations.<sup>29</sup> Europe lay on the brink of war and Lithuania feared that Germany would annex the Baltic States next, leading Lithuania to agree to the ultimatum in an effort to defuse the situation. This desire extended through Lithuania's cession of the Klaipėda District in the northwest area of the country to Germany on March 21, 1939.<sup>30</sup> As Lithuania did not want to fight in a European war and did not have the means to fight against larger, more developed, stronger countries, it was unable to do anything but remain neutral in the hopes of staying innocuous. Consequently, when the Soviet Union and Germany signed the Non-Aggression Pact on August 23, 1939 (also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), divvying up Europe into Soviet and German spheres of influence, Lithuania could do little to defend its sovereignty and ended up under Soviet control.<sup>31</sup>

On October 10, 1939, a Lithuanian-Soviet Mutual Assistance Treaty was signed, officially allowing Soviets to garrison troops in Lithuania. In exchange, the Soviet Union returned the Vilnius territory to Lithuania, taken from Poland only a short time prior. While thrilled to finally have their historic capital back, Lithuanians were aware of the irony of the situation; a popular saying summed up the mood: "Vilnius belongs to us, but we belong to Russia."<sup>32</sup>

In early summertime 1940, the Soviets issued an ultimatum to Lithuania after claiming two Russian soldiers were kidnapped on Lithuanian territory. Lithuania, unable to reject the ultimatum, was forced to dissolve its existing government.<sup>33</sup> Elections were held, bringing a pro-Soviet regime to power that soon after voted to join the Soviet Union. By June of 1940, the Soviets began a full occupation of Lithuania.

## The Soviet Occupation of Lithuania

The new pro-Soviet government was intentionally established in the interest of having an administration that would facilitate Sovietization in all areas of life. Communist ideology was imposed as the Lithuanian economy, education system, and culture were subject to repression. The

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>31</sup> Zukas, *Lithuania: Past, Culture, Present*, 189.

<sup>32</sup> Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, 364.

<sup>33</sup> Vardys, *Lithuanian Under the Soviets: Portrait of a Nation, 1940-65*, 49.

Norem, *Timeless Lithuania*, 174-175. The two men that disappeared were soon discovered to be spending nights with local women.



quality of life dropped drastically as independent Lithuania disappeared once more.<sup>34</sup>

For some, particularly the Jews, the Soviets were considered the lesser of two evils as they provided protection against Nazi Germany.<sup>35</sup> In some areas, local Jewish populations even held welcome parades for the entering Soviets.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, beyond delaying the acquisition of Lithuania by Germany, the Soviet occupation had its benefits for Jews. Higher education was once more made accessible to Jews, who took advantage of the new system after the years of Lithuanian-imposed quotas and repression. Jews also joined the Soviet establishment as employment restrictions were lifted.<sup>37</sup>

Lithuanians perceived Jewish involvement in the Soviet administration as support of the occupation and as an indication that they profited from it.<sup>38</sup> Jews were already disproportionately represented in the Communist Party in Lithuania. With the Soviet occupation, Jews joined the Lithuanian Communist Party in increasing numbers, to the point where they comprised 36 percent of the party, a disproportionately high amount.<sup>39</sup> Correspondingly, Jewish representation in the Soviet administration was disproportionately large as they held positions in economic, legal, and administrative bodies.

Yet the situation for Jews under the Soviet regime was not as positive as the Lithuanians believed. Hebrew cultural institutions and schools were closed and all forms of Jewish expression were suppressed.<sup>40</sup> Many Jewish industrialists and merchants were destroyed economically with the nationalization of private property and

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<sup>34</sup> Zukas, *Lithuania: Past, Culture, Present*, 190-191.

<sup>35</sup> Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, 369. Dov Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils: Eastern European Jewry Under Soviet Rule, 1939-1941*, trans. Naftali Greenwood (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 31, 59.

<sup>36</sup> Eidintas, *Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust*, 139.

<sup>37</sup> Dov Levin, "The Sovietization of the Baltics and the Jews, 1940-1941," in *Baltic Jews Under the Soviets: 1940-1946*, ed. Dov Levin (Jerusalem: Centre for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry; Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry; Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994), 2. Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils: Eastern European Jewry Under Soviet Rule, 1939-1941*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Eidintas, *Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust*, 127.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 133. Jews were only 10 percent of the Lithuanian population, even after the reunion of the Vilnius territory with Lithuania.

<sup>40</sup> Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, 369. Dov Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils: Eastern European Jewry Under Soviet Rule, 1939-1941*, trans. Naftali Greenwood (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 31, 59.

businesses.<sup>41</sup> Inflation and displacement affected Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors.<sup>42</sup> Approximately 7,000 Jews, more than 20 percent of those deported, were exiled to Siberia along with Lithuanians.<sup>43</sup>

The majority of deportations to Siberia occurred the week of June 14, 1941, only a week before the German invasion of Lithuania. Approximately 35,000 people were exiled to Siberia or other parts deep in the Soviet Union, including political, cultural, and communal leaders as well as those who had their businesses, farms, and homes nationalized during the Soviet occupation.<sup>44</sup> The deportations served to further rouse the anger of ethnic Lithuanians, who noticed Jews' presence in Soviet organizations, educational institutions, and the liberal professions.

To the Lithuanians, the fact that many Jews fled with the Soviets as the Germans invaded served as evidence of their guilt and complicity with the Soviets.<sup>45</sup> The historic isolation of Jewish communities aided anti-Semitic sentiment as Jews were considered disloyal foreigners, despite the centuries of history Jews shared with their Lithuanian neighbors and the fact that they fought alongside one another to establish the country's independence after World War I. The anti-Semitic Lithuanian Activist Front, supported by Nazi Germany, initiated anti-Jewish acts and called for the abolishment of the "ancient right of refuge for Jews in Lithuania granted in the time of Vytautas the Great."<sup>46</sup> They roused anti-Jewish sentiments among the Lithuanians, the majority of whom greeted the Germans as liberators when they attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, pushing the Soviets out of most of Lithuania within a week.

In many towns, Lithuanian partisans were quick to exact revenge on those involved in the Soviet occupation. Jews, who had become associated with communism and given such labels as "Jewish Bolshevism," were primary targets.<sup>47</sup> Mass killings ensued, from which few Lithuanian Jews managed to escape. Thus, the Holocaust in Lithuania began in June of 1941, before the Final Solution to the Jewish Question entailed the mass industrialized murder of European Jewry. While the Soviet occupation served to postpone the Holocaust in

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 68. Of the 986 plants nationalized in July of 1940, Jews owned 57 percent. Even more significantly, of the 1595 businesses nationalized at the end of September, 83 percent were owned by Jews. Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Norem, *Timeless Lithuania*, 184.

<sup>43</sup> Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils*, 273.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., *Fighting Back*, 23. Some estimates say up to 60,000 people were deported to Siberia, but the lower estimates are likely more accurate.

<sup>45</sup> Eidintas, *Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust*, 202.

<sup>46</sup> Levin, *The Sovietization of the Baltics and the Jews, 1940-1941*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, 381.

