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“An Entirely New and Utterly Horrifying Reality”:
Jews’ Perceptions of and Reactions to the Kovno
Pogroms, June 22–July 6, 1941

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in War and Society

May 2020

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“An Entirely New and Utterly Horrifying Reality”: Jews’ Perceptions of
and Reactions to the Kovno Pogroms, June 22–July 6, 1941

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ABSTRACT

“An Entirely New and Utterly Horrifying Reality”: Jews’ Perceptions of and Reactions to the Kovno Pogroms, June 22–July 6, 1941

by Sarah S. Markowitz

This thesis examines a roughly two-week period, between June 22 and July 6, 1941, during which Jews in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania, became the primary targets of attacks by local Lithuanians in the midst of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. An analysis of eyewitness accounts reveals that, in comparison to life before June 22, the Kovno pogroms constituted “an entirely new and utterly horrifying reality” for Kovno Jews. While Jews knew some Lithuanians to be antisemitic, there was no previous history of widespread antisemitic violence in the city and positive interethnic relationships were common. Therefore, in the days following the onset of the German invasion, Jews were shocked to learn that it was local Lithuanians who posed the most immediate threat and not the Germans. In the chaotic environment of the pogroms, Jews exercised agency by developing survival strategies based on their perceptions of perpetrators’ motivations and their limited knowledge of events. Compounding their sense of terror, Jews felt forsaken, as most of their former neighbors and friends remained passive during the violence and a few were even active participants. Studying this unprecedented episode of violence highlights the hidden dangers of latent prejudices in society. The use of eyewitness accounts further humanizes the terrible consequences of hate and the memory of its victims.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ABSTRACT.....	IV
LIST OF FIGURES	VII
INTRODUCTION	1
Historical Background	2
Research Motivations and Intentions.....	9
Methodology and Sources.....	12
 1 THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK TO THE POGROMS IN KOVNO	 20
Agency and Survival.....	21
Interethnic Violence.....	27
Identifying the “Other”	28
Interethnic Relations and Violence.....	29
Lithuanian Participation in Killing Jews.....	34
Lithuanian Motivations.....	35
Kovno in June 1941	37
Conclusion	43
 2 “WHAT WAS KNOWN AND WHAT <i>COULD</i> HAVE BEEN KNOWN”: JEWISH LIFE IN INTERWAR KOVNO	 45
Jewish Life in Independent Lithuania.....	47
Antisemitism in Kovno	51
Dangers at Home and Abroad.....	56
The Soviet Occupation: “Between the red devil and the brown devil”	60
Conclusion	65
 3 CLARITY OF INSIGHT AND TOTAL BLINDNESS: JEWS’ PERCEPTIONS AND ACTIONS DURING THE KOVNO POGROMS.....	 67
The German Invasion and Kovno Jews’ “fateful decision”.....	71
“Trouble came from a direction which we did not expect”	73
“The ever-present danger of death”	79
“The Germans know law and order, the Lithuanians don’t”	85
Conclusion	90
 4 “AN ENTIRELY NEW AND UTTERLY HORRIFYING REALITY”: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE POGROMS	 92
“Betrayed”.....	94
Targeted Attacks	95

Selective “Saving”	97
Opportunism and Indifference	100
Helping.....	101
Not All Lithuanians, But All Jews.....	103
Conclusion	104
CONCLUSION	105
BIBLIOGRAPHY	110

LIST OF FIGURES

	<u>Page</u>
Figure 1- Map of Lithuania and Surrounding Areas.....	4
Figure 2- Map of Kovno and Key Locations	8
Figure 3- Vandalized Kovno synagogue with a body lying across a bench	69

Introduction

In the days following the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Jews in Kovno, Lithuania became the primary targets of attacks by local Lithuanians.¹ The unprompted violence began before the Germans entered the city and killing escalated after their arrival on the morning of June 25. Thousands of Jews were killed between June 22 and July 6, 1941, mostly at the hands of non-Jewish Lithuanians. An eyewitness account written later in the Kovno Ghetto reflected that the Jews of Kovno had known “that with the arrival of the Germans a terrible time awaited them,” and, looking ahead to what might happen to them after the invasion, they “shuddered from the blackness and envisaged terrible things.” Tragically, however, “the reality” of being attacked by local Lithuanians “greatly exceeded in blackness and dreadful events anything the greatest pessimist could have imagined.”² What did the Jews of Kovno expect to happen after the German invasion, and why was the reality so unforeseeably horrible? While they could not as yet had any sense of the greater tragedy that would become the Holocaust, they had little reason to fear their Lithuanian neighbors. In the roughly two-week period examined herein, Jews in Kovno were primarily concerned with this more immediate, unexpected threat. Because most Jews had viewed their prewar lives in Kovno positively, the violence inflicted upon their community by local Lithuanians was terribly disturbing. Although the pogroms were

¹ Kovno is the Yiddish name for Kaunas, the capital city of independent Lithuania from 1918–1940; therefore, I will refer to it as such.

² Samuel Schalkowsky, ed., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 66.

unprecedented, Jews could not be, and were not, unresponsive. They actively interpreted and reacted to the unforeseen violence as best they could.

Historical Background

Jews first arrived in the area which constitutes modern Lithuania in the fourteenth century, which at that time was encompassed by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Jewish communities were established in major towns such as Kaunas-Wilijampole, which its Jews would come to refer to as Kovno.³ Lithuanian rulers invited Jews to settle in the region for the purpose of participating in commerce, the traditional economic role of Jews in Medieval Europe.⁴ Vytautas the Great, the Grand Duke of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, officially endorsed and protected the Jewish communities with a charter in 1388. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, established in 1569, became a significant center of Jewish scholarship and culture, particularly the city of Vilna (Vilnius to Lithuanians), which was referred to as “the Jerusalem of the North.” Although Jews received royal protections and had considerable autonomy, they were still targeted by their mostly Catholic neighbors due to religious intolerance, which was often exacerbated during times of economic discontent. In Kovno, Jews experienced periodic expulsions from the city, to the suburb of Slobodka.⁵

With the dissolution of the Commonwealth in 1795, Lithuania came under Imperial Russian rule. The region was located in the Pale of Settlement, the western border territory of the Russian Empire where Jews were permitted to reside. By the nineteenth century, Lithuanian Jews were highly urbanized, comprising half the total urban population. Most were merchants,

³ Masha Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania: A History of a Remarkable Community 1316-1945* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House. 1995), 5.

⁴ Karen Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2008), 25.

⁵ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 27.

artisans and laborers.⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century, Kovno became a cultural, spiritual, and intellectual center of Jewish life in Eastern Europe; several prominent yeshivas were established in Slobodka.⁷ Apart from traditional antisemitic sentiments, Lithuania was “relatively free” of pogroms and its Jews and non-Jews had relatively better relations than existed in other parts of the Russian empire.⁸

Lithuanian nationalism began to develop in the mid-nineteenth century, in parallel with other nationalist movements throughout Europe. The leaders of the movement, members of the intelligentsia and Roman Catholic clergy, sought to recreate and reestablish a national Lithuanian identity.⁹ During the First World War, the region was occupied by the Germans, who, for their own strategic interests, encouraged limited Lithuanian self-rule. In 1918, after the Russian Revolution and the conclusion of World War I, the First Lithuanian Republic was established. Fighting over territorial boundaries ensued between Lithuania, Poland, and the Soviet Union. Hostilities continued until 1924, by which time Lithuania lost the city of Vilnius to Poland. Kovno (Kaunas) became the new capital of the country (Figure 1).¹⁰ The city, like the new independent state, was multiethnic. Although Lithuanians were the majority ethnic group, there were significant numbers of Poles, Russians, and Jews. According to the 1923 census Jews represented 7.26 percent of the total population of Lithuania; 31.9 percent of Lithuanian Jews lived in urban areas. The largest Jewish community was located in Kovno, numbering 25,044 and constituting roughly one-fourth of the city’s population.¹¹

⁶ Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania*, 208.

⁷ Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania*, 96.

⁸ Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 216.

⁹ Michael MacQueen, “The Context of Mass Destruction: Agents and Prerequisites of the Holocaust in Lithuania.” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 12, no. 1 (1998): 29.

¹⁰ Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, 214.

¹¹ Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, 225.

Figure 1- Map of Lithuania and Surrounding Areas
(Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

Lithuanian nationalists viewed ethnic Poles more so than Jews as a threat to their aspirations during the early years of independent Lithuania.¹² Jews had supported Lithuanian independence efforts and became involved in the new government. Initially the Jewish community sought “cultural autonomy,” to have their own autonomous institutions and retain minority rights, and initially the new Lithuanian government supported the program.¹³ Such hopes were dashed, however, with the signing of the 1922 Constitution. In her comprehensive history of Lithuanian Jewry, former Kovno resident and Holocaust survivor Masha Greenbaum clarifies that, although the Constitution contained articles granting rights to national minorities, these were “purely rhetorical and contained no juridical guarantee to ensure the existence of national autonomy.”¹⁴ Thereafter, Jewish participation in the Lithuanian government dwindled, as nationalist and right-wing parties gained more power.

¹² Darius Staliūnas, “Lithuanian Antisemitism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 25 (2012): 145.

¹³ Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania*, 229.

¹⁴ Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania*, 244.

In December 1926, the right-wing parties carried out a coup, with Nationalist Party member Antanas Smetona becoming President. Lithuania ceased to be a democracy, and Lithuanian nationalism began to “crystallize and consolidate” throughout the following decade.¹⁵ Emphasis was placed on “Lithuanianization.” The national government pursued economic policies intended to bolster ethnic Lithuanians, who were becoming more urbanized and moving into the middle classes. This placed the rising Lithuanian middle class in potential conflict with Jews, who had traditionally worked as merchants and tradesmen, as well as doctors and lawyers. Despite nationalist policies which restricted Jewish participation in commerce and the civil service, overall, the Smetona government was not overtly or officially antisemitic. Antisemitism however, persisted in various forms in Lithuanian society. Many Lithuanians held traditional economic and religious antisemitic sentiments, derived from perceived economic competition with Jews or the belief that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. Jews were also negatively associated with communism, especially after the Bolshevik Revolution, in which they were perceived to have had a leading role. Thus arose the “Judeo-Bolshevik” myth, which negatively equates Jews with Soviet rule, advances that Jews created Communism, and posits that all Jews are Communists. In Lithuania, this conflation myth began to appear in the 1920s, first promulgated by right-wing groups.¹⁶

Right-wing nationalism increased in Lithuania throughout the 1930s, as it also did in a larger, more belligerent nation, Nazi Germany. In 1938, Hitler began his quest to expand Germany’s territory. He first annexed Austria in March and then the Czech Sudetenland in

¹⁵ Christoph Dieckmann, “Lithuania in Summer 1941- The German Invasion and Kaunas Pogrom” in *Shared History, Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939-1941*, eds. Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, and Kai Struve (Berlin: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 376.

¹⁶ Saulius Sužiedėlis, “The Historical Sources for Antisemitism in Lithuanian and Jewish-Lithuanian Relations During the 1930s” in *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, eds. Alvydas Nikžentaitis, Stefan Schreiner, and Darius Staliūnas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 124.

September. The other expansionist power on the continent was the Soviet Union, led by Joseph Stalin. However, neither leader was ready to go to war with the other, even though Hitler's quest for *Lebensraum* (living space) would inevitably bring the nations into conflict. In August 1939, the world was shocked to learn that the Soviets and the Nazis had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, dividing Poland into respective spheres of influence. Germany invaded Poland from the west at the beginning of September. The Soviets occupied the eastern half of the country two-and-a-half weeks later. Germany also demanded and received from Lithuania a strip of territory bordering East Prussia. Lithuania initially remained independent and neutral. The Soviet Union, however, coerced Lithuania into signing a "mutual assistance agreement" in October 1939, allowing for the stationing of Soviet troops in the country. In return, the Soviets restored the region surrounding the city of Vilnius to Lithuania, which was quickly reestablished as Lithuania's capital.

As a result of the acquisition of Vilnius, Lithuanian's Jewish population grew by an additional 65–67,000 Jews. About 14,000 Polish-Jewish refugees also fled into the country from German-occupied Poland in the autumn of 1939. Thus, by the first half of 1940, the Jewish population in Lithuania had grown from 146–147,000 to 225–228,000.¹⁷ In accordance with Stalin's desire to create a strategic buffer zone against a potential future German invasion, the Soviet Union fully occupied Lithuania on June 15, 1940, leading to the creation of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic.¹⁸ Lithuanian antisemitism subsequently significantly worsened over the next year of occupation. Embittered because of losing their independence and the ensuing changes resulting from Sovietization policies which placed some Jews in visible

¹⁷ Yitzhak Arad, "The Murder of the Jews in German-Occupied Lithuania (1941–1944)" in *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, eds. Alvydas Nikžentaitis, Stefan Schreiner, and Darius Staliūnas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 176.

¹⁸ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 72; Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania*, 291.

government positions, many Lithuanians perceived Jews as “representatives of the disdained Soviet Authority.”¹⁹

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, some Lithuanians initially saw the Germans as “liberators” who would help them restore independence to their nation. This notion had been promulgated during the Soviet occupation in anti-Soviet propaganda distributed by underground groups such as the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF), which also called for punishing Jews in retribution for the suffering Lithuanians endured under the Soviets.²⁰

Lithuanian nationalists declared independence the day after the German invasion and announced the establishment of a Provisional Government. Concurrently, Lithuanian “partisans,” members of anti-Soviet nationalist groups such as the LAF, began to target and kill Jews throughout Kovno, before the Germans arrived in the city. The incoming Nazis enabled and emboldened the pogromists. German leaders had planned to capitalize on the Lithuanians’ desires for independence and pervasive negative attitudes towards Jews. A June 29 order from Reinhard Heydrich instructed the *Einsatzgruppen* that local pogroms ““should in no way be hindered. On the contrary, they must be encouraged...and even intensified.””²¹ In Kovno, within the first two weeks of the invasion, approximately 1,000 Jews were killed in pogroms throughout the city and a further 5,000 were arrested and massacred at the Seventh Fort, one of several tsarist-era

¹⁹ Dov Levin, “On the Relations between the Baltic Peoples and Their Jewish Neighbors Before, During and After World War II,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 5, no. 1 (1990): 55.

²⁰ Following the Soviet Occupation, several right-wing Lithuanians fled to Germany and established the LAF in Berlin in November 1940. The group was led by Colonel Škirpa, who had been the Lithuanian ambassador to Germany. The group’s goal was to restore Lithuanian independence, and they believed their best chance would be following Germany’s impending invasion of the Soviet Union.

²¹ Christoph Dieckmann and Saulius Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews During Summer and Fall of 1941: Sources and Analysis* (Vilnius: Margi Raštai, 2006), 110.

defensive structures located outside the city (Figure 2).²² My work focuses on Jews' experience of this initial period of violence, instigated and primarily perpetrated by local Lithuanians.

Figure 2- Map of Kovno and Key Locations
(Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

In July, a German military administration was established, which was replaced by a civilian administration in August, the *Reichkommissariat Ostland*. Subsequently, the short-lived Lithuanian Provisional Government was dissolved. Throughout the summer, Einsatzgruppen units carried out mass killings throughout Lithuania, mostly in the provincial areas, and Ghettos were established in the large Lithuanian cities, including Kovno. Closed on August 15, the Kovno Ghetto was grossly overcrowded with 30,000 captive Jews. In fall 1941, the Ghetto population was subjected to a series of “*Aktionen*” (actions), selections of those to be murdered. Approximately 10,000 individuals were shot in the “Great Action” on October 29. In total, it is estimated that 90 percent of the entire Jewish population of Lithuania was murdered during the

²² Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 137.

Holocaust. About 80 percent of Lithuanian Jews were murdered within the first six months, by December 1941.²³ Only 3,000–3,500 Kovno Jews survived the war.²⁴

Research Motivations and Intentions

Most scholarship on the Holocaust in Lithuania only briefly touches on the initial period of violence following the German invasion, before the mass murders began across Lithuania and Ghettos were established in the major cities. More so, it is often discussed as a “prelude” to the Final Solution or as foreshadowing subsequent Lithuanian collaboration with the Nazi occupiers and participation in Einsatzgruppen units. Such a characterization reduces the significance of this period as pivotal in itself, one which must be understood regardless of the greater tragedies that followed. Few sources specifically focus on the first mass killings in Kovno as an event in itself. Most see it as a precursor to the more terrible fate that awaited the majority of Lithuanian Jewry.