Lithuania by a year by keeping the perceived Nazi menace at bay, it ultimately “heightened the tragedy” as Jews’ role in the Soviet administration inspired widespread local hostility among Lithuanians, many of whom subsequently became willing and significant collaborators in implementing the Final Solution after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941.<sup>48</sup>

Scholars divide the phases of the Holocaust in Lithuania into three periods, which I will also utilize in discussing Lithuanian Jewry’s response to the genocide. The first began on June 22, 1941, with the invasion of Lithuania by Germany, and continued through November of 1941. The second, starting in December 1941, continued through March 1943. The final period began in April of 1943 and continued through summer of 1944. Throughout these periods, Jewish survival strategies remained consistent within areas. The frequency of various strategies, however, differed depending on the period and the progress of the war.

The majority of Jews tried to flee eastward towards the Soviet Union in the face of the German invasion, despite the risks of aerial bombardment, ambush by nationalist gangs, and the division of families. However, the swiftness of the German invasion and occupation of Lithuania made escape into the Soviet Union nearly impossible for Lithuanian Jewry.<sup>49</sup> Those who did not manage to cross the border were often forced by new administrative authorities, whether German or Lithuanian, to return to their hometowns.<sup>50</sup> Other Jews sought temporary shelter in Lithuanian forests and villages, but they often returned to their homes after only a short time in hiding.<sup>51</sup> Some decided not to leave their homes at all, but to wait to see what happened. While many had heard rumors of Nazi atrocities, they hardly believed they would be subject to mass killings.<sup>52</sup> Even those who felt it was possible did not realize that the mass killings would start so quickly and be so all encompassing.<sup>53</sup>

The first period, starting on June 22, 1941, can potentially be split into two periods. From the outbreak of war between Germany and the Soviet Union through mid-July of 1941, self-proclaimed Lithuanian

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<sup>48</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 3, Folder IIA/2-4 – Raiseniai, Mazeikiai, Kediniai, 119.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 106. Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 6, Folder V pp.1-173, Page 112. Ultimately, approximately 15,000 Jews managed to cross the Soviet border or front line after the start of the war.

<sup>51</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 5, Folder IV A pp. 1-221, Page 5.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 28.

partisans killed men who were former communists, Soviet officials, or known Soviet supporters.<sup>54</sup> Given the association of Jews with Bolshevism, the majority of those killed during this time was Jewish men. In Alytus, for example, 600 men were rounded up and shot, most of which were Jews, merely two days after the German invasion.<sup>55</sup> Partisans in some towns preceded these massacres with acts of humiliation: in Marcinkonys, Jews were forced to kiss portraits of Soviet leaders that had been smeared with excrement.<sup>56</sup>

Testimonies indicate that, in addition to perpetrating these politically motivated killings, Lithuanians in many towns enacted restrictive measures and edicts against the Jews. Jews were required to wear yellow Stars of David<sup>57</sup> and walk in the streets rather than on the sidewalks.<sup>58</sup> In some towns Jews were barred from purchasing food outside limited, specified time frames.<sup>59</sup> Jews were often subject to forced labor, sometimes being assigned to clean streets and toilets or shine Lithuanian partisans' shoes.

The general massacring of Lithuanian Jewry started in late July of 1941 and continued through November of 1941. In towns across Lithuania, entire Jewish communities were wiped out. Jews were gathered in marketplaces, synagogues, schools, compounds, and barns and then led to killing sites in nearby forests. Pre-dug ditches were filled with the bodies of Jewish men, women, and children. According to testimonies, the majority of these actions were carried out by local Lithuanian collaborators and Lithuanian police battalions, usually under German supervision.<sup>60</sup> While some Jews managed to escape death by fleeing into the woods or hiding with acquaintances, the majority of Lithuanian Jews were killed during this time. By the end of this period, over 80 percent of

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<sup>54</sup> Arad, *The Murder of the Jews in German-Occupied Lithuania*, 177. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 192. Arunas Bubnys, "The Holocaust in Lithuania: An Outline of the Major Stages and their Results," in *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, eds. Darius Staliūnas, Alvydas Nikzentaitis and Stefan Schreiner Schreiner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 212. Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 3, Folder IIA/2-4 Raiseniai, Mazeikiai, Kediniai, Page 171.

<sup>55</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 5, Folder IV A pp. 1-221, Page 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part II, Page 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Nathan Katz, *Teach Us to Count our Days: A Story of Survival, Sacrifice and Success* (Cranbury: Cornwall Books, 1999), 88. Lea Eliash, *Interview 9900*. (USC Shoah Foundation Institute, 1994-2010), Tape 2.

<sup>59</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 5, Folder IV A pp. 1-221, Page 8.

<sup>60</sup> Bubnys, *The Holocaust in Lithuania between 1941 and 1944*, 15. Arad, *The Murder of the Jews in German-Occupied Lithuania*, 193. Rosin, *Preserving our Litvak Heritage: A History of 31 Jewish Communities in Lithuania*, ix.

Lithuania's Jews were dead, a higher percentage than in any other part of Europe other than Latvia and Estonia, where a similar percentage of Jews had been killed by December of 1941.<sup>61</sup> This relatively high proportion is attributed to the wide scale local collaboration in both countries.<sup>62</sup>

By December of 1941, only about 43,500 Jews were alive, the vast majority living in the four remaining ghettos in Lithuania. In the Vilnius ghetto, established in September of 1941, only 20,000 Jews remained of the prewar Jewish population of over 60,000 in the city and 100,000 in the county.<sup>63</sup> The Kaunas ghetto, created in August of 1941, had 17,500 Jews living in it, less than half of the prewar population of the city.<sup>64</sup> The Siauliai ghetto, established in late August or early September of 1941, had only 5,500 Jews left. In the smallest of the ghettos, Svencionys, only 500 Jews remained. Most of the small ghettos set up in other towns were liquidated in the summer and autumn of 1941, with a few exceptions.<sup>65</sup> The ghetto in Marcinkonys was one such exception, as it was not liquidated until November of 1942. Despite Lithuanians' express request to kill the Jews of the town in late 1941, the Germans' desire to maintain the Jews as a workforce protected the ghetto's existence until its eventual liquidation.<sup>66</sup>

In December of 1941, the annihilation of entire Jewish communities in Lithuania generally halted. From then until March of 1943 was what is deemed the "stable" period of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Jews in the four remaining ghettos were assigned to work units as the Germans sought to exploit the opportunity of forced labor. While killing actions were still carried out, they were selective and relatively less frequent.

During this time, Jews both came and left the ghettos as they could. Most ghettos were not tightly sealed and their boundaries could often be crossed without excessive difficulty. Some individuals bribed

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<sup>61</sup> Bubnys, *The Holocaust in Lithuania between 1941 and 1944*, 4. Estonia was declared free of Jews in a report issued on January 14, 1942, indicating that the vast majority of Jews in Estonia was killed by early 1942. Anton Weiss-Wendt, *Murder without Hatred: Estonians and the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 135.

<sup>62</sup> Arad, *The Murder of the Jews in German-Occupied Lithuania*, 193.

<sup>63</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania: Lithuanian Collaboration in the Final Solution, 1941-1944*, 149.

<sup>65</sup> Bubnys, *The Holocaust in Lithuania between 1941 and 1944*, 25.

<sup>66</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part II, Page 7.

guards to look the other way as they snuck in food and people.<sup>67</sup> Jews who had hidden in the countryside went to the ghettos as the weather or starvation compelled them to.

Some Jews who avoided the massacres and ghetto round-ups by hiding in the countryside or in forests managed to find Christian acquaintances that provided them with food and/or shelter. However, testimonies indicate that the majority did not manage to find long-term care or stable hideouts, especially at the beginning of the war. Fear of betrayal dissuaded both Jews and any potentially sympathetic gentiles from interacting with one another: Jews feared gentiles would turn them in and gentiles feared their neighbors would denounce them to the authorities. The closed nature of Jewish communal life before the war meant that Jews had few trusted acquaintances among their neighbors.<sup>68</sup> From the perspective of most gentiles, Jews were alien beings that they had only interacted with in an economic capacity before the war.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, incentives to help Jews were limited. Nevertheless, usually with the aid of a monetary bribe or other incentive, some Jews managed to survive outside the ghetto with the aid of gentiles. In some cases, Jews had to utilize force of arms to pressure village peasants to provide them with food.<sup>70</sup> In other cases, gentiles would accept payment from Jews for food or shelter and then turn them in.<sup>71</sup> Gentiles who were entrusted with Jews' belongings at the start of the war had an even greater material motivation to turn Jews in, which they often did.<sup>72</sup>

There are some detectable patterns between population demography of gentiles and different nationalities' willingness to help Jews, which will be discussed later. If they were not part of a partisan group, Jews could not manage without gentiles' aid, given willingly or taken by force. The majority of Jews could not speak Lithuanian fluently, making it difficult for them to blend in if they were outside the ghettos.<sup>73</sup> Even those who spoke Lithuanian fluently and without an accent found it difficult to hide under the guise of being a non-Jewish Lithuanian as physical appearance often gave away their origins.<sup>74</sup>

As the war progressed, the outlook on helping Jews changed.

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<sup>67</sup> Joel Alpert, Josef Rosin and Fania Hilelson Jivotovsky, *The Memorial Book for the Jewish Community of Yurburg, Lithuania: Translation and Update* (New York: Assistance to Lithuanian Jews, 2003), 466, 480.

<sup>68</sup> Eidintas, *Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust*, 319.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>70</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part II, Page 33.

<sup>71</sup> Eidintas, *Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust*, 330.

<sup>72</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part II, Page 21, 23, 44.

<sup>73</sup> Eidintas, *Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust*, 328.

<sup>74</sup> Alpert, Rosin and Jivotovsky, *The Memorial Book for the Jewish Community of Yurburg, Lithuania: Translation and Update*, 468.

Gentiles began to note the shifting tide of war and were afraid they would be held accountable for the massacring of Jews. Those who previously turned Jews away when they requested food or shelter now provided aid, hoping that helping a Jew would protect them from future reprisals. Others sought to eliminate Jews that much more quickly to ensure that no Jewish witness survived to testify to the prior massacres and Lithuanian complicity in the slaughters.

Opportunities for Jewish survival changed as the Soviet partisan movement grew in numbers and in power. While there were independent partisan groups in the forests since the beginning of the war, the movement officially became part of the Soviet war effort in 1942.<sup>75</sup> Prior to that, the movement was largely unorganized. Independent partisan groups, usually consisting of escaped Russian POWs, often lived in the forests as bandits. They usually rejected Jews who sought to join them, sometimes even robbing or killing them. Byelorussian partisan units were the only existing refuge for Jews who had escaped ghettos or who roamed the forests in Lithuania until the end of 1943. It was only then that the bulk of units that accepted Jewish fighters from the Lithuanian ghettos were formed, predominantly in eastern Lithuania.<sup>76</sup>

While my study seeks to understand the survival of Jews from smaller Lithuanian towns, testimonies from the Koniuchowsky collection, as well as video testimonials and memoirs, indicate that a good portion of survivors spent at least some time in one of the four main Lithuanian ghettos—most commonly the Vilnius and Kaunas ghettos. How did these Jews survive? And why didn't more Jews from those ghettos survive? What distinguishes the 13,000 Jews who survived the war from the 220,000 Jews in pre-World War II Lithuania? More tellingly, what distinguished them from the other 30,500 Jews who managed to survive the first stage of the Holocaust in Lithuania but did not ultimately survive until the end of the war?

In the following sections I will discuss elements key to Jewish survival in Lithuania. The part played by each element varies for every survivor—no two stories are alike. Generalizations are consequently difficult to make. Ultimately, as will be seen, it appears that the conclusions drawn by Yehuda Bauer in a similar study on the Polish kresy are applicable to survivors from Lithuania, as well: character,

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<sup>75</sup> Dov Levin, "Participation of the Lithuanian Jews in the Second World War," in *Baltic Jews Under the Soviets, 1940-1946*, ed. Dov Levin (Jerusalem: Centre for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry; Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry; Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994), 262.

<sup>76</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 180-182.

chance, and luck played a large part in Jewish survival.<sup>77</sup>

## Leadership

In many Lithuanian towns during the first period of the war, civilian administrations led by Lithuanian partisans either selected Jews to act as representatives of the Jewish community or demanded that the Jews appoint a Judenrat themselves. The Judenraete were essentially councils that served as liaisons between the Jews and German or Lithuanian authorities. While the Judenraete formed during the Holocaust were modeled on the Jewish councils that existed before the war, their functions differed significantly. Whereas prewar Jewish communal administrations were only partly involved in providing social services and ensuring community members' welfare, during the Holocaust their primary concern was to aid in the survival of the community.<sup>78</sup> German and local authorities often charged the Judenraete to supply labor forces and gather money or valuables from local Jews. Judenraete in larger ghettos established cultural and educational organizations in addition to organizing efforts to obtain medical supplies and additional food for community members.