In addition to focusing on later events, much research on the Holocaust in German-occupied Eastern Europe utilizes and focuses on the perpetrators’ perspective. Many scholars have examined the macro-level explanations for why genocides occur, and the micro-level motivations and actions of those who participate in them. However, most analysis is of perpetrators involved in systematic extermination efforts, such as the Final Solution, and subsequently employ primary sources from the perpetrator’s perspective as well, such as Nazi documents or post-war court trial testimonies. This material does not reveal much about the preliminary, more chaotic stages of violence leading to genocide, nor the local, preexisting sociopolitical conditions that contribute its outbreak. Literature that does explore the Holocaust

²³ Arad, “The Murder of the Jews in German-Occupied Lithuania (1941–1944),” 177.

²⁴ Dov Levin, “Kaunas,” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, accessed October 27, 2018, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Kaunas>

from the victim's perspective often overlooks the early stages of persecution, Jews' first traumatic experiences, and their initial responses. Rather, survivor memoirs and scholarly works tend to focus on later experiences in the Ghettos or in camps. Furthermore, agency, the actions and choices of Jews in the face of mounting terrors, merits greater study than it has received. When examined it is mostly explored in the context of Jews' participation in resistance movements or partisan units, or experiences of hiding or "passing." Expanding the use of such an approach provides a more comprehensive, humanized illustration of the targets of violence.

Studying suffering endured by Jews during the Holocaust is difficult for scholars in many respects, emotionally and methodologically. Holocaust historian Amos Goldberg notes that "historians have found it difficult to contend with the full extent of the helplessness that the Jews experienced."²⁵ This challenge is precisely why the victim perspective is essential to constructing a fuller understanding of Holocaust history. The historian Saul Friedländer is notable for integrating the perspective in his eminent two-volume work, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*. According to Friedländer, victim accounts are important because they "reveal what was known and what *could* have been known; theirs were the only voices that conveyed both the clarity of insight and the total blindness of human beings confronted with an entirely new and utterly horrifying reality."²⁶ Friedländer emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the individual actions of Jews who were suffering persecution, for "any steps taken by Jews in order to hamper the Nazi effort to eradicate every single one of them represented a direct countermove." Examining the macro-level processes of the Final Solution does not reveal much of the Jewish experience, the consequences of Nazi policies on its victims. Rather, it was at the "microlevel

²⁵ Amos Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), ix.

²⁶ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume 1: The Years of Persecution 1933-1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 2.

that the most basic and ongoing Jewish interaction with the forces acting in the implementation of the ‘Final Solution’ took place; it is at this microlevel that it mostly needs to be studied.”²⁷ In his own undertaking he writes that he seeks to “offer a thorough historical examination of the Jews of Europe, without eliminating or domesticating [their] initial sense of disbelief.”²⁸

Although Jews in Kovno, Lithuania might have been helpless to halt the German invasion, and their initial exposure to the violence inflicted upon them by local Lithuanians would surely be met with disbelief, they were not unresponsive or passive when confronted with such a “new and utterly horrifying reality.”

Amidst the chaos that ensued in Kovno in the days after June 22, 1941, Jews had to rely on previous knowledge and experiences in their evaluation of unfolding events and to guide their actions and decisions. I propose that Jews’ interwar relationships and experiences with non-Jewish Lithuanians affected how they initially perceived and reacted to the violence. Because most Jews viewed their lives in Kovno positively, the level of unprecedented violence inflicted upon their community by local Lithuanians was completely unexpected, although many postwar testimonies attempt to explain it in hindsight. To borrow Saul Friedländer’s language, it is important first of all to ask “what was known and what *could* have been known” about the potential threats Kovno’s Jewish community would face following a German invasion. Did Jews feel secure in independent Lithuania during the interwar years? What information or perceptions did they have about Nazi Germany? Then we can interpret how they acted when “confronted with an entirely new and utterly horrifying reality.” How did Jews in Kovno react to the initial violence they experienced or witnessed, and why did they respond in such ways? How did Jews’

²⁷ Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), xxiv.

²⁸ Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, xxvi.

prewar relationships with non-Jews and personal experiences of antisemitism shape their perceptions of Lithuanians' participation in the pogroms?

Methodology and Sources

I focus on the short, roughly two-week period following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, from June 22–July 6, 1941. This timeframe was derived primarily from the framework established by historian Yitzhak Arad, who constructed a comprehensive, detailed chronological account of the Nazis' near-total extermination of Jews in Lithuania. He establishes three periods of persecution between the German invasion in June 1941 and the arrival of the Soviet forces in July 1944. The majority of the mass killings occurred during the first period, June 22 – December 1941, during which about eighty percent of Lithuanian Jews and half of Kovno's Jews were murdered.²⁹ Arad further divides this period into two stages, focusing on the authority in control and the conditions under which the killings were carried out. The first stage, June 23–July 5, was “characterized by a wave of pogroms and murder initiated and carried out by Lithuanians;” in the second stage, July 5 – end of December 1941, the Einsatzgruppen units “took control and led extermination actions, which included the widescale participation of Lithuanian police units and the full cooperation of local Lithuanian municipal authorities.”³⁰ Lithuanian historian Arūnas Bubnys also breaks down the Holocaust in Lithuania into stages. He divides the period of the end of June – November 1941 somewhat differently and less specifically than Arad, into “End-June 1941 – mid July 1941” and “End-July – November 1941.” Like Arad, however, Bubnys identifies July as the month in which the Germans consolidated

²⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Kovno,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed on February 4, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kovno>

³⁰ Arad, “The Murder of the Jews in German-Occupied Lithuania (1941–1944),” 177.

their occupation of Lithuania, which was when the nature of the Jews' persecution changed "from separate pogroms to the mass murder of Jews."³¹

The closing date cited by Arad for this initial period – July 5 – bears closer examination. According to an extensive analysis of summer and fall of 1941 by historians Christoph Dieckmann and Saulius Sužiedėlis, the final killings at the Seventh Fort occurred in the evening on Sunday, July 6. No more mass killings occurred in Kovno until after the Ghetto was established. They note that some members of the Wehrmacht complained that the Lithuanian units carrying out the July 6 killings "had overdone it." Subsequently the Nazi official in charge "assumed responsibility for the 'orderly' performance of the murders;" from then on, therefore, Lithuanians no longer had license to act independently.³² Given the evidence provided by Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis I extend the period under examination to July 6, 1941.

The murders and violence that occurred between June 22 and July 6 broadly fits the definition of a pogrom. Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis define pogrom as a "collective violent attack directed against the Jews simply because they are Jews, that is, antisemitic violence inflicted on the people themselves, their lives and property, including acts of public humiliation."³³ In addition to being a "collective" act, scholars Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg note that pogroms also involve "participation by civilian groups."³⁴ These are all recognizable elements of the violence that occurred in Kovno. Taking into account the week-long killings at the Seventh Fort, which involved more organization than the killings which occurred on the streets of Kovno, Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis further state how in Kovno "the boundaries separating pogroms and

³¹ Arūnas Bubnys, "The Holocaust in Lithuania: An Outline of the Major Stages and Their Results" in *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, eds. Alvydas Nikžentaitis, Stefan Schreiner, and Darius Staliūnas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 209.

³² Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 139.

³³ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 101.

³⁴ Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, "Deadly Communities: Local Political Milieus and The Persecution of Jews In Occupied Poland," *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 3 (2011): 261.

mass shootings become somewhat less distinct.”³⁵ Thus, violence in the initial period can be generally categorized as “pogroms,” while the murders at the Seventh Fort can also be considered as mass killings facilitated in the context of the pogroms, as Jews were seized from the streets and their homes and brought to be killed at the fort.

I ground my research in the current literature on German and Lithuanian perpetrator actions and motivations in the region, since these form the shifting context of victims’ experiences, perceptions, and responses. Using scholarly literature from a variety of disciplines I evaluate scholarly works on national identity, interethnic relations, and interethnic conflict at the macro and micro levels of analysis. In examining the specific historical context of Kovno, I also draw upon literature on Lithuanian regional history that focuses on Jewish history, the independent interwar years and first Soviet occupation, and the German occupation and Holocaust.

My analysis terminates at the turning point at which the Germans asserted control over the murders and subsequently organized and directed future Lithuanian participation in mass killings. However, in order to connect Jews’ prewar experiences with their reactions to events after June 22, 1941, I begin my analysis before the start of the war, in the interwar period. While much of the scholarly literature offers descriptions and explanations of perpetrator actions and motivations, only victim accounts can reveal how Jews attempted to understand and responded to those actions. Therefore, I examine contemporaneously written primary sources translated into English and English-language oral survivor testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation Institute Visual History Archive. In analyzing victim accounts, I will be employing a “life course

³⁵ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 102.

perspective,” a sociological concept.³⁶ The life course perspective holds that “human lives are shaped by a person’s unique location in historical time and place and that early life experiences have a significant impact on later life outcomes,” such Holocaust survivors’ prewar experiences.³⁷ I evaluate survivors’ life experiences leading up to the beginning of the war and through the initial stage of violence. This approach contextualizes individual experiences and perceptions in that short, two-week period within previous, preexisting sociopolitical conditions and individuals’ prior knowledge and experiences.

Two examples of eyewitness accounts were written by Jews in the Kovno Ghetto and buried within the Ghetto before its liquidation, Avraham Tory’s *Kovno Ghetto Diary* and *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*. Both sources contain detailed accounts of the events examined in this thesis. Avraham Tory later became the secretary of the Kovno Ghetto’s Council of Elders. Tory, however, began writing his diary before entering the Ghetto; his first entry was written at midnight on June 22, 1941, with some details added a few days later. In his diary, he included both his personal account of events and official documents from Jewish leaders and the German and Lithuanian authorities. While some entries were written on the same day that events occurred, Tory “edited” many other entries to include information that he learned later.³⁸ The section covering events between June 23 and July 7, 1941, was recorded a few years later, but the July 7 entry was mostly written that same day. The second source, *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, was written in the Ghetto by one primary author and several contributing authors during 1942 and 1943. It describes events from

³⁶ Ronald Berger uses this approach in his book, *Surviving the Holocaust: A Life Course Perspective*, an analytical account of how his father and uncle were able to survive the Holocaust.

³⁷ Ronald J. Berger, *Surviving the Holocaust: A Life Course Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

³⁸ Editor Martin Gilbert notes that “it was Tory’s habit to write an entry and then later—if possible – to add more details he had learned in the meantime.” Avraham Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary*, ed. Martin Gilbert, trans. Jerzy Michalowicz (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 5.

the German invasion on June 22, 1941 through most of 1942. Its second chapter, “The Prehistory of the Kovno Ghetto” covers the events of June and July 1941 in detail.

It is important to note that these written sources are “official,” rather than “personal,” accounts.³⁹ They provide an overview of the collective experiences of Kovno’s Jews. Both sources were written by persons in positions of authority and thus document context and details that were unlikely to be included in individual testimonies. The authors likely, as Mark Roseman describes, “saw their task as recording faithfully what was happening.”⁴⁰ Jan Gross notes that Jewish archivists during the Holocaust, such as those in the Kovno Ghetto, undertook such tasks “deliberately.” They did so in light of the difficulty that “the reality surrounding them was such an exaggeration of everything people were accustomed to in the course of everyday life,” and, as such, “their concern could only be whether posterity would be capable of believing what had really happened.”⁴¹

In conjunction with the aforementioned written sources, I explore testimonies of people who were living in Kovno at the time of the German invasion. Survivor testimonies provide more personal accounts of the experience of persecution as well as provide details about Jewish life in the interwar period. I examined a diverse range of individual accounts from different socioeconomic backgrounds, with various levels of religious observance and education. Most testimonies are from survivors who were adolescents or young adults in 1941. Each survivor testimony offers a unique perspective and individual experiences that might not be included in the collective narrative. Idiosyncrasies described in some of the testimonies attest to the

³⁹ Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person*, 12.

⁴⁰ Mark Roseman, “Holocaust Perpetrators in Victims’ Eyes” in *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies*, eds. Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (London: Continuum, 2010), 88.

⁴¹ Jan T. Gross, “Opportunistic Killings and Plunder of Jews by their Neighbors – a Norm or an Exception in German Occupied Europe?” in *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies*, eds. Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (London: Continuum, 2010), 271.

unpredictable nature of persecution, which in turn emphasizes the significance of the development of Jews' sense of agency during the Holocaust and their struggle to ascertain what could be done to increase their chances of survival.

When gathering testimonies for analysis, I utilized specific index search terms in order to locate testimonies that included detailed accounts of their lives during the interwar period and the experience of the pogroms, as these are aspects not discussed at length in some survivor testimonies.⁴² It is significant to note, as the oral history scholar Alessandro Portelli describes it, that oral testimonies are “the achievement of a shared labor” between the interviewer and interviewee.⁴³ Some survivors recount experiences organically, without prompting, while others do not. It appears that pre-1941 details such as childhood experiences of antisemitism seem to need more prompting than retelling of events following the German invasion.⁴⁴ Therefore, I often utilize survivor responses to specific questions asked by the interviewer. Sometimes the interviewers' questions or the survivors' answers contain factual errors. Dates or locations of events are misidentified, or events are remembered out of order. However, such mistakes do not discredit testimonies as a historical source.⁴⁵ Although individual testimonies may contain different details and contradictions, collectively they “reveal a firm core of shared memory.”⁴⁶ On the individual level, testimonies convey “not just what people did but what they wanted to

⁴² Lithuania 1941,” “Lithuania 1940,” “Jewish non-Jewish relations,” “Jewish persecution bystander responses”

⁴³ Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 15.

⁴⁴ According to Michael MacQueen, “Because the rise in antisemitism under successive authoritarian governments was not expressed in specific measures or policies, surviving Lithuanian Jews of the prewar generation often speak nostalgically about the Smetona days, even though the coup began the process of isolating and marginalizing the Jewish community.” MacQueen, “The Context of Mass Destruction: Agents and Prerequisites of the Holocaust in Lithuania,” 30.

⁴⁵ According to Portelli, “there are no ‘false’ oral sources... ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true.’” Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 53.

⁴⁶ Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 46.

do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.”⁴⁷ I am, above all, interested in their interpretations of and reactions to events as they were occurring, given their knowledge and perceptions at the time of events. However, as testimonies were recorded years later, mostly in the 1990s, survivor testimonies also include ex post facto reflections and information.⁴⁸ Due to the passage of time, many survivor accounts combine how they felt then with later reflections and knowledge learned about the events they experienced.

What happened in Kovno is paradoxically incomprehensible but also explainable with the help of historical hindsight and analysis. The victim perspective shows that Jews actively interpreted their experiences and asserted their sense of agency whenever and however possible in order to best protect themselves. My examination of the experiences and actions of the Kovno Jews will reject any misperception that Jews went like “sheep to the slaughter” during the Holocaust. Finally, the case of the Kovno pogroms demonstrates the consequences of exacerbated nationalism and the danger of the latent, persistent “othering” of minority groups, as such differences can be used to unite “us” against “them” during times of sociopolitical instability and direct the onset of unexpected violence by one group against another.

Using contemporary written accounts and postwar oral histories, this thesis evaluates the stark contrast between Jews’ recollections of life in Kovno before June 22, 1941, and their experiences of and reactions to the pogroms. Because most Jews remembered their prewar interethnic relations in Kovno positively, the unprecedented violence inflicted upon their community by local Lithuanians appeared unexpectedly and compounded Jews’ sense of terror amidst the first days of the German invasion. Chapter 1 presents a conceptual and contextual

⁴⁷ Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” 52.

⁴⁸ Henry Greenspan writes, “retelling a memory as a story implies the narrator’s ability to take some perspective on experience and give it significance and form.” Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2010), 21.

framework for understanding what Jews experienced in June 1941. Chapter 2 examines “what was known and what *could* have been known” about being Jewish in interwar Kovno and the potential threats Jews faced. Chapter 3 demonstrates how Jews exercised agency during the unprecedented pogroms, making actions and decisions with both “clarity of insight” and “total blindness.” Chapter 4 reveals the intimate nature of the violence Jews experienced, which constituted an “entirely new and utterly horrifying reality” as the direction from which the trouble came was paradoxically unexpected yet familiar.

1 Theoretical and Historical Framework to the Pogroms in Kovno

Historical hindsight allows us to recognize what the Jews in Kovno could not perceive in those initial, chaotic days after the German invasion in June 1941. While eyewitness accounts convey the victims' experience of persecution, we must turn to the scholarly literature for a fuller, fundamental understanding of the pogroms facing Kovno's Jews. This task necessitates taking a broad examination of works across different scholarly disciplines. Different perspectives will ensure sufficient consideration of the various components comprising violent conflicts, such as individual actors, their motivations, and their surrounding sociopolitical conditions.