The majority of Judenraete in Lithuania outside the four main ghettos, however, were ultimately ineffective. While cases have been noted in which they managed to obtain better accommodations than those initially designated for ghettos, remove a few regulations, or free imprisoned Jews by bribing authorities, they largely only delayed individuals' deaths and could do nothing in the face of mass killings.<sup>79</sup> Their inability to provide a significant amount of aid can be attributed to the fact that they often only existed for very short amounts of time. The Judenrat of Alytus was formed at the behest of Lithuanian and German authorities. The Jewish community felt the appointment of a Judenrat was desirable, believing that it would be able to alleviate the anti-Jewish regulations imposed on them. Unfortunately, the Judenrat did not have the opportunity to do so as its members were taken away and killed on August 12, 1941. By mid-September, the Jews remaining in the zone designated for Jewish residence were killed.<sup>80</sup> Unlike the example of Alytus, in which the Jews optimistically opted to select their own Judenrat, Jews in Jonava refused to appoint a Judenrat when Lithuanian

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<sup>77</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 2, Folder IIA/1 – Telsiai, Page 4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 5, Folder IV A pp.1-221, Page 104-105. Box 5, Unlabeled Folder, Page 250. Box 6, Folder V pp.1-173, Page 187.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 5, Folder IV A pp.1-221, Page 12-64.



partisans demanded that they do so; consequently, the Lithuanians appointed the committee themselves. Nevertheless, by August 23, the Jewish men and women who remained in Jonava were killed.<sup>81</sup>

The story of Marcinkonys differs not only from those of Alytus and Jonava, but also from the majority of Lithuanian towns. Near the border between Lithuania and White Russia, Marcinkonys was assigned to Grodno County rather than to Alytus County. This distinction was of paramount importance to the Jewish community as being assigned to Alytus County, and consequently being ruled by Lithuanians, was justifiably viewed as a death sentence. As part of Grodno County, Marcinkonys was not ruled by Lithuanians. This gave the Judenrat, which was created as a result of German demands, the opportunity to help the community's Jews. Not only did the Judenrat fulfill the role necessitated by the Germans by providing laborers and money, it also helped the community in other ways. By instituting a tax on all Jews in the town, it was able to consistently fill German orders, bribe local administrators, and buy "gifts" for the Germans. Most notably, however, the Judenrat created a Jewish police force that maintained order and distributed work notices to Jews. When a ghetto was established after Passover in 1942, Jewish policemen were stationed by the ghetto fence in order to alert the Judenrat of dangers and protect the ghetto from robberies. When the Jewish police noticed that the ghetto was being surrounded by heavily armed guard on November 1, 1942, it was able to warn the community. While organized escapes were limited given the short notice prior to the liquidation on November 2, a mass escape occurred when the Judenrat President, Ahron Kobrovsky, yelled that the Jews should flee. The ghetto inhabitants ran towards the ghetto fence, breaking it down and escaping into nearby forests. Unfortunately, while many managed to escape the liquidation of the ghetto, other circumstances limited their survival rate, as will be discussed later.<sup>82</sup>

While the Judenrat of Marcinkonys was well-organized and assisted in the maintenance of the Jewish community, it should be viewed as the exception rather than the rule. Its population would likely have been decimated in the early months of the war had the town been assigned to Alytus County and its administration led by Lithuanians. Yet the actions of the Marcinkonys Judenrat bring to the fore another question: what role, if any, did the Judenrat play in the Jews' resistance to the genocide?<sup>83</sup> Testimonies indicate that most towns did not have

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., Box 6, Folder VA pp.339-521, Page 421-423.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part II, Page 6-27.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Robert Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987), 109-120. German-Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt implicated Jewish leadership for their role in the destruction of their

Judenraete for long enough to have made any difference. Thus, we turn to the larger Lithuanian ghettos to gain a better understanding of the role played by Jewish leadership in resistance, both armed and unarmed.

Unarmed resistance facilitated by the Judenraete took the form of providing ghetto inhabitants with social services. The Judenrat of Vilnius organized food smuggling, sanitation efforts, medical care, education, and public kitchens. They also ran theatres, choirs, and libraries.<sup>84</sup> The Judenrat in Kaunas undertook similar actions.<sup>85</sup> Religious observance was also common in the ghettos: in Kaunas, Jews arranged places to pray on the high holidays, discreetly built a sukkah for Sukkot when possible, and made efforts to bake matzah for Passover.<sup>86</sup> The Siauliai and Svencionys Judenraete engaged in efforts to ease the life of Jews, as well.

In addition to unarmed resistance efforts, there were underground organizations planning armed resistance and/or escapes in each of the ghettos. The organizations were relatively small, never comprising more than 5 percent of the ghettos' populations.<sup>87</sup> The goals of such organizations included preparing for self-defense as well as offensive combat and organizing rescue efforts through mass or individual escapes from the ghetto.<sup>88</sup> A common concern within the ghettos was that any resistance or underground organizations would put the entire ghettos' populations at risk. Ghetto Judenraete consequently took stances on resistance efforts.<sup>89</sup>

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fellow Jews during the Holocaust, claiming that Jewish leaders organized and facilitated the German persecution of the Jews. Her argument draws heavily on the arguments made by Raul Hilberg, a political scientist and historian, who claimed that Jews did not display any resistance to the genocide and presented the Judenrat as compliant to Nazi orders, acting as the instrument of German will and moving Jews through the phases of the Final Solution. Both Hilberg's and Arendt's arguments have been criticized for their generalizations. Isaiah Trunk's *Judenrat* illustrates the impossibility of generalizations regarding Jewish leaders' responses and actions by providing detailed examples and discussions of Jewish councils. Aharon Weiss's research on ghettos in Galicia and Eastern Poland complements Trunk's work by showing the many different patterns of behavior, ranging from compliance through suicide and resistance.

<sup>84</sup> Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania: Lithuanian Collaboration in the Final Solution, 1941-1944*, 172.

<sup>85</sup> Eliash, *Interview 9900*, Tape 2.

<sup>86</sup> Efromim Oshry, *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry* (New York: Judaica Press, 1995), 45, 52, 81.

<sup>87</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 133.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>89</sup> Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania: Lithuanian Collaboration in the Final Solution, 1941-1944*, 177.

Generally, the majority of Jews in the four ghettos were not disposed to resistance for a number of reasons. It is important to note that Soviet deportations prior to the German invasion left many communities leaderless as communal, political, and religious leaders were usually deported. Furthermore, the massacres that occurred prior to ghettoization usually targeted youths, wiping out a significant portion of those able to resist. Thus, those remaining in the ghettos usually preferred to focus on ensuring their productivity, hoping that the Germans would find the ghetto's value too great to liquidate it. This may have been a reflection of leaders' beliefs. In Vilnius, the ghetto leader Jacob Gens was particularly opposed to armed resistance efforts, believing they jeopardized the entire ghetto population.

In July 1943, when the Germans threatened to liquidate the ghetto if the leader of the resistance movement, Yitzhak Wittenberg, was not turned in, Gens facilitated his arrest. Wittenberg went into hiding after the Germans demanded he be turned over, but came out of hiding to attend a meeting called by Gens. Gens had arranged for Wittenberg's arrest, but resistance group members managed to save him as he was being led away. Wittenberg once more went into hiding, but his colleagues in the resistance movement pressured him to surrender after realizing the ghetto population did not support resistance efforts. The consensus among ghetto inhabitants was that 20,000 people should not be endangered because of the actions willingly undertaken by one man. Wittenberg agreed to surrender, asking to first meet with Gens. Gens provided Wittenberg with poison, which Wittenberg used in prison the night he was turned over. Thus, one can see how Gens was forced to balance his ability to aid individuals and the ghetto as a whole. He felt that the most effective means to preserve the majority involved ensuring invaluable production for the Germans. The resistance movement not only jeopardized the ghetto through its underground activities, but given that it mostly comprised of youths, it diminished the number of available youths to work and defend the ghetto, particularly after groups began leaving the ghetto for the forests. In fact, Gens was not opposed to the idea of fighting within the ghetto. He stated that he would fight, but only when the time came for the ghetto's annihilation. Thus, once more, we see the nuances of the considerations taken into account by Gens in administering the ghetto.<sup>90</sup>

It appears that the actions of ghetto and resistance group leaders did not necessarily correspond with the actions of ghetto inhabitants. Even in the Kaunas ghetto, where leaders supported escape efforts,

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<sup>90</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *Ghetto in Flames: The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority; Ktav Pub. House, 1980), 338, 383, 386-399.

breakouts were relatively uncommon. Escape from the Vilnius ghetto was comparatively and proportionately more frequent. The significance of this statistic is highlighted by the fact that the leaders of the resistance group in Vilnius initially preferred rebelling within the ghetto to fleeing to the forests, as will be elaborated on later.

Given the very small number of Jewish communities remaining in Lithuania by the end of 1941, there are few examples for historians to examine in an effort to understand the effects leaders had on Jews' responses. Generalizations about the leadership of a community are consequently impossible. Each Jewish community was unique and individuals, groups, and/or families (depending on their priorities) usually responded in the manner they felt was most likely to lead to their survival. With this in mind, the considerations taken by the 43,500 Lithuanian Jews still alive during the second period are crucial in understanding their responses. What factors played into Jews' decision to partake in unarmed or armed resistance? Why did some Jews flee from the ghettos while others chose not to?

## The Neighbors

As most Jews were physically distinguishable from gentiles in Lithuania and could rarely pass as Lithuanian, Jews outside the ghettos had the options of hiding in forests or fields or hiding with a gentile. In both cases, gentiles' attitudes towards Jews often meant the difference between life and death. Jews who opted for the former option often encountered difficulties in acquiring resources and were forced to turn to local gentiles to obtain food and arms. Those who decided to seek refuge with gentiles also had to contend with significant risks on a daily basis. The most significant risk was the possibility that the person solicited for aid or their neighbors would betray the Jew requesting it.

Gentiles living in towns and villages killed and betrayed untold numbers of Jews who managed to escape the ghettos. The hostility of ethnic Lithuanians towards Jews was distinct and played a key role in the low survival rate of the country's Jews. Not only did hostility and traditional anti-Semitism inspire gentiles to kill Jews, but the opportunity to loot Jews also provided an incentive. Testimonies indicate that Jews who fled towards the Soviet Union in the first days of the war returned to homes that had been robbed by locals.<sup>91</sup> A number of Jews chose to give their valuables to trusted neighbors. While some managed to retrieve their belongings during the war to utilize as payments to aid-givers, others were targeted by those to whom they entrusted their valuables.

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<sup>91</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part II, Pages 38, 69, 85, 97, 111, 135.

A prime example of the role played by locals in the survival of Jews emerges from what happened after the mass escape of the Marcinkonys Jews during the ghetto's liquidation in November 1942. In several instances, escapees who managed to find non-Jews willing to help them were turned in by neighbors.<sup>92</sup> In other cases, locals found Jews and either killed them or reported them to authorities who subsequently killed them.<sup>93</sup> Locals often tricked Jews who sought help. In one instance, a Pole locked six Jewish women hoping to buy food from him in his barn, promising to bring them food but bringing Germans instead.<sup>94</sup> One family that had been hiding in the forest approached a peasant who had hidden them before, once more seeking shelter; the peasant refused to hide them again but agreed to acquire weapons for them. Instead, he followed the family back to their hiding spot in the forest and betrayed them to the Germans.<sup>95</sup> Such stories were common, particularly when material gain was possible.<sup>96</sup> Locals even offered to bury the Jews who died during the escape from the ghetto as they hoped to loot the bodies.<sup>97</sup> These testimonies emerge from a community in which Christian-Jewish relations were referred to as “friendly” before the war.<sup>98</sup>

Monetary incentives were not locals' only motivation to kill and betray Jews. The interwar years increased Lithuanians' hostility towards Jews, who they viewed as economic oppressors. The “Lithuania for Lithuanians” movement, initiated by the nationalist Lithuanian Activist Front and eventually adopted by the Lithuanian government, pressed for the removal of Jews from the economic sphere. Testimonies universally acknowledge that anti-Semitic sentiments were common before the war, although they had publicly diminished in the year of Soviet occupation.<sup>99</sup> Despite the decline in visible anti-Semitism during the Soviet occupation, Lithuanians' resentment towards Jews grew as they were increasingly present in education, the liberal professions, and the government. Thus, the situation that developed in the interwar years enflamed existing anti-Jewish feelings, leading to widespread animosity towards Jews.

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 22.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 18, 20-21, 25, 26-28.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. Another such instance involved a family that managed to escape the ghetto and hide with a local peasant; after the father went to the Lithuanian with whom he had hidden their belongings in order to gather them as payment for the peasant who was caring for them, the Lithuanian followed him back to the peasant's house and informed the Germans, who killed the family.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>99</sup> Sidney Iwens, *Interview 8965*. (USC Shoah Foundation Institute, 1994-2010), Tape 1.

Not all gentiles were hostile towards Jews, though. Ita Solomansky of Alytus fled the town when it was invaded. She spent a few months hiding with and working for a peasant before settling into another peasant's home, where she stayed until liberation. On May 2, 1942, the peasant, Kasimierz Korkuts, took in a family of Jews that escaped from the Vilnius ghetto. By the time they were liberated by the Red Army on July 13, 1944, Korkuts had taken in a total of fifteen Jews, who he cared for without receiving payment by the end of the war.<sup>100</sup>

Another survivor from Alytus, Khaye Katzovitz, escaped with her sister from the Kaunas ghetto in March 1944. They stayed with a peasant for ten days before a neighbor reported him, after which they went to the peasant with whom they had left their belongings at the start of the war. The peasant threatened to turn them in. Khaye's sister subsequently returned to the Kaunas ghetto, but Khaye chose to continue seeking shelter. She spent the next few months working for a series of peasants as a tailor until she was liberated on July 28, 1944.<sup>101</sup>

In Jurbarkas, few managed to find shelter with locals. There are indications that a group of Jews managed to escape into the woods surrounding the town during the first stage of the war, but they were ultimately killed.<sup>102</sup> A survivor from Jurbarkas tells of her flight from a shooting site and her journey to the Kaunas ghetto in light of her inability to find stable shelter with a gentile.<sup>103</sup> Another survivor from Jurbarkas was luckier in his search for shelter: after staying with a series of locals, he eventually found shelter with a farmer he knew before the war and was able to stay there for three and a half years.<sup>104</sup>

It is impossible to ignore the factor of luck in analyzing survivors' stories. While many Jews approached acquaintances they had known prior to the war when seeking shelter or aid, many others often requested aid from strangers in the areas where they hid. It was important that both the individual they requested aid from and those living around him would not betray them. In 2001 it was estimated that 2,700 gentiles rescued and/or helped Jews survive.<sup>105</sup> While the number may be an underestimate, one fact regarding the aid-givers remains clear: they were central in Lithuanian Jews' survival. Without the help of gentiles, the number of Lithuanian Jewish survivors would have been far less. Even those who spent the majority of the Holocaust hiding in forests and

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<sup>100</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 5, Folder IV A pp.1-221, Page 19-21.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-30.