Contemporary scholarship on ethnic identity and intercommunal violence has established connections between pre-existing sociopolitical conditions and the outbreak of interethnic conflict. Such literature further notes that the initial onset of collective violence is often the result of some process of the legitimization of violence and reduction of normal societal restraints on intergroup interactions. Scholarship on the agency of Holocaust victims also emphasizes the influence of Jews' prewar experiences on what happened to them after the war began, such as individuals' actions and decisions amidst ongoing persecution. Apart from such comparatively few works on agency and survival, most research on interethnic violence focuses on perpetrator motivations.

The content henceforth reviewed is intended to provide a theoretical framework for my subsequent analysis of victims' experiences. I first review the sparse literature analyzing agency and survival of Jews during the Holocaust. Next, I look at various scholarly works from a variety

of disciplines on the societal conditions that make interethnic violence more likely. I also review the historical explanations offered on the specific issue of what motivated Lithuanians to participate in killing Jews during the Holocaust, and why violence erupted in Kovno in particular. Finally, I explore the debate concerning the German role in the pogroms and mass killings in Kovno.

Agency and Survival

Victim agency has, until relatively recently, been overlooked in scholarly literature on the Holocaust. When it is discussed, most works pass over the early experiences of persecution in the initial period under German rule and focus instead on the role of agency in the development of survival strategies later in Ghettos and camps. Scholars that do acknowledge and discuss agency often connect it to Jews' prewar experiences and knowledge in order to explain their range of available actions. The concept of agency inherently rejects arguments of Jewish "passivity" and reevaluates attributions of survival to "luck." Although agency was restricted under conditions of oppression and persecution, it was not negated. Jews did what they could, employing their knowledge and acting within available options. Finally, agency also involves a sense of adaptability, necessitated by the unpredictable, shifting nature of persecution.

In *Surviving the Holocaust*, sociologist Ronald Berger analyzes the agency exhibited by his father and uncle during the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Poland. His father, Michael, endured several concentration camps, while his uncle, Sol, spent the war "passing" as a Catholic. The book's stated focus is the question of survival, which Berger aims to understand in light of survivors' previous life experiences. This approach, known as a "life course perspective," conceptualizes human action as the combination of agency, "a person's capacity for self-direction, an ability to make decisions and exercise a degree of control over their life," and social

structure, which “established external parameters of human action, which enhance and/or limit opportunities and life outcomes.”⁴⁹ Social structure consists of cultural schemas, “general frameworks of action,” and social resources, “the organizational and institutional mechanisms by which individuals acquire, maintain, or generate power in social relationships.”⁵⁰ Social structures can both enable and constrain agency. Berger’s argues that, during the Holocaust, “some Jews’ agentic capacity under these structural conditions of extremity was enhanced by their prewar exposure to cultural schemas and social resources that they were able to transpose to the war-occupation context.”⁵¹

Berger attributes his father’s and uncle’s survival to “their prewar exposure to cultural schemas and social resources that they were able to transpose to the wartime context.” In their particular case, he emphasizes their ability to speak Polish, tailoring skills, and family upbringing which encouraged them to take risks, and provides examples of situations in which they were able to utilize their skill sets in ways that maximized their chances of survival.⁵² Although the brothers have radically different survival stories, Berger demonstrates that “both were able to realistically appraise their situation and take strategic courses of action through calculated risk-taking and disobedience.”⁵³ According to Berger’s analysis, previous knowledge and experiences influenced and empowered strategic decisions. Often the outcome of those choices was uncertain, nevertheless, decisions had to be made and actions taken.

Given such uncertainty, the “successful” outcome of such choices – survival – is often attributed solely to “luck,” which mitigates the survivor’s sense of agency. The central role of

⁴⁹ Ronald Berger, *Surviving the Holocaust: A Life Course Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

⁵⁰ Berger, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 19.

⁵¹ Berger, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 21.

⁵² Berger, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 186.

⁵³ Berger, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 188.

luck in survivors' stories is explored further by scholar Carolyn Ellis in her review of the literature on Holocaust survival, including Berger's book. In her work, she associates "luck" with chance and "randomness of selection."⁵⁴ In her article, Ellis does not reject the role of luck, but questions its use as a "totalizing explanation for survival."⁵⁵ She uses a conversation with a survivor, Jerry Rawicki, to demonstrate that "luck and agency can go hand in hand," adding that agency serves "to maximize though not ensure survival." Jews made choices without knowing if they were the "right" ones, nonetheless hoping they were. Ellis discovers that Rawicki simultaneously and paradoxically "described how he coordinated his actions to survive at the same time he resisted *claiming agency*."⁵⁶ She finds that Jerry's attribution of his survival to luck, rather than his own actions, is reflected in scholarly analysis of survivor testimonies, as looking for explanations other than luck is uncomfortable in that it might suggest that those who did not survive could have done something different to change their fate. Thus, although other academic explanations of survival speculate on the impact of psychological, cultural, and social and conditions,⁵⁷ overall, "exploring the 'how' of survival in the Holocaust is a quest that in general has not received much attention."⁵⁸ Perhaps one reason for the lack of scholarly literature on agency is that the victims themselves are reticent to cite the importance of their own actions.⁵⁹ It is clear that during the Holocaust, luck, chance encounters, and coincidences surely enabled

⁵⁴ Carolyn Ellis and Jerry Rawicki, "More Than Mazel? Luck and Agency in Surviving the Holocaust," *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 19, no. 2 (2014), 117.

⁵⁵ Ellis and Rawicki, "More Than Mazel," 108.

⁵⁶ Ellis and Rawicki, "More Than Mazel," 104.

⁵⁷ Alpert (2010) cites "informal communities." Croes (2006) looks at local conditions in the Netherlands, finding that age, nationality, appearance, language knowledge, and sound of voice also played a role in survival. Hilberg (1993) asserts that the most critical component of survival was the psychological profile of the survivor. Class position, wealth, and relationship with non-Jews in Tammes (2007).

⁵⁸ Ellis and Rawicki, "More Than Mazel," 109.

⁵⁹ In her article, Ellis cites a study which asked about factors that led to survival during the Holocaust. The study found that survivors were more likely to cite external factors, such as luck and help from others, than internal factors such as psychological strength and determination. In Peter Suedfeld, "Specific and General Attributional Patterns of Holocaust Survivors," *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 35, no. 2 (2003): 133.

some to survive, while others' unlucky encounters led to their deaths. We will see this exemplified in survivor accounts of the Kovno pogroms. While luck clearly had an impact on survival, it is also clear that Jews tried to make their own luck through exercising agency. As Ellis reminds, "Jews weren't passive; they resisted all the time even within a situation in which they often felt powerless."⁶⁰

In *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival during the Holocaust*, political scientist Evgeny Finkel seeks to emphasize such acts of resistance, as exemplified in the various survival strategies Jews employed during the Holocaust. Jews experiencing persecution were not deprived of agency, rather, according to Finkel they were "ordinary people who are forced to act in the face of extraordinary dangers."⁶¹ In the book, he compares and contrasts Jewish behavior in three different Jewish ghettos: Minsk, Kraków, and Białystok. Minsk had been under Soviet rule since 1918 and was occupied by the Germans in June 1941. Krakow, located in western Poland, was occupied by the Germans in 1939. Białystok, in eastern Poland, was occupied by the Soviets in September 1939 and then by the Germans in June 1941. Of the three cities, Jews' experiences in Białystok would be most similar to that of Jews in Kovno in regard to the successive occupations by the Soviets then the Germans. Finkel assesses more than 500 survivor testimonies as well as memoirs and primary source documents produced by Jews in the cities under study. He purposefully avoids using perpetrator-produced materials for his analysis since his goal is to "understand internal Jewish perspectives and decisions."⁶² He outlines several strategies that Jewish victims had to choose from (cooperation and collaboration; coping and compliance; evasion; and resistance) and seeks to determine why an individual would choose one particular

⁶⁰ Ellis and Rawicki, "More Than Mazel," 115.

⁶¹ Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival during the Holocaust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 6.

⁶² Finkel, *Ordinary Jews*, 15.

strategy over another at a certain point in time and why different strategies were more commonly employed in different ghettos. A majority of Jews, according to Finkel, chose “coping,” which is not synonymous with passivity, but rather involves “nonviolent, ‘everyday’ or ‘hidden’ forms of resistance.”⁶³ Finkel argues that a city’s prewar political regime shaped Jews’ choice of survival strategy; he finds that Jews selected survival strategies based on their prewar level of integration into non-Jewish society.⁶⁴

When looking at other explanations for why Jews adopted the strategies they did, Finkel explores what Jews in their respective cities might have known about Germans prior to their invasion. Echoing Saul Friedländer, Finkel emphasizes that, across the cities, “the existing political regime prior to the Nazi occupation shaped what people in these communities *knew and could know* about German policies [emphasis added].”⁶⁵ Furthermore, Finkel cites that “decision making under conditions of uncertainty is subject to various ‘heuristics,’” the most common of which is “the tendency to believe that the past is a useful predictor of the future.”⁶⁶ As we will see also happen in Kovno, Finkel highlights that, in Minsk, a lack of information about the Nazis’ anti-Jewish policies, combined with positive memories of the German occupation during the First World War, led many Jews to decide to stay in the city following the 1941 invasion.⁶⁷ Accordingly, Finkel determines that previous knowledge alone is not a sufficient explanation for behavioral variation. Rather than prior knowledge, knowledge acquired amidst persecution was important for adapting new survival strategies, when old ones appeared to be unsuccessful.⁶⁸

⁶³ Finkel, *Ordinary Jews*, 99.

⁶⁴ Finkel, *Ordinary Jews*, 193.

⁶⁵ Finkel, *Ordinary Jews*, 51.

⁶⁶ Finkel, *Ordinary Jews*, 52.

⁶⁷ Finkel, *Ordinary Jews*, 53-4.

⁶⁸ Finkel, *Ordinary Jews*, 56.

However, in the initial stage of persecution, in one as chaotic as Kovno in late June 1941, there was a steep learning curve for Jews. In *Memory Perceived*, an analytical study of memory using over 100 survivor testimonies from the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University, psychologist Robert Kraft outlines stages of adapting to and experiencing atrocity. Kraft focuses on emotional responses and perceptions instead of physical actions and survival strategies in an effort to ascertain how memories of periods of prolonged trauma are encoded and recalled. Specifically, he examines recalled experiences of survival in concentration camps. Since there are no similar studies of the initial phases of violence as experienced in Kovno, his description of the first and second stages of adapting to trauma might be extended to apply to other traumatic experiences and radically new realities. He writes:

In the first stage, the initial exposure to unprecedented cruelty leaves people bereft of understanding, unable to apply prior learning and unable to comprehend. Reflective thought disappears; emotion and response disconnect. Contact between ongoing events and existing knowledge breaks apart, resulting in unguided perception of the events. Those who are victimized come to know the specific horrors through isolated glimpses, with fragmented perceptions of an unbelievable reality.⁶⁹

While Kraft describes the experience of Jews first arriving at concentration camps, this vivid description seems to capture what my future analysis of the Kovno pogroms will show—how utterly disorienting it must have been for Jews in the days following June 22, 1941. Although perhaps unintentional, it appears as if Kraft’s analysis strips Jews of any sense of agency, instead characterizing their reactions as somewhat irrational. Although the chaotic situation of the pogroms would have severely restricted avenues of action, it also made the Jews’ assertion of agency even more critical and remarkable, given the accompanying incomprehension and lack of knowledge available.

⁶⁹ Robert Kraft, *Memory Perceived: Recalling the Holocaust* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 91-2.

During the second stage, Kraft describes a resumption of agency, of rational thinking and decision-making. After the initial shock, “people may use prior knowledge in an effort to assimilate the horrible events...new schemas of atrocity are pieced together, and there are attempts to organize the unrecognizable.”⁷⁰ As we will see, this process aligns with the Kovno Jews’ experience in July 1941. After the chaotic pogroms and unprecedented mass killings at the forts, the fact that the local Lithuanians had attacked them was now “recognizable.” This new understanding would have impacted how Jews reacted to and understood the order to establish a Ghetto in the city. Kraft’s conception of these initial stages of apprehending atrocity are useful to understand the emotional state of Jews. Emotional response does not negate agentic decision-making but does help frame it.

Interethnic Violence

In contrast to victim agency, perpetrator agency has received extensive scholarly study, often connecting ethnic violence and genocide with a community’s preexisting interethnic relations and societal conditions. Such works focus on the construction and crystallization of identities and the role of sociopolitical crises fomenting interethnic tensions. The literature demonstrates that ethnic violence does not erupt spontaneously, that it is the result of a culmination of pressures. Some form of catalyst helps to facilitate an environment in which normal constraints on collective violence disappear, legitimizing the transformation of latent emotions into violent actions. Throughout these processes we see that violence is often motivated by perceptions, not reality.

⁷⁰ Kraft, *Memory Perceived*, 91-2.

Identifying the “Other”

As a newly independent state, defining a Lithuanian national identity was an important step in nation-building, and thus “Lithuanians developed an abiding fixation with the ‘who belongs’ question and a rigid view of the answer.”⁷¹ Jews, decidedly, did not belong. In the article “National Identity and the ‘Other,’” Anna Triandafyllidou describes this “double-edged character of national identity,” which establishes an ingroup and an outgroup, even within the borders of the same nation.⁷² She develops the term “internal significant others” to describe minority groups which are deemed as “threatening” and who are “perceived” to “erode the unity and/or authenticity of the nation from ‘within.’”⁷³ This outgroup, which can exist unproblematically within society in times of peace and stability, can easily become a scapegoat “in periods of social, political or economic crisis during which the identity of the nation is put in question.”⁷⁴

Henri Zukier addresses this perception of outsiders as threatening in his conception of “the imaginary Jew.” He asserts that, throughout modern history, “the Jew remains forever in the mind of the West the most readily available and imaginable target for exclusion, the most essential outsider of society,” which he says is rooted in Catholic Church doctrine.⁷⁵ Echoing Triandafyllidou’s concept of “internal significant others,” Zukier writes that Jews’ “archetypical crime is penetration and subversion of the national body.”⁷⁶ Again, the “outsider’s” identity becomes most relevant in times of crises, when “people anxiously attempt to make sense of

⁷¹ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 24.

⁷² Anna Triandafyllidou, “National Identity and the ‘Other,’” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 4 (1998): 593.

⁷³ Triandafyllidou, “National Identity and the ‘Other,’” 602.

⁷⁴ Triandafyllidou, “National Identity and the ‘Other,’” 603.

⁷⁵ Zukier, “The Essential ‘Other’ and the Jew: From Antisemitism to Genocide.” *Social Research* (1996): 1151.

⁷⁶ Zukier, “The Essential ‘Other’ and the Jew,” 1140.

unsettling circumstances...they search for ready-made answers”⁷⁷ Accordingly, although Lithuanian citizens, Jews were considered outsiders. Although an enduring condition, it became lethally dangerous in times of crises.

Interethnic Relations and Violence

People of different ethnic identities often live together peacefully in many situations. Thus, scholars attempt to explain what motivates the people of one group to attack another in other circumstances. Several scholarly articles explore the impact of group identity on interethnic violence, and in particular address the connection between ethnic violence during the Holocaust and the preceding level of integration of different ethnic groups. Like Evgeny Finkel, scholars who look at perpetrator actions also evaluate and emphasize the impact of political regimes and social integration.

Lisa Haagensen and Marnix Croes focus on perpetrators’ dehumanization of victims during genocide, after a conflict has already begun.⁷⁸ In addition to examining the Rwandan Genocide, they treat the Holocaust in Western Europe and the Holocaust in Eastern Europe as separate cases. Their analysis assumes that dehumanization facilitates genocidal violence because it reduces psychological and moral restraints on killing other humans. Accordingly, the authors hypothesize that “the smaller the social distance between the perpetrator group and the victim group prior to genocide the more severe the dehumanization behaviors of the perpetrators during genocide.”⁷⁹ In order to test their hypothesis, they modified an existing “social distance scale” and created a ranked list of dehumanizing behaviors, derived from in-depth analysis of

⁷⁷ Zukier, “The Essential ‘Other’ and the Jew,” 1147.

⁷⁸ Lisa Haagensen and Marnix Croes, “Thy Brother’s Keeper? The Relationship between Social Distance and Intensity of Dehumanization during Genocide,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 7, no. 2 (2012): 226.