<sup>102</sup> Alpert, Rosin and Jivotovsky, *The Memorial Book for the Jewish Community of Yurburg, Lithuania: Translation and Update*, 415.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 431-433.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 457-463.

<sup>105</sup> Eidintas, *Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust*, 334.

fields or those who joined the partisan movement sought gentiles' help in the form of food and arms. Almost all of them spent at least some time sheltered by gentiles. Thus, it is important to note that while local collaboration in the Final Solution is what facilitated the almost complete decimation of Lithuanian Jewry, without gentiles willing to provide food and shelter, survival for any Jews would have been nearly impossible.

There are some commonalities among those who provided aid. For example, in the Vilnius region, which had a majority of Poles in addition to a large minority of Lithuanians and fewer Byelorussians, Russians, and Ukrainians, Jews seemed to have a greater chance of finding shelter with non-Lithuanians. This may be attributable to the greater animosity felt by other ethnicities towards Lithuanians, particularly by the Poles.<sup>106</sup> The majority of Poles held a greater disdain for Lithuanians and Germans than Jews, providing Jews with a more sympathetic audience to their plight as they sought help.<sup>107</sup> This seems applicable in areas outside Vilnius, as well. Leib Koniuchowsky notes of his own experience in Alytus the warnings from his Polish neighbors, who disliked the Lithuanians, and their suggestion that he go to Kaunas in order to potentially avoid pogroms by being in a city.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, minorities within Lithuania did not feel the same nationalistic fervor as ethnic Lithuanians and thus were not as inclined to blame Jews for the loss of the country's independence to the Soviet Union in 1940. Despite this, some testimonies tell of non-Lithuanians betraying Jews, making a conclusive statement regarding a connection between aid-givers and ethnicity difficult.

Some Jews opted to avoid interaction with all gentiles whenever possible. After spending some time with gentiles, the majority of Marcinkonys Jews who escaped from the ghetto set up bunkers in nearby forests and decided to avoid contact with gentiles as much as possible, believing they could not be trusted.<sup>109</sup> One survivor from Jurbarkas spent three years in the forest with a group of Jews and only had contact with gentiles while obtaining resources and arranging escapes from the Kaunas ghetto.<sup>110</sup> In addition to helping Jews in the Kaunas ghetto escape, the group engaged in partisan activities. As the emergence of the partisan movement provided Jews with a significant means of survival, Jewish

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<sup>106</sup> Kazimierz Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary, 1941-1943: A Bystander's Account of a Mass Murder*, ed. Yitzhak Arad (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), xv.

<sup>107</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 105.

<sup>108</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 5, Folder IV A pp.1-221, Page 53.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part II, Page 32.

<sup>110</sup> Alpert, Rosin and Jivotovsky, *The Memorial Book for the Jewish Community of Yurburg, Lithuania: Translation and Update*, 465-467.

involvement in partisan units merits examination.

## Rebels & Partisans

Unfortunately, by the time an organized partisan movement emerged in the eastern parts of Lithuania at the end of 1943, the majority of Lithuanian Jews were dead. The movement's relatively late development is partly attributed to the anti-Soviet attitude of Lithuanians, which made infiltration more difficult for guerilla fighters.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, as armed resistance within ghettos was often dependent on receiving material support from national underground movements, the ability of Jews within Lithuanian ghettos to resist was limited prior to the establishment of the partisan movement in eastern Lithuanian. Groups often lacked arms and ammunition, making armed resistance within the ghetto and later escape attempts to join partisan units, which usually only accepted armed fighters, more difficult.

Even so, underground resistance efforts developed relatively early in the larger Lithuanian ghettos. In fall of 1941, only months after the creation of the Kaunas ghetto, Communist and Zionist groups formed underground units and began smuggling weapons into the ghetto, engaging in sabotage, and establishing contact with Soviet partisans. In the summer of 1943, the groups united as the Jewish General Fighting Organization (Yidishe Alegemeyne Kamfs Organizatsie, JFO), soon reaching a membership of 600 people.<sup>112</sup> In Vilnius, a united resistance group emerged much earlier. By January of 1942, the United Partisan Organization (Fareynegte Partizaner Organizatsye, FPO) was created, bringing together Communists, Zionists, and Bundists and reaching a membership of 700 people. Unlike the resistance group in Kaunas, which sought to escape from the ghetto and join the partisan movement relatively early, the resistance in Vilnius was geared towards organizing a rebellion within the ghetto until the summer of 1943.<sup>113</sup> In the smaller

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<sup>111</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 180.

<sup>112</sup> "Resistance in the Kovno Ghetto," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/lerman/medal\\_award/award.php?content=kovno](http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/lerman/medal_award/award.php?content=kovno) (accessed 03/01, 2011).

<sup>113</sup> Rahel Margolis, *A Partisan from Vilna* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 326. The shift occurred after the Wittenberg Affair of July 1943, during which time the FPO realized that ghetto inhabitants did not support resistance efforts. While some decided to stay in the ghetto and potentially fight when the time came, resistance group members increasingly left the ghetto for the forests. Arad, *Ghetto in Flames: The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in the Holocaust*, 395-396.



ghettos of Siauliai and Svencionys, the resistance groups' membership numbered 150 and 50 respectively.

Debates regarding the potential effectiveness of armed resistance within the ghetto were common in underground groups. In Vilnius, those who preferred the idea of escaping into the forest expressed the futility of resistance within the ghetto, believing it would merely contribute to hastening the liquidation of the ghetto. In September 1943, the FPO abandoned its hope of organizing an armed rebellion within the ghetto when calls for an uprising against Germans that were gathering Jews to transport to Estonian labor camps went unheeded.<sup>114</sup> From the perspective of the Vilnius ghetto inhabitants, cooperation with the Germans was more likely to guarantee their survival than resistance. They believed that not all Jews would be killed and that some would survive, a mindset that undermined collective action.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, they were aware that the resistance of a single Jew could lead to the punishment of many. In the Svencionys ghetto, a minority believed that any Jew's escape would endanger the entire ghetto's existence.<sup>116</sup> Cognizant of this, some Jews refused to escape, despite having ample opportunities to.<sup>117</sup> Other Jews were torn between family obligations and the opportunity to escape and join partisan units, which would not accept families.<sup>118</sup>

Despite these external and internal debates, a number of Jews fled the ghettos, whether as part of organized resistance groups or individually. In the spring of 1943, the first group of Jews involved in underground activities left the Vilnius ghetto in the hopes of joining partisan units.<sup>119</sup> In the fall of 1943, the leader of the JFO agreed to send small groups of fighters to join partisans in the Augustow Forest south of Kaunas.<sup>120</sup> Groups of Jews left the ghetto in Svencionys in March of

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<sup>114</sup> Margolis, *A Partisan from Vilna*, 355. "Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/lerman/medal\\_award/award.php?content=vilna](http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/lerman/medal_award/award.php?content=vilna) (accessed 03/01, 2011).

<sup>115</sup> David Engel, Yitzchak Mais and Eva Fogelman, *Daring to Resist: Jewish Defiance in the Holocaust* (New York: Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2007), 23. Margolis, *A Partisan from Vilna*, 385.

<sup>116</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 130.

<sup>117</sup> Eliash, *Interview 9900*, Tape 3. Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part I, Page 11.

<sup>118</sup> Engel, Mais and Fogelman, *Daring to Resist: Jewish Defiance in the Holocaust*, 23-24. Aba Gefen, *Defying the Holocaust: A Diplomat's Report* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1993), 65. Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part II, Page 66-67. Margolis, *A Partisan from Vilna*, 359-360.

<sup>119</sup> Margolis, *A Partisan from Vilna*, 340.

<sup>120</sup> "Resistance in the Kovno Ghetto."

1943, also hoping to join the partisan movement.<sup>121</sup> While there were plans to organize escapes to the forest from the Siauliai ghetto, few were realized.<sup>122</sup>

Scholar of Eastern European Jewish history Dov Levin estimates that 1,150 Jews escaped from the ghettos for the forests in organized groups and an additional 650 Jews left individually or in unorganized groups.<sup>123</sup> Some were captured and killed while others died from hunger or cold.<sup>124</sup> He approximates that a total of 1,650 Lithuanian Jews were active in fighting units and other groups in the forest, only about half of which were members of underground units in the ghettos. Of the 1,650 Lithuanian Jews fighting in partisan units, 450 were accepted into the Byelorussian movement, 850 were accepted into the Lithuanian movement, 100 fought in units outside Lithuania, and 250 were in family groups or other units.<sup>125</sup> It is difficult to substantiate these approximations with concrete data. Nevertheless, the partisan movement played a significant role in many survivors' stories as even some who did not join partisan units lived in family camps under the protection of partisans.

The ability of Lithuanian Jews to enjoy such protection and join the partisan movement is largely attributable to topographical and geographical circumstances. Eastern Lithuania is covered in dense forests, providing Jews with accessible spots to hide without requesting aid from gentiles. Vilnius was closest to partisan-occupied forests, providing favorable conditions for escape and survival. At least a third of the surviving Vilnius Jews, numbering 2,000-3,000, joined the partisan movement.<sup>126</sup> Svencionys, near the border between Lithuania and Belarus, was also conveniently located near forests. Kaunas was less well situated as it was surrounded by small forests and partisans were less common in the area. Siauliai's circumstances were least advantageous as only a scarce number of copses were in the vicinity.<sup>127</sup> Siauliai's relatively minimal resistance is attributable to its distance from forested areas in addition to its distance from the other ghettos, circumstances which not

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<sup>121</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 131.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-129.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-175.

<sup>124</sup> "Resistance in the Kovno Ghetto." Margolis, *A Partisan from Vilna*, 340. Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 175.

<sup>125</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 190.

<sup>126</sup> Bubnys, *The Holocaust in Lithuania between 1941 and 1944*, 37.

<sup>127</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 105.

only made escape difficult, but also complicated the conveyance of messages and aid from partisans and others who resisted the Nazi regime.

These distinctions are reflected in the relatively higher proportion of Jews who escaped and survived from the Vilnius ghetto than the other Lithuanian ghettos. With the Rudninkai forest, containing three Lithuanian partisan units, about 40 kilometers away and the Narocz forest, containing two Byelorussian partisan units, about 140 kilometers away, Jews from the Vilnius ghetto were closest to the majority of the partisan units. Jews from Svencionys usually escaped to Byelorussian units in the Narocz forest, about 50 kilometers away, while Jews in the Kaunas ghetto escaped to the Rudninkai forest about 100 kilometers away, the Augustow forest 150 kilometers away, or the Kazlu-Ruda forest, which contained one Lithuanian partisan unit, about 30 kilometers away. Unfortunately, given the distance from Siauliai to any dense forests containing partisans, few managed to escape (it is estimated that 60 people fled, about 1 percent of the ghetto population).<sup>128</sup>

Such information regarding ghetto resistance and flight to the forests from the four Lithuanian ghettos has already been studied. Yet, given that the majority of testimonies from Jews of smaller towns indicate that they spent at least some time in one of the ghettos (usually the Vilnius or Kaunas ghettos), the information is relevant to any analysis of resistance and survival efforts on the part of Lithuanian Jews.

Given the swiftness of the annihilation of Lithuanian Jews, very few individuals from smaller towns managed to survive even the first stage of the war. Only two women survived from Alytus, both due to help from gentiles.<sup>129</sup> Only four Jews from Jonava survived, all after having been in the Kaunas ghetto.<sup>130</sup> These forms of survival were most common. The stories of the Jews from Jurbarkas and Macinkonys, however, provide us with an example of an alternative survival strategy. As previously mentioned, a number of Jews from Jurbarkas managed to hide in the woods around the town. They were joined by Jews from the Kaunas ghetto, ultimately numbering approximately seventy people. The group was destroyed, making it difficult to concretely determine their activities, but it appears they were involved in partisan efforts.<sup>131</sup>

Some Jews who were outside Jurbarkas when the war started, however, managed to survive in local forests. Most notably, the Feinstein brothers from Stakiai, about 30 kilometers from Jurbarkas, established a

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>129</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 5, Folder IV A pp.1-221, Page 15-56. Rosin, *Preserving our Litvak Heritage: A History of 31 Jewish Communities in Lithuania*, 17.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., Box 6, Folder V pp.1-173, Page 423-424.

<sup>131</sup> Alpert, Rosin and Jivotovsky, *The Memorial Book for the Jewish Community of Yurburg, Lithuania: Translation and Update*, 416, 465.

group that eventually numbered approximately seventy-five Jews, half of them armed.<sup>132</sup> The brothers ventured into the forest in the spring of 1942, having stayed with local peasants in the area until then.<sup>133</sup> Through the summer of 1943, the Feinstein brothers alternated between living in the forests and with various peasants, gathering more Jews under their leadership with time, particularly from the Kaunas ghetto.<sup>134</sup> While they had attempted to join a partisan battalion as it passed through on its way to Jurbarkas, the group was turned away and consequently remained an independent unit living a partisan lifestyle.<sup>135</sup> Unfortunately, a majority of the Jews from the Feinstein group were killed in the summer of 1944. Shortly before, two Latvians requested to join the group, saying they were escaped conscripts of the German army and now wanted to join the partisan movement. They eventually left the group, after which Germans found the Jews' bunkers and killed almost everyone at the site, leading survivors to believe that the Latvians betrayed them.<sup>136</sup>

The only other accounts from Jurbarkas Jews reflect more common tendencies. One survivor, Khane Goldman, arrived at the Kaunas ghetto on October 27, 1941 after having spent six weeks roaming nearby forests. She remained in the ghetto and was eventually liberated

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>133</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 3, Folder IIA/2-4 – Raiseniai, Mazeikiai, Kediniai, Page 182-183.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 183-188.