⁷⁹ Haagensen and Croes, “Thy Brother’s Keeper,” 245.

accounts from each of the three case studies.⁸⁰ Their study results show that during the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, severe dehumanization occurred due to the great degree of social integration of Hutus and Tutsis. In comparison, they found that the German Einsatzgruppen and SD units engaged in “less severe dehumanization behavior” when killings Jews in Eastern Europe. As the victim and perpetrator groups were strangers, having had no social interaction prior to the outbreak of violence, severe dehumanization was not needed to break social bonds like in Rwanda.⁸¹ Notably, Haagensen and Croes support their argument by specifically mentioning instances of Lithuanian participation in local police units accompanying the Einsatzgruppen in Eastern Europe. They observe that “dehumanization was particularly severe” in the violence perpetrated by local Lithuanians, and connect that assessment to the claim that “the Lithuanians involved in the killings were often former customers, neighbors and classmates.”⁸² As such, they separate the Lithuanian violence from the actions of the Germans in Eastern Europe, and instead claim that it bore similarities with what happened in Rwanda.

In another study, Diana Dumitru and Carter Johnson assess the “quality” of prewar interethnic relationships and how it might have caused individuals to either help or harm Jews in Eastern Europe. Their article compares two regions in Eastern Europe, Bessarabia and Transnistria. Both had “been subjected to heavily antisemitic state policies from at least 1812 to 1918,” but during the interwar period, “Bessarabia continued with its antisemitism” under Romanian rule, while Transnistria was “under a strongly inclusivist nationality policy” as a result of its inclusion in the Soviet Union, which promoted internationalist cooperation.⁸³ The authors

⁸⁰ Haagensen and Croes, “Thy Brother’s Keeper,” 226.

⁸¹ Haagensen and Croes, “Thy Brother’s Keeper,” 226

⁸² Haagensen and Croes, “Thy Brother’s Keeper,” 243.

⁸³ Diana Dumitru and Carter Johnson, “Constructing Interethnic Conflict and Cooperation: Why Some People Harmed Jews and Others Helped Them during the Holocaust in Romania,” *World Politics* 63, no. 1 (2011): 35.

found that during World War II, “the Bessarabian side was more likely to commit violent acts against its Jewish population than the Transnistrian side, which in turn was more likely to provide aid to the Jews.” They conclude that non-Jews in Transnistria “internalized” a commitment to interethnic cooperation during the interwar period, which had been fostered by the Soviets, “despite a new government [imposed Romanian rule] that rewarded victimization of the Jews and severely punished any attempts to assist them.”⁸⁴ Therefore, Dumitru and Johnson establish that individual motivations and actions are connected to and influenced by state policies. Accordingly, interethnic animosities are not rigid but flexible, and can be either inflamed or mitigated by such conditions. In addition, they point out that the case of Bessarabia bears similarities to that of Lithuania, which was independent for most of the interwar period and therefore was not subject to the inclusivist Soviet policies, except for the year of Soviet Occupation from 1940–1941.⁸⁵

Dumitru and Johnson look at territories under Romanian occupation during World War II, where violence occurred, but was not prompted by German invasion. The phenomenon of pogroms immediately following the German invasion of the Soviet Union is specifically studied by Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg. They looked at the onset of pogroms in various communities in what had been northeastern Poland during the summer of 1941, aiming to explain why pogroms broke out in some communities but not others. They find that “the greater the degree of intercommunal polarization between Jews and the titular majority group, the more likely a pogrom.”⁸⁶ They specifically look at the economic and cultural/political polarization as identifiable in census and national election results during the interwar period. Their research

⁸⁴ Dumitru and Johnson, “Constructing Interethnic Conflict and Cooperation,” 36.

⁸⁵ Dumitru and Johnson, “Constructing Interethnic Conflict and Cooperation,” 30.

⁸⁶ Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, “Deadly Communities: Local Political Milieus and The Persecution of Jews In Occupied Poland,” *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 3 (2011): 260.

suggests that “localities where the Jews were already perceived as a threatening ‘Other’—places with large numbers of Jews who opted for ethnic particularism—provided fertile ground for anti-Jewish violence.”⁸⁷ Thus the pogroms can be understood as the Poles “reacting to the perceived unwillingness of Jews to assimilate into Polish political life.” Similar to how Dumitru and Johnson identify the influence of state policies in promoting or discouraging ethnic integration, Kopstein and Wittenberg find that “the failure of the Polish state to politically integrate its Jewish citizens” contributed to the polarization.⁸⁸ In contrast to the above cited articles, which focus on the opposing actions of perpetrator violence or the decision to help Jews, Kopstein and Wittenberg ascertain a third pattern of behavior: indifference. They assert that polarization not only contributed to participation in pogroms but made Poles “more tolerant of others committing violence, and less likely to come to the aid of the victims.”⁸⁹ As we will see, such attitudes were present among many Lithuanians in Kovno, who demonstrated inaction and indifference rather than actively engaging in hostilities.

In his analysis of genocidal violence, Aristotle Kallis attributes perpetrators’ participation to the culmination of two forms of “license.” First, the existence of “a long-term *license to hate* a particular out-group and desire its elimination,” and then a “a short-term *license to kill* that authorizes the group to adopt violent practices of elimination against this very particular ‘other’ by suspending individual accountability and by overriding inhibiting factors.”⁹⁰ Kallis categorizes the resulting cumulative violence as a “carnival,” in that normally prohibited behavior is permitted and legitimized. He notes that “the legitimization of the act itself rests on

⁸⁷ Kopstein and Wittenberg, “Deadly Communities,” 271.

⁸⁸ Kopstein and Wittenberg, “Deadly Communities,” 275.

⁸⁹ Kopstein and Wittenberg, “Deadly Communities,” 271.

⁹⁰ Aristotle Kallis, “‘Licence’ and Genocide in the East: Reflections on Localised Eliminationist Violence during the First Stages of ‘Operation Barbarossa’ (1941),” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 7, no. 3 (2007): 9.

and feeds into the prior delegitimization of the victims”⁹¹ These concepts parallel Alexander Hinton’s notion of the processes of “genocidal priming and activation,” which also connects societal conditions before genocide occurs with what happens as genocide unfolds. Correlating with long-term license, Hinton identifies “socioeconomic or political upheaval” and the “process of envisioning difference” as the two key “primes” that, when “triggered,” can spark the onset of violence by one group against another. The first results in the destabilization of society, which can “intensify group divisions” and create a sense of threat and danger.”⁹² The latter, as a consequence of the former, results in the scapegoating of individuals based on the notion that “the annihilation of a threatening or impure group will help create the preconditions for a better life.”⁹³ The onset of violence “almost always involves some sort of ‘genocidal activation’— a series of direct and indirect, more or less organized pushes from above,” which grants what Kallis refers to as short-term license.⁹⁴

In such situations, Roger Petersen argues that emotions of would-be perpetrators drive their violent behavior and determine who will be targeted. In his evaluation of instances of ethnic violence in Eastern Europe throughout the twentieth century, Petersen describes emotion as a “switch” prompting individuals to meet some need or desire. He connects emotion to the “essentialization of identities that underlies ethnic conflict,” as “identities can crystallize when one is in the grasp of a powerful emotion.”⁹⁵ His work highlights that that ethnic violence often occurs when state powers collapse. Thus, he maintains “emotion helps explain the spontaneous

⁹¹ Kallis, “‘Licence’ and Genocide in the East,” 15.

⁹² Alexander Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 282.

⁹³ Hinton, *Why Did They Kill*, 283.

⁹⁴ Hinton, *Why Did They Kill*, 280.

⁹⁵ Roger Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

yet directed and purposeful nature” of leaderless collective violence; the driving emotion— Fear, Hatred, Resentment, or Rage—determines the target of the violence.⁹⁶

In contrast to other scholarly explanations of interethnic violence, political scientist John Mueller argues that the entire concept of “ethnic warfare” is “severely misguided.”⁹⁷ After assessing violent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, he determines that “the mechanism of violence...is remarkably banal.” He determines that most perpetrators were opportunistic, non-ideological, and sometimes intoxicated, thus their actions did not reflect “deep, historic passions and hatreds.”⁹⁸ Mueller does, however, emphasize that such violence “could happen almost anywhere under the appropriate conditions,” when local conditions enable and legitimize violence. Like Kopstein and Wittenberg, the author also addresses others’ lack of action, observing that in Rwanda only a minority of a population participated in the violence, while the rest, “stood by in considerable confusion, and, often, indifference.”⁹⁹ This pattern of local participation in interethnic violence is reminiscent of what happened in Kovno.

Although scholars show that perpetrators’ actions and motivations are varied, the consequences for their victims are the same. It is victims’ actions and motivations, in response to perpetrator’s actions, which remains insufficiently examined in scholarly literature.

Lithuanian Participation in Killing Jews

The essentialization of national identity and breakdown of sociopolitical integration helps explain and describe the deterioration of interethnic relations between Jews and non-Jews in Lithuania during the interwar period, which accelerated during the Soviet Occupation. In Kovno,

⁹⁶ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, 4.

⁹⁷ John Mueller, “The Banality of ‘Ethnic War’,” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 42.

⁹⁸ Mueller, “The Banality of ‘Ethnic War,’” 43.

⁹⁹ Mueller, “The Banality of ‘Ethnic War,’” 43.

the initial murders of Jews at the hands of the Lithuanians were facilitated by a lack of constraints following the German invasion. Preexisting societal conditions and interethnic relationships either directed Lithuanians to unleash their anger on the Jews or facilitated their passivity towards the Jews' persecution.

Lithuanian Motivations

Roger Petersen describes the violence which erupted in Lithuania in June 1941 as a reaction to the prior year's Soviet Occupation. In the chaos that resulted from the German invasion and subsequent Soviet retreat, "a rapid lifting of constraints produced masses of leaderless individuals." He also reflects that the situation "came as close to anarchy as one can expect to see," explaining that "widespread emotional antipathies can substitute for leadership in these situations."¹⁰⁰ He seeks to address five "puzzles" centered on event timelines, targeted groups, and the nature of violence in the aftermath of the invasion.¹⁰¹ Of his four emotional motivations assessed in his research, he finds that Resentment as well as Rage best fit the case of the Lithuanian pogroms. The Soviet Occupation had disrupted the Lithuanian ethnic hierarchy existing political order, which "produced beliefs of injustice and emotions of Resentment." Outraged Lithuanians sought to put others "back in their place." The collapse of Soviet rule opened opportunities for violence "that quickly resubordinated minority groups, especially Jews."¹⁰² Petersen connects Resentment with the horrifying acts of public humiliation that occurred during the Kovno pogroms, in particular the targeting of Rabbis, who were easily identifiable as Jews because of their manner of dress.

¹⁰⁰ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, 96, 98.

¹⁰¹ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, 99.

¹⁰² Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, 109-110.

Resentment posits that Lithuanians attacked Jews specifically, while the emotional mechanism of Rage explains that Jews were attacked not as Jews but as “substitute targets.” Encouraged by the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism and misperceptions of Jews’ roles in the Soviet administration, and in light of the Soviets’ rapid retreat and resulting chaotic environment, Petersen notes how “Jews were an available, and vulnerable, substitute target.”¹⁰³ Significantly, he rejects the argument that Lithuanians attacked Jews due to ethnic hatred, noting that there was no previous pattern of antisemitic-motivated violence in modern Lithuania. Indeed, for this same reason, “the brutal and humiliating actions of Lithuanians...came as a shock to most of the Jewish victims.”¹⁰⁴

While Petersen ties Lithuanian violence against Jews to the directly preceding Soviet Occupation, Karen Sutton takes her analysis further back. According to her, we must recognize the much longer history of “deeply rooted” antisemitism throughout Lithuanian society, primarily emanating from “the teachings of the Church, modern nationalism, and political and socioeconomic conditions.”¹⁰⁵ She asserts the need to understand that “the Jews constituted an economically distinct, culturally isolated group within the body politic; Jews were not seen as ‘Lithuanian compatriots.’”¹⁰⁶ Not only were Jews were not considered “Lithuanians,” the difference in religion maintained that Lithuanians saw Jews “as aliens whose culture and way of life conflicted with their own.”¹⁰⁷ In the majority-Catholic country, Sutton emphasizes that religious antisemitism had just as much of a role to play as economic and political antisemitism, despite the fact that Lithuanian historians often gloss over moments of religious antisemitic

¹⁰³ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, 114.

¹⁰⁴ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, 112.

¹⁰⁵ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 32.

violence throughout Lithuanian history.¹⁰⁸ Jews' economic status and roles also earned them Lithuanian animosity.¹⁰⁹

Although emphasizing the existence of multifaceted Lithuanian antisemitism prior to the Soviet Occupation, Sutton does stress that the occupation drastically worsened the relationship between Jews and non-Jews. Political antisemitism in particular became extremely potent. Sutton asserts that the negative association of Jews with Communism helps explain why some Lithuanians "sided with the Nazis proactively" and most Lithuanians "responded passively" during the Holocaust in Lithuania.¹¹⁰ Given the foundational existence of antisemitism, after the German invasion, "Lithuanian leaders could bargain with the lives of Jews to attain their dearest goal, independence. That they could also solve their Jewish problem was an added bonus."¹¹¹

Kovno in June 1941

Christoph Dieckmann and Saulius Sužiedėlis extensively study what happened in the summer and fall of 1941. They contextualize events by emphasizing the nature of Operation Barbarossa as a "war of extermination."¹¹² Thus, their analysis reveals much about the relationship between the invading, occupying Germans and the collaborating Lithuanians. The authors use German and Lithuanian documentation and eyewitness accounts to detail the important events and developments that occurred. They elaborate on many aspects and events that are only briefly mentioned in other sources. Like Petersen and Sutton, they emphasize how the period of Soviet rule amplified preexisting interethnic tensions.¹¹³ Attacks on Jews began

¹⁰⁸ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 68.

¹⁰⁹ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 55, 47.

¹¹⁰ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 60.

¹¹¹ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 96.

¹¹² Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 97.

¹¹³ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 98.

almost immediately upon the arrival of news of the German invasion. Jews constituted a majority of civilians killed in the first week. As Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis note, “with the exception of real and alleged Communists and Soviet collaborators, no other group endured such egregious public humiliation.”¹¹⁴ While some Jews might have been attacked for being “Communists,” most were target simply for their identities as Jews.¹¹⁵

Lithuanian antisemitism in Kovno was not only activated by the German invasion, but the Germans’ arrival in the city further legitimized and encouraged violence against Jews. Scholarly accounts describe the pogroms as emerging within, and because of, the chaos created in the city in the wake of the Soviets’ retreat. The city had become the center of the Lithuanian Activist Front’s Anti-Soviet uprising; however, Petersen concludes that the LAF was not entirely in control of the violence that erupted throughout the city.¹¹⁶ Sutton identifies various motivations for the initial attacks, ranging from “sheer opportunism to sincere and deep-rooted lust to avenge the Crucifixion and retaliate for persecution suffered under the Soviets.”¹¹⁷ Similar to Petersen’s attribution of Lithuanian violence to “Rage,” she says that partisans attacked Jews in light of the Soviet’s rapid withdrawal from the city. According to Kallis, “a sense of ‘license’ derived from the breakdown of order and the power vacuum was generated,” and was “seized autonomously by local forces in the absence or benevolent disinterest” of the arriving Germans.¹¹⁸ He describes the events as reminiscent of “a *carnival*,” in that the pogroms “took the form of an extraordinary suspension of conventional moral norms and a transgression into a different sphere of ritualistic

¹¹⁴ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 97.

¹¹⁵ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 101.

¹¹⁶ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, 98.

¹¹⁷ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 121.

¹¹⁸ Kallis, “‘Licence’ and Genocide in the East,” 11.

carnage where the ‘excess energy’ of resentment could be fully expended in a festival of rage.”¹¹⁹

According to Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, outside of Kovno, “similar massacres on such an extreme scale occurred nowhere else in Lithuania.”¹²⁰ Scholars particularly focus on the fact that pogroms did not break out in Vilna, a city of similar size, as they did in Kovno. Sutton notes that “popular fury needs sanction, either explicit or implicit,” and reasons that because the Jewish population outnumbered the ethnic Lithuanians in Vilna, the latter “probably felt too insecure to act out its violence with impunity and reacted to the euphoria by demonstrating some initial restraint.”¹²¹ In respect to his argument that the Lithuanians’ were motivated by Resentment, Petersen says that Poles, rather than Jews, would have been the targeted in Vilna because “Poles were the greatest impediment to present and future Lithuanian status dominance.”¹²² Kovno is further significant because, according to Arūnas Bubnys, the “move from separate pogroms to the mass murder of Jews...was done first of all in Kaunas.”¹²³ Thus, Kovno in June and July 1941 was a unique phenomenon both in regards to the scale and intensity of its pogroms and it being the first Lithuanian city to experience German-organized mass-murder.

Although there is substantial evidence that the majority of killing was done by the local Lithuanians, there is considerable debate about the extent to which Lithuanians independently initiated pogroms, whether or not they began to kill large numbers of Jews before the German army arrived in Kovno, and to what extent the Germans directed the violence after they arrived in the city. Bubnys categorizes the pogrom in Kovno as “Gestapo-initiated,” and challenges the

¹¹⁹ Kallis, “‘Licence’ and Genocide in the East,” 16.

¹²⁰ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 102.

¹²¹ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 127.

¹²² Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, 110.

¹²³ Bubnys, “The Holocaust in Lithuania: An Outline of the Major Stages and Their Results,” 209.

“allegation” that “between 22 June 1941 and 5 July Lithuanians perpetrated anti-Jewish acts and controlled the situation in Lithuania.” He asserts, rather, that the Lithuanian perpetrators were not autonomous, they “had to carry out the orders of the German military administration and operational groups.”¹²⁴ In their examination of the period, Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis take a cautious approach to the debate. They note “there is no easy way to determine to what extent German encouragement inspired local violence towards Jews or to what degree this was the result of politically and ethnically motivated spontaneous outbreaks. Certainly, both factors played their part.”¹²⁵

One potential reason for this debate is that most scholars primarily rely on the same Nazi sources to provide insight into the Germans’ accounts of the process of persecuting Lithuanian Jews in summer 1941.¹²⁶ On June 29, 1941, Reinhard Heydrich issued Einsatzgruppen Order No. 1, instructing the Einsatzgruppen that the Lithuanian pogroms ““should in no way be hindered. On the contrary, they must be encouraged...and even intensified.””¹²⁷ This written statement reiterated directions given at a meeting prior to the invasion, on June 17.¹²⁸ In an October 15, 1941, report summarizing his unit’s operations between June and October, Franz Stahlecker, the commander of *Einsatzgruppe A*, writes that he followed Heydrich’s order, and he details the Germans’ encouragement of and involvement in the Kovno pogroms and the results. According to Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, “Stahlecker recalled how his EG A had succeeded in this task ‘despite great difficulties, in provoking the local anti-Semitic powers to organize pogroms against the Jews.... Nevertheless, through the directives given to Klimaitis, the

¹²⁴ Bubnys, “The Holocaust in Lithuania: An Outline of the Major Stages and Their Results,” 208.

¹²⁵ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 99.

¹²⁶ Two separate reports by Einsatzgruppen unit leaders, Franz Stahlecker and Karl Jäger detail the Lithuanians’ involvement and actions. These reports are detailed and discussed by Arad, Bubnys, Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, and other scholars who use the “perpetrator perspective.”

¹²⁷ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 110.

¹²⁸ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 126.

Vorauskommando of EG A managed to initiate a pogrom.”¹²⁹ The report further states that EG A was “‘doing its best’ to film and photograph the events in Kaunas” so as to prove that the locals were carrying out the murders themselves.¹³⁰ The Jäger reports, written by the commander of *Einsatzkommando* 3, Standartenführer Karl Jäger, details the locations of mass killings and the numbers of Jews killed by the unit through December 1, 1941, including statistics on the initial murders in Kovno. The first report, published in September, “reported that ‘partisans’ had killed an estimated 4,000 Jews in pogroms, of whom nearly 800 had perished ‘during the time of EK1b,’ that is, before EK3 took control in Kaunas.” In his follow-up report in December, Jäger “noted that the killings of 4 and 6 July were carried out by Lithuanian partisans ‘on my direction and orders.’”¹³¹

Andrew Ezergailis looks at such sources and asserts that “‘Neighbors’ Did Not Kill Jews!” in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust. His title is a reference to Jan Gross’s *Neighbors*, a seminal work examining the phenomena of pogroms following the German invasion of the Soviet Union. In his book, Gross examines the circumstances surrounding the massacre which took place in Jedwabne, Poland, when, in the course of one day, “half the population of a small European town murdered the other half—some 1,600 men, women, and children.”¹³² In his essay, Ezergailis pushes back against “the corollary to the ‘neighbors’ thesis,” that “the killing of Jews in Eastern Europe was Germanless and leaderless.”¹³³ He contends that, due to the nature of the Nazi system of occupation, the local perpetrators could not have acted autonomously. He

¹²⁹ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 126.

¹³⁰ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 129.

¹³¹ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 168.

¹³² Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), xviii.

¹³³ Andrew Ezergailis, “‘Neighbors’ Did Not Kill Jews!” in *Collaboration and Resistance during the Holocaust: Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania*, eds. David Gaunt, Paul A. Levine, and Laura Palosuo (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 188.

relies on the October 15 Stahlecker report to substantiate much of his argument. Citing Stahlecker's admission that it was difficult to incite pogroms and his description of the organization of auxiliary police units, Ezergailis says that the report "proves on the one hand that German-organized native formations participated in the murder of Jews and on the other hand that it was not a free-for-all but instead a programmed and organized operation."¹³⁴ He claims that Stahlecker's writings are a reliable source because the "reports were confidential and intended for his superiors to whom he could boast but not lie."¹³⁵ Although he might not have been lying, it is also understandable that the commander would have wanted to take credit for the Lithuanians' actions and assert that the Germans were indeed in control of the situation.

Ezergailis specifically addresses the Kovno pogroms as one "typical" example of the "neighbors" narrative. In attempting to discount it, he poses questions and assertions that, in turn, can be discounted and corrected. He incorrectly asserts that "in Eastern Europe, for example, there is no analogy to the 'stab in the back' idea that so deeply agitated the soul of Germany."¹³⁶ Indeed, Saulius Sužiedėlis specifically uses the phrase to describe the rise of Lithuanian antisemitism during the Soviet Occupation, when Jews began to be perceived "as traitors, 'stabbing in the back' the state and nation whose land they had enjoyed as guests – or in antisemitic parlance 'exploiters' – for centuries."¹³⁷ Ezergailis goes on to state that, "Even if there was a sufficient explanation for 'neighbors' attacking 'neighbors' and the motivation for it made clear and credible, it still would need to have an explanation as to why it should have been done in the primitive manner in which it is averred to have happened."¹³⁸ An answer to this

¹³⁴ Ezergailis, "'Neighbors' Did Not Kill Jews," 205.

¹³⁵ Ezergailis, "'Neighbors' Did Not Kill Jews," 200.

¹³⁶ Ezergailis, "'Neighbors' Did Not Kill Jews," 193.

¹³⁷ Saulius Sužiedėlis, "'Listen, the Jews are Ruling Us Now': Antisemitism and National Conflict During the First Soviet Occupation of Lithuania, 1940-1941," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 25 (2012): 313.

¹³⁸ Ezergailis, "'Neighbors' Did Not Kill Jews," 193.

question could be found in Haagensen and Croes's conclusion that more brutal, dehumanizing violence occurs in violent conflicts where there was previously less social distance between perpetrators and victims, such as in Kovno where, despite the presence of Lithuanian antisemitism, Jews and non-Jews often lived in the same neighborhoods and their children attended the same schools. Furthermore, Petersen's mechanism of "Resentment" also explains instances of brutal, humiliating violence.

From his reading of Stahlecker's report, the author claims that it "does not allow us to say in Lithuania there is a strong case for 'neighbors' killing 'neighbors' scenarios."¹³⁹ Much of his argument pertains to the situation which had coalesced by July 1941 and applies less so to the chaotic, liminal period between June 22 and July 6, 1941. Indeed, even if we accept that the Germans fully directed the murders, "neighbors" were still killing "neighbors," the local Lithuanians were not forced to participate against their will. There is a question of the definition of "neighbor," whether we take it to mean individuals residing in the same city or those who live next to each other. Nonetheless, both broad and narrow definitions describe Lithuanian participation in the Kovno pogroms. Survivor testimonies sometimes identify Lithuanian perpetrators by name and often describe their shock at being targeted by people they had known, worked with, went to school with, and lived next to.

Conclusion

Literature on interethnic violence emphasizes the need to understand a community's past, as it is what frames the future actions of perpetrators and victims alike. In doing so we can see connections between levels of integration, the essentialization of identities and exacerbation of

¹³⁹ Ezergailis, "'Neighbors' Did Not Kill Jews," 205.

differences, and the legitimization of violence. This chapter has placed Kovno in theoretical and historical context, illuminating the ways in which what happened in Kovno in 1941 follows the pattern of other instances of ethnic violence and establishing that the city was ripe for such violence to break out. During the interwar years, ethnic Lithuanians increasingly identified Jews as the threatening “other.” The intense sociopolitical upheaval of the Soviet Occupation exacerbated interethnic tensions, as Jews became viewed as responsible for the Lithuanians’ suffering. The German invasion provided the catalyst for the outbreak of pogroms. In the chaotic environment, Lithuanians, motivated by a variety of reasons from virulent antisemitism to opportunism, had license to engage in violence. Jews, having been othered and scapegoated for years, were easily identified and unprotected targets. In the face of such unprecedented danger, Kovno’s Jews exercised agency accordingly whenever and however possible. But in the chaos, agency was severely restricted, and luck and chance likely played a large role in their survival

With such contextual and historical hindsight, we can understand the situation in which local Lithuanians targeted Jews. But in June 1941, the historical context which determined Jews’ reactions was their lives in Kovno before June 22, 1941.

2 “What Was Known and What *Could* Have Been Known”: Jewish Life in Interwar Kovno

Jews in interwar Kovno knew Lithuanian Gentiles to be antisemitic, but they also knew them as their neighbors, friends, teachers, and classmates. While the threat of a belligerent Nazi Germany mounted during the 1930s, culminating in the outbreak of war in September 1939, Jews in Kovno felt a sense of security in Lithuania. They were fearful of external threats such as occupying and invading foreign armies, and indeed the Soviet Union occupied the country in June 1940, but they were not worried about life in Lithuania as Jews. Although Lithuanian nationalism and antisemitism increased during the interwar years, positive interethnic relationships still existed. These were destabilized by the year of Soviet Occupation and demolished after the Nazi invasion. Thus, relative to the “entirely new and utterly horrifying reality” of life after June 22, 1941, life in interwar Lithuania had indeed been fairly good for Kovno’s Jews. In order to assess how they confronted their new reality we must first understand “was known and what *could* have been known” about life as Jews in Kovno.

Only with hindsight can one survivor describe Jews’ sense of security as “complacency,” as the most immediate, lethal threat came not from across the border, but from down the street.¹⁴⁰ There is a somewhat “nostalgic” character to some survivors’ recollections of life in interwar

¹⁴⁰ Waldemar Ginsburg, Elland, England, United Kingdom, 20 November 1997, interview 36376, segment 40, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019.

Kovno, Lithuania.¹⁴¹ The Holocaust survivors' testimonies analyzed in this chapter mostly describe their childhood and adolescence, as they were born in the early or mid-1920s and thus grew up in independent Lithuania, under the rule of President Antanas Smetona. This is not to say, however, that their evaluations of life in Kovno should be attributed to childhood ignorance of the tense domestic and international political climate developing in 1930s Lithuania and throughout Europe. In addition to information acquired themselves and gained from older family members, their testimonies relay their own experiences of growing up Jewish in Kovno. They were, even as children, aware of their Jewish identity in the city and of events that related to their Jewishness, and interpreted experiences accordingly.

Despite positive social and professional interactions with non-Jews, Jews were still seen as a separate ethnic group, and thus Lithuanian nationalism inherently excluded Jews from gaining full membership in society. This sense of difference, of "otherness," from the perspective of some ethnic Lithuanians, could have contributed to their readiness to participate in harming Jews after June 22, 1941. But did this same sense of separateness exist from the Jews' perspective? What did it mean to be a Jew growing up in Kovno during the interwar years? How did Jews interact with Gentiles, and how did they evaluate and experience the persistence of antisemitism in Lithuanian society? How was the Soviet Occupation perceived to have affected Jewish life in Kovno? In a wider context, not only did Jews' relationships with Gentiles in Lithuania impact their sense of security. What did Jews understand about Nazism and was it perceived to be a threat to themselves in Kovno? Did Jewish perceptions of the Nazi German threat change over time?

¹⁴¹ MacQueen, "The Context of Mass Destruction: Agents and Prerequisites of the Holocaust in Lithuania," 30.

Jewish Life in Independent Lithuania

During the establishment and consolidation of an independent Lithuanian state in the early interwar years, Lithuanian nationalists saw Jews as an important source of support in the new nation. Initially Jews were perceived as less threatening than the other large minority group in Lithuania, ethnic Poles.¹⁴² Historian Česlovas Laurinavičius thus categorizes the early relationship between ethnic Lithuanians and Jews as a “political alliance,” but one that did not further develop into a “civic consolidation” as Jews were not fully welcomed as valued, equal participants in Lithuanian politics. As another Lithuanian historian succinctly put it, “Jews did not become Lithuanians” automatically following Lithuanian independence.¹⁴³ Accordingly, Laurinavičius describes Lithuanian domestic policy as decidedly “Lithuanian;” that is, “nationalist and ethnocentric.”¹⁴⁴ However, this was not manifest in overtly antisemitic policies or national movements, as was the case with German nationalism in Nazi Germany. Indeed, during its years of independence, even during the authoritarian reign of Antanas Smetona, the Lithuanian political system “provided a basic guarantee for the country’s minorities and, when necessary, a physical barrier of police force against base nativist instincts.”¹⁴⁵ In such an environment, educated, middle-class Jews, such as those who resided in Kovno, began to adopt Lithuanian culture as their own during the 1920s. One such indication of this burgeoning integration is that the first Lithuanian-language Jewish secondary school was opened in Kovno in the 1920s.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Staliūnas, “Lithuanian Antisemitism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” 145.

¹⁴³ Darius Staliūnas, “Lithuanian Antisemitism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 25 (2012): 145.

¹⁴⁴ Česlovas Laurinavičius, “Lithuanian General Aspects of Domestic Policy 1918–1940” in *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, eds. Alvydas Nikžentaitis, Stefan Schreiner, and Darius Staliūnas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 109.

¹⁴⁵ Sužiedėlis, “The Historical Sources for Antisemitism,” 146

¹⁴⁶ Sužiedėlis, “The Historical Sources for Antisemitism,” 129.

Jewish life in Kovno was not monolithic; in a community of approximately 30,000 people, professional occupations, levels of religious observance, political views, and socioeconomic status varied widely. Jack Brauns, born in 1924, was the son of a well-respected doctor who was director of the contagious diseases department in the city's Jewish hospital, and his mother was a successful author of English teaching books. Morris Rich, also born in 1924, was the son of a woodturner, albeit an "educated" woodturner in his own assessment compared to other tradesmen, yet it was still a "poor trade."¹⁴⁷ Margaret Kagan's mother, Anna Gure's grandfather, and Waldemar Ginsburg's stepfather all had arrived in Kovno after fleeing Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution. However, Kagan's father was liberal and was a member of an organization which helped provide aid to communists who had been jailed in Lithuania; the Lithuanian Communist Party (LCP) was banned by the Smetona regime, but still operated underground. Gure's and Kagan's families were both well-off and well-connected. Gure's father owned a construction company and their family had a nurse, cook, and chauffer, when not many families, Jewish or non-Jewish, had cars in Kovno at that time. Kagan's father managed the state lottery and their family was "comfortably off."¹⁴⁸ Neither girls' family was observant. Waldemar Ginsburg's mother was an accountant, and they lived with his maternal grandparents. His grandfather was religious and imparted Jewish traditions and observance on his grandson, but Ginsburg was more secular, as were most of his Jewish friends.

Whether well-off or less privileged, observant or not, many Jews regularly interacted with and knew non-Jews, albeit to varying degrees. At a basic level, regardless of the personal

¹⁴⁷ Morris Rich, Miami, Florida, U.S.A., 12 August 1996, interview 18626, segment 14, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019.

¹⁴⁸ Margaret Kagan, Brighouse, England, United Kingdom, 16 June 1998, interview 46259, segment 4, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019.

relationships and interactions between Jews and non-Jews, they lived next to each other throughout Kovno. Morris Rich, who lived in Slobodka, a suburb of Kovno where Jews traditionally resided, said that there were “a lot of non-Jews” in his town, including next-door neighbors, with whom Jews were “very friendly.”¹⁴⁹ Margaret Kagan lived in an affluent neighborhood in central Kovno, with fewer Jews than in the “old town”; she specifically remembers interacting with non-Jewish Lithuanian neighbors who were around her age, including putting on a play together in her family’s apartment.¹⁵⁰ Jack Brauns lived on the main street in the city, and recalled that most of the people who lived there were Jewish, including the owner of the house.