<sup>135</sup> Alpert, Rosin and Jivotovsky, *The Memorial Book for the Jewish Community of Yurburg, Lithuania: Translation and Update*, 467, 469. Rosin, *Preserving our Litvak Heritage: A History of 31 Jewish Communities in Lithuania*, 65.

<sup>136</sup> Details from the Koniuchowsky collection state that only five people who were not at the bunkers at the time, in addition to two women who ran upon the German's arrival, survived while over 50 Jews died in the shooting, including most of the escapees from the Kaunas ghetto. Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 3, Folder IIA/2-4 – Raiseniai, Mazeikiai, Kediniai, Page 190-195. *The Memorial Book for the Jewish Community of Yurburg*, however, presents a slightly different account of the killing. According to survivor Yehudah Tarshish, the Latvians' betrayal led to the death of only one half of the group at the hands of the Germans as the Feinstein group had split into two smaller groups. Of this half, only one woman survived the German attack. Alpert, Rosin and Jivotovsky, *The Memorial Book for the Jewish Community of Yurburg, Lithuania: Translation and Update*, 470-471. The version provided by survivors in the Koniuchowsky collection may be more accurate given that they were taken directly after the war, whereas the memorial book was published in 2003. Nevertheless, as both contain information regarding the Jewish escapees from Kaunas in the group and the two Latvians who betrayed the group, in addition to the fact that the named survivor from the Tarshish version matches one of the names listed as a survivor in the Koniuchowsky collection, the varying accounts are reconcilable.

from Chinhof on March 15, 1945.<sup>137</sup> Another Jew from Jurbarkas, Mordechai Ben Tuviyah, managed to survive the initial massacres and ended up in the Kaunas ghetto. On June 12, 1944, while on a transport out of the ghetto, Ben Tuviyah slipped out of the window of the train wagon near the Kazlu-Ruda forest. After receiving aid and directions from a number of gentiles, he joined a partisan unit and survived the war.<sup>138</sup>

The story of the Marcinkonys Jews stands out from the others, as before. After their escape in late 1942, the majority of Marcinkonys Jews hid in the Nacha forest of White Russia. A group emerged under the leadership of Shloyme Peretz comprising approximately twenty men, women, and children. Jews from the area found and joined the group and it grew to contain forty-five Jews. The group eventually split up for safety reasons. Even so, some were betrayed by local peasants who spotted them or from whom they requested aid. This inspired the Jews in hiding to seek revenge: they attacked the families and destroyed the homes of those who betrayed Jews.<sup>139</sup> Meanwhile, in February of 1943 Soviet commander Anatoli Stankiewicz arrived in the forest and organized Jewish groups living in the forest under his command.<sup>140</sup> The situation for Jews in the forest improved as fear of robbery by Red partisans diminished.<sup>141</sup> Yet the presence of a partisan unit was a double-edged sword: Stankiewicz demanded that the Jews relinquish their weapons, which they refused to do. He then requested that Jewish youths join the movement, which they agreed to do on the condition that he allow their families to accompany them; Stankiewicz refused. The Jews consequently relocated, but they were found by the partisans, who forbade them from obtaining food from local peasants. Thus the Jews opted to take food from large government depots, which was more dangerous. Eventually, four Jews joined the partisan unit and relations between the partisans and Jews became friendlier. Jews contributed a great deal to the unit's activities and were permitted to carry out acts of revenge against those who killed Jews, as well.<sup>142</sup>

While the example of Marcinkonys is unique in that it does not represent the experience of the majority of Lithuanian Jewish survivors, it

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<sup>137</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 3, Folder IIA/2-4 – Raiseniai, Mazeikiai, Kediniai, Page 138. Alpert, Rosin and Jivotovsky, *The Memorial Book for the Jewish Community of Yurburg, Lithuania: Translation and Update*, 418-433.

<sup>138</sup> Alpert, Rosin and Jivotovsky, *The Memorial Book for the Jewish Community of Yurburg, Lithuania: Translation and Update*, 447-482.

<sup>139</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part II, Page 28-50.

<sup>140</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 182.

<sup>141</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 2, Folder IA/4, Part II, Page 62.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-68.

is a good example of the dynamic between Jews and partisans. If a Jew did not have weapons, he or she was often turned away. Furthermore, when Jews did join partisan units, their arms were usually taken from them and given to non-Jewish partisans.<sup>143</sup> Families were, for the most part, not allowed to accompany partisans. Young Jewish fighters were assigned to fighting units while all others were assigned to productive supply units to service the brigade.<sup>144</sup> If the partisans were forced to retreat from the forest in the face of an expected siege, Jews were usually left behind weaponless.<sup>145</sup> Both the Byelorussian and Lithuanian partisan movements had anti-Semitic elements, making life in a partisan unit difficult. Jews were subject to accusations of being traitors and were sometimes even killed by their non-Jewish comrades.<sup>146</sup> Even so, Jewish members were often valuable to a unit as they had a better knowledge of the territory.<sup>147</sup>

Despite prevalent anti-Semitism, the majority of those who escaped from the ghettos desired to join the partisan groups. To the Jews, partisan activities provided a means by which to obtain revenge against the Nazis and local collaborators. Alternatively, some Jews saw the partisan movement as a means by which to survive. Ultimately, only a portion of Lithuanian Jewish survivors participated in the partisan movement. While a significant means of survival, it worked in concert with other factors, including group leadership and neighbors' attitudes towards Jews.

Through the stories of Lithuanian survivors, we can come to understand three important elements that influenced the survival strategies of Jews during the Holocaust: leadership, neighbors' attitudes, and resistance efforts. Despite our ability to understand that these elements played a role in Jewish survival strategies, it is impossible to make any conclusive generalizations regarding their role in the success or failure of individuals struggling to survive in the face of genocide.

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<sup>143</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 184. *Yizkor Book in Memory of the Jewish Community of Yanova*, ed. Shimeon Noy (Tel Aviv: Irgun Yotzei Yanova, 1972). Margolis, *A Partisan from Vilna*, 381. Iwens, *Interview 8965*, Tape 5.

<sup>144</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 184. Margolis, *A Partisan from Vilna*, 422.

<sup>145</sup> Margolis, *A Partisan from Vilna*, 391-392. Iwens, *Interview 8965*, Tape 5.

<sup>146</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 205.

<sup>147</sup> Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 2, Folder IA/5, Page 22. Koniuchowsky, *Testimonies*, Box 3, Folder IIA/2-4 – Raiseniai, Mazeikiai, Kediniai, Page 98. Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941-1945*, 107.

Survivors' testimonies reflect unique experiences that invariably reference these elements in varying ways. What we do know is the devastating effect of the Holocaust on Lithuanian Jewry: whereas Lithuania was once a vibrant center for Jewish religion, academia, and culture, it is now nearly devoid of any signs of former Jewish life. All that remains of the active Jewish communities that once existed throughout Lithuania are the mass graves containing those who comprised it.

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