Although Jewish children in Kovno may have grown up living next-door to non-Jews, they attended different types of schools and therefore had varying degrees of interactions with non-Jewish children. Families could choose to send them to state or private schools with non-Jews, or to Jewish schools. Rich attended a Jewish school, the Talmud Torah, in Slobodka. Brauns, Gure, Kagan, and Ginsburg all initially attended German-language private schools, yet Jewish children left those schools after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany in 1933 (voluntarily, according to some Holocaust survivors’ recollections). Jack Brauns and Anna Gure then went to Jewish gymnasiums (high schools), but Brauns was taught in Hebrew and Gure was taught in Lithuanian. Gure still socialized with non-Jews outside of school while Brauns said that he almost exclusively had Jewish friends. Margaret Kagan and Waldemar Ginsburg went to state Lithuanian schools. Ginsburg said he “didn’t feel any antisemitism at school, our school was a very tolerant school, which could have been an exception I don’t know, but there was no

¹⁴⁹ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 21.

¹⁵⁰ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 2-3.

discrimination and I had a lot of Lithuanian friends, as well as Jewish friends.”¹⁵¹ Kagan recalled there being very few Jewish classmates at her school and described one instance in which she was singled out for being Jewish by a teacher. She had gotten a good grade in a class, and the teacher said that the Lithuanian girls should be “ashamed.” Kagan herself understood the statement “as a compliment to me that I, not being a proper Lithuanian, being Jewish, had done so well and they hadn’t.” While she acknowledged that that instance could be interpreted as antisemitism, she maintained that she did not see it as such.¹⁵²

Although there was a sense that Jews were different than Lithuanians, this in itself was not perceived to be a negative consequence of antisemitism or Lithuanian nationalism. While not being “a proper Lithuanian” in the eyes of her teacher, Margaret Kagan described her family as “very much more part of the Lithuanian establishment.”¹⁵³ Accordingly, her father played poker with “Lithuanian dignitaries” and tennis with President Smetona’s son.¹⁵⁴ For Kagan, it seems as if her Lithuanian identity was stronger than her Jewish identity. At seven years old, she knew that she was Jewish, “I knew I was different,” she said, but she was not entirely aware of what that meant. Once, when attending a friend’s family Easter celebration, the host apologized that Kagan could not eat the pork that was offered. This confused Kagan because her family did not observe the Jewish dietary regulations of *kashrut*, and therefore “wasn’t aware enough that their food was different than Jewish food.”¹⁵⁵

According to Jack Brauns, Jewish identity was perhaps more salient in Kovno than Kagan’s testimony indicated, and unconnected to the level of religious observance. He affirmed,

¹⁵¹ Waldemar Ginsburg, Elland, England, United Kingdom, 20 November 1997, interview 36376, segment 40, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019.

¹⁵² Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 8.

¹⁵³ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 3.

¹⁵⁴ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 6.

¹⁵⁵ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 8.

“people were Jewish— even if they were religious or they were not, but they were very Jewish.”¹⁵⁶ Brauns’s family was as equally well-connected as Kagan’s, but he did not say if they were a part of the “Lithuanian establishment” as she claimed. His father was a prominent physician who had Lithuanian patients, knew government officials, and had even been called to consult for the president once when he was sick. However, Brauns said that his family did not have “a social relationship” with non-Jews. Rather, he described their relationship as “cordial, a mutual respect for each other, an appreciation for each other.”¹⁵⁷ From his evaluation of their interethnic relationship, and Margaret Kagan’s family’s experiences, it does not appear that Lithuanians and Jews felt that any perceived differences negated their willingness or ability to interact with each other, professionally or socially. Kagan’s family more fully integrated themselves than Brauns’s, but it seems to have been their choices to do so or not, since both fathers had the opportunity as successful and well-respected professionals in Lithuanian society. Thus, Judaism may have made them different, but being Jewish did not necessarily make life more difficult for Jews in general in Kovno or make some Jews uncomfortable interacting with non-Jewish Lithuanians at work, at school, or in their neighborhoods.

Antisemitism in Kovno

Despite opportunities for increased assimilation, full integration of Jews into Lithuanian society was stunted by a growing sense of “Lithuanian self-consciousness” during the interwar years, resulting in a “process of Jewish exclusion,” accelerated and institutionalized after the 1926 ascension of the right-wing Nationalist Party to power.¹⁵⁸ According to Lithuanian

¹⁵⁶ Jack Brauns, Covina, California, U.S.A, 15 June 1998, interview 46504, segment 12, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019.

¹⁵⁷ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 14.

¹⁵⁸ MacQueen, “The Context of Mass Destruction: Agents and Prerequisites of the Holocaust in Lithuania,” 29.

historian Alfonsas Eidintas, the coup d'état was a reaction by Lithuanian conservatives, who felt threatened by the government's "concessions to ethnic minorities," which they thought endangered ethnic Lithuanians' "national and social achievements of independence."¹⁵⁹ After 1926, Jews subsequently lost almost all political power and representation, as the government attempted to bolster the interests of ethnic Lithuanians at the expense of minorities. The Ministry of Jewish Affairs was eliminated, and Jews were excluded from sections of the economy controlled by the state, blocked from employment in the civil service, and discriminated against in university admission processes.¹⁶⁰ Thus, the marginalization of Jews as "others" was both institutional and conceptual. With government protection, however, such attitudes infrequently translated into widespread, public antisemitic violence, and it was punished appropriately when it did. When a group of Lithuanians attacked Jews at a communist demonstration in Kovno in August 1929, the attackers were taken to court and several were imprisoned.¹⁶¹

Economic competition stoked antisemitism throughout the 1930s, resulting in increasing antisemitic rhetoric, which government officials spoke out against.¹⁶² Antisemitism significantly intensified in 1938–1939, during which the government recorded a relatively high amount of antisemitic violence. However, no fatalities resulting from such violence were recorded during the interwar years.¹⁶³ These trends contributed to attacks on Jewish students at the University of Kaunas in March 1938, during which students publicly posted a copy of *Der Stürmer*, the vehemently antisemitic paper published by the Nazi regime.¹⁶⁴ In addition, in 1939, Lithuanian

¹⁵⁹ Alfonsas Eidintas, "The Nation Creates its State" in *Lithuania in European Politics: The Years of the First Republic, 1918-1940*, ed. Edvardas Tuskenis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 54.

¹⁶⁰ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania* 51.

¹⁶¹ Vladas Sirutavičius, "'A Close but Very Suspicious and Dangerous Neighbor': Outbreaks of Antisemitism in Inter-War Lithuania." *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 25 (2012): 257.

¹⁶² Eidintas, "The Nation Creates its State," 135.

¹⁶³ Sirutavičius, "'A Close but Very Suspicious and Dangerous Neighbor,'" 260.

¹⁶⁴ Sužiedėlis, "The Historical Sources for Antisemitism," 138.

police identified attempts by Nazi Germany to spread antisemitic attitudes and incite antisemitic violence.¹⁶⁵ Sužiedėlis attributes the increase to the domestic and international political crises occurring at the time and “the general fascination with fascism and radical ethnic nationalism amongst certain intellectual circles characteristic of the later 1930s.”¹⁶⁶

In addition to traditional, religious and economic antisemitism, the popular antisemitic stereotype of associating Jews and communism proliferated in the late 1930s. The Judeo-Bolshevik myth had existed in Lithuania since the previous decade, first promulgated by right-wing groups in the mid-1920s as a part of anti-leftist propaganda which simultaneously “appealed to fears of Bolshevism” and “Jewish domination.”¹⁶⁷ The Lithuanian Communist Party (LCP) aimed to overthrow the existing regime and unite Lithuania with the Soviet Union. Therefore, under the Smetona regime it was banned as an anti-state organization, so the LCP operated underground. Nonetheless, LCP membership increased in the 1930s, including the numbers of Jews, who comprised 31 percent of the LCP in Lithuania and 70 percent in Kovno in 1939. Still, Eidintas says Jews’ active participation in the party was largely exaggerated.¹⁶⁸ Paradoxically, economic instability in the 1930s also prompted the negative association of Jews with capitalism, as many Jews were factory and business owners.¹⁶⁹ Sirutavičius sums up the multiple, contradictory antisemitic perceptions of Jews in Lithuania in the late 1930s as such: “Jews were accused of not being loyal to the state, they were said to be aligned with the communist movement, they were reproached for dominating the economic sphere, and they were considered to be of no social or economic benefit to Lithuanian society.”¹⁷⁰ Still, in comparison

¹⁶⁵ Sirutavičius, “A Close but Very Suspicious and Dangerous Neighbor,” 260

¹⁶⁶ Sužiedėlis, “The Historical Sources for Antisemitism,” 137.

¹⁶⁷ Sužiedėlis, “The Historical Sources for Antisemitism,” 124.

¹⁶⁸ Alfonsas Eidintas, “A ‘Jew-Communist’ Stereotype in Lithuania, 1940-1941,” *Lithuanian Political Science Yearbook* 01 (2000): 5.

¹⁶⁹ Sužiedėlis, “The Historical Sources for Antisemitism,” 128.

¹⁷⁰ Sirutavičius, “A Close but Very Suspicious and Dangerous Neighbor,” 261-2.

to Jews in places such as Germany and Poland, Lithuanian Jews were indisputably “better off.”¹⁷¹

While Jack Brauns lauded Jewish life in Kovno as a “Jewish renaissance,” and said that “you didn’t feel the burden of being Jewish. In fact, it was a privilege,” his recollections of associating mainly with Jews indicates that life for Jews in Kovno was not entirely privileged and secure.¹⁷² He explained that his Jewish school had its own skating rink because “it was really much more fun to be with your friends than having the fear – of antisemitism.”¹⁷³ Morris Rich experienced Lithuanians’ hatred of Jews “all the time” before the war. Ethnic Lithuanian children threw stones as he and his Jewish friends walked home from school; if a Jew beat a non-Jew in a soccer games or boxing match, Jews were at risk of being attacked afterwards.¹⁷⁴ Another Holocaust survivor from Kovno, Ann Hirschberg, offered an explanation of the survivors’ varying childhood experiences of antisemitism, and the seemingly common experience of Jewish youth being at risk of antisemitic attacks, verbal and physical, in public. She commented that “when you go to school with a girl and you sit with her and do your homework with her she is going to be your friend,” but maybe the girl’s brother would not be friendly. As evidence, she said that she went to a Lithuanian school and did not experience antisemitism. Her brother, however, attended a Hebrew school and, identified as Jewish by his school uniform, was beaten up by Gentile boys.¹⁷⁵ Evidently it was known that it was safer for Jews to intentionally interact with non-Jews than for Jews and non-Jews to encounter each other as strangers on the street.

¹⁷¹ Levin, “On the Relations between the Baltic Peoples and Their Jewish Neighbors,” 55. Also in Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, 239.

¹⁷² Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 8.

¹⁷³ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 8.

¹⁷⁴ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 31.

¹⁷⁵ Ann Hirschberg, Wheeling, Illinois, U.S.A., 29 June 1995, interview 3643, segment 6, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019.

Others remembered Lithuanian antisemitism more clearly. Morris Rich declared that Lithuania, “is one of the most antisemitic countries...in the world.”¹⁷⁶ Perhaps such a comment reflects hindsight, not direct memories of his experiences in Lithuania before 1941. But Anna Gure also remembered that antisemitism was a widespread reality in interwar Kovno, recalling that “Lithuanians were notoriously known as antisemites...my friends of course not in my presence...but somehow we didn’t pay much attention to it...we had to survive so you know.”¹⁷⁷ Antisemitism was so prevalent that Gure acknowledged that her Lithuanian friends may have been antisemitic, but that did not affect their friendship. It seems to have been accepted as an enduring condition of Jewish life in Lithuania. Waldemar Ginsburg made the distinction that a different kind of antisemitism developed over the interwar years in Lithuania. Religious and economic antisemitism had always existed, “but racial antisemitism was something new,” he recalled. When Ginsburg studied architecture at Kaunas University in the late 1930s, he said “I experienced for the first time antisemitic agitation and it came to me as a shock. It was the result of a minority of students which were contaminated with the ideas of Nazi Germany.”¹⁷⁸ Lithuanians’ antisemitism was tolerated as part of life in Lithuania, as it did not disrupt daily life or permeate all interactions between Jews and non-Jews. Even the “new” form of antisemitism was not cause for alarm; it was shocking to experience for the first time, but it could be attributed to foreign ideas, not local attitudes.

¹⁷⁶ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 31.

¹⁷⁷ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 11.

¹⁷⁸ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 32-33.

Dangers at Home and Abroad

Despite the latent and at times overt presence of antisemitism, yet perhaps due to its infrequent expression, Jews felt secure as Jews in Kovno. When asked if Jewish friends were seeking to leave Kovno during the interwar years, Anna Gure asserted, “why should they leave? They had a good life there, there was no question about it.” As a teenager, she said that she thought life in Kovno “was boring like hell,” but her parents’ generation was “very content.”¹⁷⁹ Older Jews such as Gure’s grandfather had chosen to live in Lithuania because it was perceived to be better for Jews there than in other places, like the Soviet Union. Although Brauns described how “very Jewish” Jews were in Kovno, and indicated that Jewish children avoided associating with Lithuanian children due to fears of antisemitism, he maintained that Jews “were very proud of Lithuanian culture.”¹⁸⁰ Even Rich, despite his strong condemnation of Lithuanians’ antisemitism, declared that he had believed “it’s our country. I was born here.”¹⁸¹ In retrospect, Brauns called the devotion of Jews to Lithuania a “tragedy,” but acknowledged that Jews stayed in Lithuania because they saw no reason to leave, “the life in Lithuania was not really bad. It was a very comfortable life.”¹⁸²

Awareness of external events in Nazi Germany, and even the outbreak of World War II in 1939, did not drastically change this assessment of Jewish life in Lithuania or spur the widespread notion that Jews were in danger and thus should attempt to leave. Neither did testimonies indicate that Jews perceived the Soviet Union to be a major threat. Those who had access to foreign-language newspapers or read German books were apparently aware of Nazism and its implications for Jews. As a child Anna Gure was an avid reader of German literature, and

¹⁷⁹ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 24-25.

¹⁸⁰ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 12.

¹⁸¹ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 32-33.

¹⁸² Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 14.

commented that “all of the German authors were trying to tell the world what was going on, few of our people listened.”¹⁸³ Even Hitler himself had stated his intentions in *Mein Kampf*, which Morris Rich’s father had read, which made him very concerned.¹⁸⁴ Margaret Kagan and her family had even travelled to Berlin, presumably sometime in the mid-1930s, and remembers seeing the park benches designated for Jews only. However, despite her personal encounter with Nazi antisemitism, there is no sense in her testimony that there was even the consideration that her life in Lithuania as a Jew was threatened or she would be subjected to the same treatment.¹⁸⁵

The arrival of refugees from Nazism was another source of information about the Nazi regime which came straight to the Jews in Kovno. The first to come to the city were German Jews in the 1930s, and then Polish Jews after war broke out in September 1939. Waldemar Ginsburg recalled that the German Jews told “all the horror stories” and thus Kovno Jews were “quite well-informed;” however, people were “complacent” and “optimistic, convinced that people have learned their lesson and would not repeat the mistakes of the First World War.”¹⁸⁶ Essentially, it was terrible what the German Jews were subjected to, but for the time being, it remained a German problem. After Germany invaded Poland, Margaret Kagan recalled that the arrival of Polish Jewish refugees in Kovno made them “much more aware of the problems of war than we had been, of antisemitism before the war started.”¹⁸⁷ They were aware of its effects on others, perhaps, but it did not lead to having a sense of “doom” themselves as Jews in Kovno.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, the consequences of Nazi antisemitism were not yet fully known, even to Polish refugees. Another Holocaust survivor from Kovno, Jerry Convoy, remembered that the refugees

¹⁸³ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 27-28.

¹⁸⁴ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 18-19.

¹⁸⁵ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 10.

¹⁸⁶ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 34-35.

¹⁸⁷ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 11.

¹⁸⁸ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 41.

“did not know what was happening behind them. They only came in and say that the Germans starting to organize ghettos and put all the Jews together....”¹⁸⁹ Polish refugees knew some details of Nazi persecution of Jews, but as this was still an unfolding policy such knowledge was far from complete or consistent.

According to Jack Brauns, Jews in Kovno “opened every door possible...everything that could be done for the refugees was done, from money, to lodging, to food,” but there was no sense that the Jewish community in Lithuania themselves needed help at the moment.¹⁹⁰ As such, a well-known story regarding helping Jews leave Lithuania involves Jewish refugees, not Jewish Lithuanians. Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat in the Japanese consulate in Kovno, helped Jewish refugees travel eastwards by granting transit visas through the Soviet Union to Japan, contrary to official Japanese orders to cease. Before he was ordered to leave Lithuania in September 1940, Sugihara was able to issue over 2,000 visas throughout the previous year.

Jack Brauns personally met Sugihara. While on summer vacation in a resort town on the coast of Lithuania, Brauns’s family had befriended a German-Jewish family who needed transit visas through the Soviet Union. Brauns’s father used his diplomatic connections to invite Sugihara to have dinner at the Brauns’s home with the German family. Brauns remembered that the family spoke of the “horrors” of living in Germany, “how the Jews couldn’t get this, and how they were beaten on the street,” but said that he couldn’t fully comprehend the stories he heard, because “our life was not touched.”¹⁹¹ Jewish life in Lithuania must have seemed so different, so secure in comparison. Similarly, Ginsburg said others did not have the same sense that events in Germany would affect their lives in Lithuania. They were “aware of the two superpowers getting

¹⁸⁹Jerry Convoy, Hampstead, Quebec, Canada, 27 April 1997, interview 29148, segment 9, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019.

¹⁹⁰ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 10.

¹⁹¹ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 10.

more belligerent on each side of us,” but, “people who live in peaceful circumstances...don’t usually like to dwell on the unpleasant aspects of life...we thought it can’t happen here. It will happen everywhere else but not here.” In hindsight, he added, “that was our big mistake.”¹⁹²

Evaluations of the perceived threats to Jewish life in Kovno varied, even within families. Although it was known that Jews were suffering in areas under German occupation, the speculation that the same could happen in Kovno was unsubstantiated and contemplating leaving seemed irrational to those comfortable with their lives in Kovno. Some Jews, like Morris Rich’s father did, however, believe that their lives would be soon be put in peril. According to Rich, his father had told his mother “we don’t have a chance to hang around Lithuania,” likening the Jews’ situation to “standing on an iceberg which is melting under our feet. And it’s going to melt. And we are all going to be sunk, and drowned, and dead, and murdered.” For whatever reason, Rich’s father had more foresight than most of the possible extent of Nazi terror. Before war broke out in 1939, his father “begged” his mother to emigrate to the United States, but she pointed out that richer Jews were building factories and not leaving, so why should they. So, they stayed.¹⁹³ After 1939, Anna Gure also tried to convince a family member that they should try to leave Lithuania. She had “read German literature and newspapers and I was quite aware what was going on and I was frightened to death.” When she expressed her fears to her father, he refused to leave, he “didn’t want to wander anymore.”¹⁹⁴ Jews had been subjected to forms of persecution in Europe for centuries. Perhaps many Jews evaluated the information they had and considered some possibility that life would become more difficult, but ultimately determined that life in Kovno would be livable.

¹⁹² Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 17.

¹⁹³ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 18-19.

¹⁹⁴ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 9.

For many of those who decided they should leave, they could not. Although she wanted to leave, Anna Gure said that she was not aware of many opportunities to do so, but also did not try.¹⁹⁵ Waldemar Ginsburg made efforts to emigrate to America, but it would have taken ten years for him to receive a visa.¹⁹⁶ Jack Brauns's parents also thought about going to America but were told it was a minimum five-year wait. British Mandate Palestine was another popular destination for Lithuanian Jews, but the British government restricted Jewish immigration. Unfortunately, for many like Brauns and Ginsburg, almost all doors leading out of Lithuania were closed, even for those ready to leave.

The Soviet Occupation: “Between the red devil and the brown devil”

After Lithuania lost its independence and became the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic in summer 1940, the accompanying Sovietization policies completely disrupted all aspects of life. Lithuanian society became “quickly atomized and traditional social bonds [were] broken.” Interethnic relations significantly worsened, as Jews became even more so negatively identified with communism and the Soviet regime.¹⁹⁷ This misperception ignored the fact that Jews suffered from Sovietization as well. The notion that Jews were colluding with the Soviets and exploiting Lithuanians was in part stoked by foreign-produced propaganda, such as that distributed by the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF). The extent of the LAF's influence in Lithuania is indeterminable, but Sužiedėlis does not place much emphasis on the existence of antisemitic and anti-Soviet propaganda or the connection between the LAF and the Nazi regime. Rather, he asserts that the LAF's “increasingly strident antisemitism was partly a reaction to the

¹⁹⁵ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 9.

¹⁹⁶ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 37.

¹⁹⁷ MacQueen, “The Context of Mass Destruction: Agents and Prerequisites of the Holocaust in Lithuania,” 32.

mood back home, which was a distorted response to a real tragedy, and needed little prodding from ‘foreign influences.’”¹⁹⁸ Anger towards perceived Jewish collaboration with the Soviets increased in mid-June 1941, when the Soviets arrested and deported 18,000 Lithuanians.¹⁹⁹ Despite the large number of Jews also taken away, some Lithuanians blamed the Jews for what happened because a few Jews had been members of the committee responsible for the deportations.²⁰⁰ According to Sužiedėlis, these deportations “pushed an already anxious Lithuanian society over the edge.”²⁰¹

During the Soviet Occupation of Lithuania, Russia and Germany were partners in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the following Boundary and Friendship Treaty. Not only did populations under Soviet rule believe that the specter of a war between the two powers was lessened, the Soviet press and radio also censored any negative information about the Nazis’ treatment of Jews in German-occupied Poland. As Lithuania was still independent in fall 1939, Jews in Kovno could have been more aware of conditions in German-occupied Poland; the country only fell under Soviet censorship in mid-1940. In addition, in autumn 1939, tens of thousands of refugees, many of them Jews, streamed across the border into Lithuania. Many passed through Kovno.²⁰² Yet information about the Nazis’ mistreatment of Jews may not have been believable to Kovno Jews who encountered refugees.

Historians looking at the impact of Soviet censorship of news of Nazism on Jews in the Soviet Union mostly focus on Soviet-occupied eastern Poland, as does Ben-Cion Pinchuk, or the pre-1939 borders of the Soviet Union, as does Mordechai Altshuler and others. In his study of

¹⁹⁸ Sužiedėlis, “‘Listen, the Jews are Ruling Us Now,’” 329.

¹⁹⁹ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 98.

²⁰⁰ Levin, “On the Relations between the Baltic Peoples and Their Jewish Neighbors.” 56.

²⁰¹ Sužiedėlis, “‘Listen, the Jews are Ruling Us Now,’” 328.

²⁰² Ben-Cion Pinchuk, “Soviet Media on the Fate of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Territory (1939-1941),” *Yad Vashem Studies* 11 (1976): 233.

Jews in Soviet Belarus, Jeffrey Koerber asserts that although Jews knew about the events of Kristallnacht in 1938, news of persecution of Jews in German-occupied areas after fall 1939 was limited and replaced by rumors, which were often dismissed.²⁰³ If such limited information was given credence at all, Altshuler says it was only clear that Jews “had been thrown to the wolves” under Nazi rule, but more specifics were unknown or unknowable.²⁰⁴ Furthermore, although the Soviet press published some information in spring 1940 suggesting that Germany posed a military threat, Jews’ sense of insecurity under Soviet rule was lessened by Soviet “propaganda reinforcing trust in the strength of the Red Army.”²⁰⁵ No matter what information Jews may have received in Kovno, the genocide of European Jews with the aim of extermination, was not yet in the minds of Jews anywhere in Europe, nor in the plans of the Nazis themselves, as this endeavor did not begin until the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.²⁰⁶ Although testimonies discuss impressions of the Nazi threat to the west, before June 1940 they do not mention fearing their neighbor to the east.

For all of Lithuanian society, Jews and non-Jews alike, “life was turned upside down” after the Soviets occupied Lithuania in June 1940.²⁰⁷ Although Lithuania was only under Soviet Occupation for a year, the experience significantly exacerbated interethnic tensions, as Jews were accused of benefitting from the Soviet regime and being responsible for Lithuanian suffering under Sovietization policies. When looking at the violence which erupted in June 1941, in comparison to the lack of overt and violent expressions of antisemitism Jews had experienced

²⁰³ Jeffrey Koerber, “What Did Soviet Jews Make of Kristallnacht? The Nazi Threat in the Soviet Press,” in *New Perspectives on Kristallnacht: After 80 Years, the Nazi Pogrom in Global Comparison*, eds. Wolf Gruner and Steven J. Ross (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2019), 157.

²⁰⁴ Mordechai Altshuler, “The Distress of Jews in the Soviet Union in the Wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 36, no. 2 (2008): 101, 106.

²⁰⁵ Koerber, “What Did Soviet Jews Make of Kristallnacht? The Nazi Threat in the Soviet Press,” 160.

²⁰⁶ Altshuler, “The Distress of Jews in the Soviet Union in the Wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact,” 74.

²⁰⁷ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 33.

in Lithuania and their relatively peaceful relations with non-Jews before the Soviet Occupation, it is clear that the year of occupation severely disturbed Lithuanian society. Although Lithuanians understandably felt animosity toward the Soviets, they misattributed and misdirected their troubles to a familiar scapegoat. Ultimately, after a year, Jews arguably suffered the worst consequences of the Soviet Occupation. When asked if there was a change in the level of antisemitism during the occupation, Anna Gure remembered, “Yes, of course. All the Jews were communists...they said it freely, all the Jews are communists.”²⁰⁸ Such sentiments were not new, but they did become more prevalent and virulent during this period and would later become lethal for some Jews in Kovno, including Gure’s grandfather.

Some Jews, as well as some Lithuanians, welcomed the arrival of the Soviets. For Jews, Soviet rule was beneficial to an extent, it promised protection from the Nazis and possibilities for career opportunities not afforded to them under Smetona’s nationalist policies.²⁰⁹ In reality, of course, not all Jews desired communist rule. As previously noted, many families had had negative experiences under communism after the Russian Revolution and had fled to Lithuania. For those families, the period of Soviet Occupation was fear-filled. Ginsburg’s stepfather was one such refugee; he apparently did not hide his scorn for the Soviets and therefore the family feared they would be arrested and deported.²¹⁰ Anna Gure’s grandfather had a “devastating” experience with Soviet communism, and her family had “a great deal of fear” throughout that year of occupation.²¹¹ Such families were not afraid because they were Jewish, although Jewish institutions and Jewish businessmen and property owners were negatively affected by

²⁰⁸ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 36.

²⁰⁹ Sužiedėlis, “Listen, the Jews are Ruling Us Now,” 311.

²¹⁰ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 36-37.

²¹¹ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 36.

Sovietization policies. For well-off Jews or those who were known anti-communists, their primary fear was arrest and deportation to Siberia as “bourgeoisie” enemies.

Even for Jews like Margaret Kagan’s mother who “hated the Soviets,” there was a sense that Lithuania was “wedged between the red devil and the brown devil and inevitably...would get crushed by one or the other.” Therefore, her mother “was very ambivalent, she certainly was unhappy to be under the Soviets but nobody wanted to be under the Germans.”²¹² Anna Gure also remembered it being a “very unhappy time;” her father’s business was nationalized, and was sent to a new job in the provinces.²¹³ But, although it became a “different life,” it “was still a life.” Jack Brauns clarified, “there was still food on the table. Nobody beat anybody up, and it was still a *modus vivendi*.”²¹⁴ As Morris Rich remembered, life did not change much for him under the Soviet Occupation as “the poor people...didn’t have anything to lose,” but he noted that the secularization affected religious institutions, which was “not a happy outcome.”²¹⁵

Not only was life “wedged between the red devil and the brown devil” unhappy for Jews, it was also nearly impossible to escape if they so desired. There were even fewer possibilities to leave Lithuania than before the Soviets entered. War raged to the west and the eastern border with the Soviet Union was closed; travel through the Soviet Union to other destinations was only possible if one had a transit visa, which was difficult to obtain.²¹⁶ In addition to not being able to leave, Kovno Jews may not have wanted to do so. Ostensibly, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the perceived strength of the Red Army protected Soviet occupied-territories from the Germans. Jerry Convoy remembered that his father said that what was happening to Jews in Nazi-occupied

²¹² Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 11.

²¹³ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 32.

²¹⁴ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 17.

²¹⁵ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 25.

²¹⁶ Dov Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils: Eastern European Jewry under Soviet Rule, 1938-1941*, trans. Naftali Greenwood (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 206.

Poland would “never happen” in Kovno because “the Russians are here and [the Germans] would not dare to come into Kovno to occupy it.”²¹⁷ Accordingly, some Jews were more afraid of Soviet deportations than of a possible impending Nazi invasion. In an ironic twist of fate, those who were deported to Siberia and imprisoned in gulags were saved from what would happen when the Germans surprised the world and invaded the Soviet Union. Jews in Kovno would not only be surprised by the invasion, which they had feared, but experienced further shock when they realized they then had to fear the local Lithuanians as well.

Conclusion

An examination of Jews’ lives in interwar Kovno highlights the unprecedented nature of the events that would unfold in the first weeks following the German invasion. The level of integration and interaction between Jews and non-Jews varied based on a family’s socioeconomic status and schools attended by children. Jews and non-Jews were friends and colleagues, but some Jews mostly socialized with other Jewish families. Although some Jews experienced antisemitism, they did not perceive it to be a life-threatening phenomenon. Knowledge about the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany was disturbing, but there was a sense that nothing like that could happen in Kovno.

The Soviet Occupation in June 1940 initiated a crisis period, severely destabilizing Lithuanian society. Sovietization negatively impacted Jews and non-Jews alike, but Jews were perceived negatively by Lithuanians as communist sympathizers and collaborators. Jews did seem to have the sense that Soviet rule was preferable to Nazi occupation, although they only had limited knowledge of what was happening to Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland since the war

²¹⁷ Convoy, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 9.

began in 1939. Those who discussed or attempted to leave Lithuania based their decisions on the perceived threat of Nazi Germany to Jewish life in Lithuania, yet there was not yet the sense that a German invasion constituted a mortal threat. In Kovno, Jews had actively interpreted their experience during the interwar years and had asserted their sense of agency in their decisions to integrate into Lithuanian society, decisions which relied on what was known about what it meant to be a Jew in Lithuania. It could not have been known that the situation would change so drastically, overnight, on June 22, 1941.

3 Clarity of Insight and Total Blindness: Jews' Perceptions and Actions during the Kovno Pogroms

Jewish accounts of the violence experienced in the days following the German invasion of the Soviet Union exemplify what Saul Friedländer describes as “the clarity of insight and the total blindness of human beings confronted with an entirely new and utterly horrifying reality.”²¹⁸ Jews had the clarity that an invasion would put them in danger, but initially they were totally blindsided by the reality that it was local Lithuanians who posed an immediate threat. While attempting to comprehend that new reality, Kovno Jews simultaneously navigated the chaotic environment of the pogroms and took action based on their knowledge and perception of events and what they believed would help them survive.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Friedländer reminds us that Jews “did not understand what was ultimately in store for them.” Even if they did have some sense of what was to come from a German invasion, “in terms of reactions and initiatives, expecting terrible hardship and even widespread death is one thing, expecting immediate murder, quite another.”²¹⁹ Yet the situation Kovno Jews faced following the German invasion was even more horrifyingly unprecedented, because they held no expectations of immediate murder, nor that it would come at the hands of local Lithuanians. Given the impossibility of foresight, Friedländer emphasizes

²¹⁸ Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 2.

²¹⁹ Saul Friedländer, “An Integrated History of the Holocaust: Possibilities and Challenges” in *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies*, eds. Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (London: Continuum, 2010), 23.

the need to recognize that “any steps taken by Jews in order to hamper the Nazi effort to eradicate every single one of them represented a direct countermove.”²²⁰ However, the Kovno pogroms were not the consequence of the Nazis’ extermination policy, which had not yet been formally launched but would soon begin in the Lithuanian provinces. Rather, Kovno Jews had to take steps and make countermoves to avoid the Lithuanians who were participating in the pogroms, whose efforts were significantly more disordered than the Nazis’.

Local Lithuanians held significant responsibility for the violence unleashed against Jews over the two-week period, June 22 – July 6, 1941, following the onset of the German invasion. Pogroms began before the Germans arrived in Kovno, soon after news broke of their invasion of the Soviet Union. On June 23, a Lithuanian Provisional Government was established in Kovno, which organized the Lithuanian army and police.²²¹ Accordingly, Christoph Dieckmann and Saulius Sužiedėlis write that “it can be assumed with a fair degree of certainty that the hastily reorganized security and criminal police in Kaunas also participated in the arrests” of Jews. Identified by their white armbands, Lithuanian partisans roamed the city, targeting not only those Jews they found on the streets but also Jews sheltering in their homes. In addition to arresting, robbing, and harming Jews, Lithuanians also publicly humiliated their victims.²²²

While Lithuanians targeting Jews were loosely organized and acted on their own initiative in the first few days, the pogroms reached “their terrible fury and extent” in the days following the arrival of the Germans. The first German soldiers reached Kovno in the evening of June 24. SS commander Franz Stahlecker, head of *Einsatzgruppe A*, entered the city soon after in the early hours of June 25 with an *Einsatzgruppen* unit, SK 1B; he encouraged the continuation of

²²⁰ Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, xxiv.

²²¹ Arad, “The Murder of the Jews in German-Occupied Lithuania (1941–1944),” 181.

²²² Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 120.

the Lithuanians' actions.²²³ That night, from June 25 to June 27, the most intense violence of the pogroms took place in the suburb of Slobodka. Historians and eyewitness accounts alike describe the Lithuanians' actions as incredibly brutal. Jews were shot and stabbed, their bodies were mutilated, synagogues were vandalized, and homes were set on fire (Figure 3).²²⁴ Because photographic evidence of the event exists, the most well-known tragedy of the Kovno pogroms is the Lietūkis Garage massacre on June 27. Several Lithuanian perpetrators humiliated, tortured, and killed about 60 Jewish men as a crowd of both Lithuanian civilians and Germans soldiers watched.²²⁵ On June 28, the Germans disarmed the Lithuanian partisan groups and established local police battalions.²²⁶

Figure 3- Vandalized Kovno synagogue with a body lying across a bench
(Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

²²³ Dieckmann, "Lithuania in Summer 1941- The German Invasion and Kaunas Pogrom," 360.

²²⁴ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 123.

²²⁵ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 121-122.

²²⁶ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 119.

Approximately 1,000 Jews were killed during that first week. Another 5,000 more Jews (mostly Jewish men) were murdered in the second week, June 30 –July 6, in mass executions, primarily carried out at the Seventh Fort. German and Lithuanians collaborated in this second phase of massacres. On July 6, however, members of both the German Wehrmacht and Security Police forces voiced their disapproval of the Lithuanians' behavior during the murders. The Germans subsequently asserted total control over the treatment of Jews in the Kovno and thereafter systemized and supervised all future mass murder operations in Lithuania and other newly occupied areas.²²⁷

The shocking and chaotic first week of pogroms prompted Kovno's Jews to improvise survival strategies. Jews demonstrated their agency in the various "countermoves" they made. First, following the onset of the German invasion but before the pogroms began, Jews decided whether to stay or flee, depending on their perceptions of the Nazi threat and opportunities available to them. Amidst the chaos of the ensuing pogroms, Jews relied on their personal experiences and perceptions of Lithuanians' motivations in their evaluation of unfolding events to guide their actions and decisions. In this dangerous, disordered environment, some Jews moved locations in attempts to avoid harm. The primary survival technique Kovno Jews possessed was one of avoidance through hiding in their homes. Unfortunately, staying inside did not always protect them, as partisans broke in, ostensibly to search for "communists," to loot and kill the Jewish inhabitants. Therefore, by early July, Jews began to view the Germans' order to establish a ghetto as a survival strategy in itself, a place where, amongst fellow Jews, they would not have to hide from the constant threat of death. Those Jews who were arrested and taken to the Seventh Fort also demonstrated agency but had less chances to do so. While Jews had

²²⁷ Dieckmann, "Lithuania in Summer 1941- The German Invasion and Kaunas Pogrom," 360.

agency, their countermoves ultimately were effective or ineffective often only by chance. In this tumultuous period, random encounters often determined the positive or negative outcomes of agentive action.

Survivor testimonies, which, as we have seen, offer much detail about Jewish life in interwar Lithuania, also describe the profound contrast between life before and after June 22, 1941. According to survivor Sonia Stern, “life wasn’t bad” before the war broke out, but then “the whole country went crazy.”²²⁸ In addition to tracing the experiences of many of those survivors discussed in the previous chapter, I supplement personal experiences with contemporary written accounts which describe the collective experience of Kovno’s Jews during the pogroms and illustrate how utterly horrifying their new reality was. This chapter establishes how they confronted it. First, how did Jews respond to the news of the German invasion? Then, how did Jews react when the first violence they experienced came at the hands of local Lithuanians? What did Jews understand about the Lithuanians’ motivations for attacking Jews? How did Jews’ knowledge and perceptions of events during the pogroms inform the survival strategies they decided to employ? Did Jews perceive the local Lithuanian attackers and invading Germans differently? How did Jews view the Germans in the wake of the Lithuanian pogroms?

The German Invasion and Kovno Jews’ “fateful decision”

The German invasion of the Soviet Union came as a surprise. Although feared and somewhat anticipated, the attack caught Red Army forces completely off guard. With no time to mount an immediate defensive strategy, most military units rapidly retreated eastwards. The invasion caught civilians by surprise as well; when the war broke out some Jewish children, such

²²⁸ Sonia Stern, Houston, Texas, U.S.A., 6 January 1995, interview 55180, segment 17, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019

as Margaret Kagan's younger brother, were at summer camps outside of Kovno. Twelve-year-old Nechama Shneorson was also away at camp. The sound of German bombs woke the children and they were rushed back to the city.

Even before violence began, the expected arrival of the Germans meant Kovno Jews needed to decide whether to stay or try to flee eastward. When Nechama Shneorson was reunited with her family, her parents explained that they would "have to try to run away" because they believed if they stayed, the Germans would do to them what they heard had happened to Polish Jews.²²⁹ The next day, as the family fled east towards the Russian border, they followed in the path of the retreating Red Army and thousands of civilian refugees. But those fleeing seldom got far.²³⁰ The German advance was so rapid that Wehrmacht forces frequently overran refugee columns, forcing them to turn back. The Shneorsons, for example, made it only about 80 kilometers before they turned back when they realized that there was "nowhere to escape anymore."²³¹ Unfortunately for them and thousands of others, they could not return to their homes. Many returning Jews were captured and imprisoned, mostly at the Seventh Fort.²³² Their fate is discussed later in this chapter.

Although fearful of the dangers posed by the Germans, flight was not an immediately clear choice for some Jews. On June 22, Anna Gure's extended family members gathered together, "waiting" to see what would happen.²³³ Waldemar Ginsburg's family spent that day "in a panic"; fourteen family members gathered together to "make the fateful decision," whether to

²²⁹ Nechama Shneorson, New York, New York, 16 November 1995, interview 8842, segment 26, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019.

²³⁰ Schalkowsky, ed., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 66.

²³¹ Shneorson, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 32-33.

²³² *Clandestine History*, 66.

²³³ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 44.

stay or flee.²³⁴ His stepfather wanted to follow the retreating Russians, since he thought it would be better to “take his chances with the devil he knows.” Other family members, however, recalled their positive experience under German occupation of Lithuania during the First World War and thus believed “the Germans aren’t so bad.” Life might become “difficult,” they reasoned, but it would be “better than living under the Communists.”²³⁵ Ultimately the family decided to stay in Kovno. Of those gathered that day, Waldemar was the only one to survive the war.²³⁶ Jack Brauns’s father turned down the opportunity to flee. He was a highly respected doctor, and the Soviets had arranged a car to evacuate the family. Yet when the car arrived the next day, he decided that he would not abandon his patients, and the family would stay.²³⁷

“Trouble came from a direction which we did not expect”

When Jews made the decision to stay or flee, it was in response to the German invasion. The threat that local Lithuanians posed to Jews proved to be an unanticipated and much more immediate danger. Thus, the pogroms were just as surprising as the invasion itself, if not more so. When Waldemar Ginsburg’s family decided to remain in Kovno they had expected trouble from the Germans, “but the trouble came from a direction which we did not expect.”²³⁸ Although scholars would later debate whether Lithuanians independently initiated the pogroms, Jews clearly recalled this to be the case. Holocaust survivor testimonies attest to the fact Lithuanians started targeting Jews before German forces arrived in the city. When recounting the first few days of the pogroms, Jack Brauns emphasized that many Jews “were killed at that period of time,

²³⁴ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 46.

²³⁵ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 47.

²³⁶ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 48.

²³⁷ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 18.

²³⁸ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 49.

before the Germans came.”²³⁹ Abraham Resnick also recalled this sequence of events, asserting “before the Germans came in, you should know that the Lithuanians became like beasts.”²⁴⁰ While the killings intensified after the Germans arrived in the city, the first days of violence constituted a terrifying initiation for Kovno Jews. The fact that Lithuanians independently attacked Jews was disconcerting yet eye-opening.

Kovno Jews seem to have quickly understood Lithuanians’ actions as a consequence of the Soviet retreat, which left Jews vulnerable in ways they had not been under Soviet or interwar Lithuanian rule. The disintegration of local rule permitted Lithuanians to release latent hatreds, without fear of consequence. Anna Gure described how “immediately almost the Lithuanians bloomed” after the Soviets retreated.²⁴¹ According to Morris Rich, Kovno became a “free city.” Lithuanians were free from Soviet rule and thus free to act out their repressed aggression, so they “right away took that for a good opportunity to start killing.”²⁴² Avraham Tory wrote in his wartime diary that, after the Soviets retreated, the Jews of Kovno were “left behind as fair game.”²⁴³ Similarly, the Jewish ghetto policemen who wrote *The Clandestine History* while imprisoned in the Kovno Ghetto characterized the status of Jews in the city as having become “*hefker*,” like abandoned property, “any non-Jew could do with us as he pleased.”²⁴⁴

Jack Brauns explained that the chaos of the invasion gave Lithuanians “an opportunity to kill the Jews” because “there was nobody...who would protect the Jews.”²⁴⁵ Indeed, the newly restored Lithuanian leadership in the city either directed, participated, or were complicit in the violence. Kovno was the center of an anti-Soviet uprising, led by the Lithuanian Activist Front

²³⁹ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 15.

²⁴⁰ Resnick, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 26.

²⁴¹ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 43.

²⁴² Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 35.

²⁴³ Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 8.

²⁴⁴ Schalkowsky, ed., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 70.

²⁴⁵ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 19.

(LAF). The LAF was a Lithuanian right-wing nationalist group which had been headquartered in Berlin during the Soviet Occupation, preparing to restore Lithuanian independence following an eventual German invasion of the Soviet Union. On June 23, a leader of the LAF declared Lithuania's independence and announced the establishment of a provisional government.²⁴⁶ However, the group was not entirely responsible for the violence that erupted throughout the city.²⁴⁷ Historian Christoph Dieckmann notes how the violence that erupted in the wake of the German invasion was "the result of a combination of central planning and local spontaneous action," but "communication difficulties proved to be too great for direct coordination of the entire uprising."²⁴⁸ Despite their lack of central coordination, Lithuanian partisans were loosely organized in various groups and could be commonly identified by the white armbands they wore.²⁴⁹

After the invasion began and the Germans bombed targets outside the city, Margaret Kagan's family took shelter in a cellar with Gentile neighbors. Those hiding heard a Lithuanian military leader's radio announcement declaring that for every German soldier harmed, one hundred Jews would be shot in reprisal.²⁵⁰ She "remembers her father's face and reaction" when he heard that, it was a "revelation."²⁵¹ Such public, explicit antisemitic agitation by Lithuanian officials may have been a surprise to Margaret Kagan's family, but the Lithuanians' anti-Soviet uprising had actually been "long-prepared," according to Dieckmann.²⁵² Holocaust survivor Morris Rich recalled details that support this. In response to an interviewer's question about who armed the Lithuanians during the pogroms, Rich replied, "The Lithuanians" armed themselves,

²⁴⁶ Dieckmann, "Lithuania in Summer 1941- The German Invasion and Kaunas Pogrom," 358.

²⁴⁷ Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence*, 98.

²⁴⁸ Dieckmann, "Lithuania in Summer 1941- The German Invasion and Kaunas Pogrom," 373.

²⁴⁹ Dieckmann, "Lithuania in Summer 1941- The German Invasion and Kaunas Pogrom," 374.

²⁵⁰ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 118.

²⁵¹ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 14.

²⁵² Dieckmann, "Lithuania in Summer 1941- The German Invasion and Kaunas Pogrom," 373.

adding that “they were preparing already for years in the underground.”²⁵³ He substantiates this claim with the recollection that his family believed their neighbor, a Mr. Mazuras, had been some sort of “organizer,” as “a lot of Lithuanian Gentile people used to come to his home.” He had also been seen digging in his yard and Rich’s father had commented that he hoped he was not burying weapons.²⁵⁴ Although perceptive, it is doubtful the Rich family comprehended or contemplated that those Lithuanians next door were organizing to attack Jews.

Lithuanian partisans quickly generated chaos in the city by looting Jewish homes and brutally and indiscriminately killing and arresting Jews, mostly men. Even so, in the beginning, the violence was believed to be “a passing event,” a consequence of the chaotic invasion and the Soviets’ retreat.²⁵⁵ Margaret Kagan lived along one of the main roads the Soviet army was using to retreat, which is how she became aware of the partisans’ activities. She recalled, “they get these white armbands and they called themselves LAF...and they start immediately shooting into the backs of the retreating Russians and they start raiding Jewish homes.” After her father had an upsetting personal encounter with a passing partisan, they “seriously contemplated leaving Lithuania.” While the German invasion had not provided enough impetus, the ensuing Lithuanian violence motivated some Jews to consider fleeing. Her father even obtained a cart and horse; however, her mother refused to leave. Kagan’s younger brother had not yet returned from the summer camp he had been at, so his whereabouts were unknown. Also, her mother was convinced the war would not last long, “so we all stayed,” Kagan explained.²⁵⁶ Anna Gure remembered that the initial exposure to Lithuanian violence was very frightening, “to say the

²⁵³ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 29.

²⁵⁴ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 23.

²⁵⁵ Schalkowsky, ed., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 66.

²⁵⁶ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 15-16.

least,” but Kovno Jews “still didn’t realize how bad” their situation would become.²⁵⁷ If Jews had tried to flee east due to the newly recognized local threat, they would have been unable to get far. They would likely have been turned back and arrested like the Shneerson family.

Although most Jews could not have been aware of the full extent of the Lithuanians’ activities, nor their true motivations, others determined they were targeted for allegedly being “communists” or simply to loot their property. Morris Rich remembered that there were two separate kinds of Lithuanian perpetrators. The first were “educated,” they “killed and walked away, with guns, with pistols.” The second group “killed the Jews and...robbed them,” and “slaughtered like...butchers.”²⁵⁸ While Rich made a distinction between perpetrators’ actions, those who looted and those who killed, Waldemar Ginsburg had a monolithic explanation for Lithuanians’ motivations. According to him, they “decided to exorcise the trauma of Soviet terror by a massacre of the Jews, it was as simple as that.” He had heard Lithuanian Provisional Government radio “propaganda” calling for retribution against the “Jewish traitors who betrayed Lithuania to the communists.” As he explained, they “accused the Jews of being in league with the communists and all the Jews were branded as communists”²⁵⁹ Not only were Jews branded as communists, as Ginsburg recalled, Jews were murdered for this very reason. Anna Gure noted the preposterous situation in which her grandfather was killed, “not as a Jew but as a Jew and a communist, a man who was running from the communists was killed as one.”²⁶⁰ Gure’s comments reflect the permeation of the Jewish-Bolshevik myth among many Lithuanians; if Gure’s grandfather was indeed killed for allegedly being a communist, it did not matter to those who murdered him that their victim had despised the Soviets.

²⁵⁷ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 43.

²⁵⁸ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 37-38.

²⁵⁹ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 50-51.

²⁶⁰ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 36.

Jews also understood looting and opportunism to be significant motives for Lithuanians; as Avraham Tory described, Lithuanians realized that “hunting [Jews] is not unprofitable.” Besides, it was easier to steal from dead Jews.²⁶¹ During the first days following the invasion, Jack Brauns helped in the Jewish hospital where his father worked, encountering many looting victims there. Corroborating Tory’s allegations, Brauns remembered that “people were massacred in their homes for the purpose of stealing their goods.”²⁶² Anna Gure recalled that the Lithuanians specifically targeted wealthy Jews, they “didn’t care about the ones who lived modestly, they cared about the Jews who lived well because this is where they could grab whatever they could find.”²⁶³ Since killing often accompanied looting, Jews were fortunate if they lost their property but not their lives. Abraham Resnick’s relatives’ house was looted, and he was later told that although the intruders had wanted to “kill and to take away my Aunt’s brothers,” the family “fortunately, they had some watches, and they were able to bribe those people who came in.”²⁶⁴ Other Jews were less fortunate. At the hospital, Jack Brauns witnessed Jews who survived looting, but suffered from “maliciously inflicted injuries by marauders.” He himself almost became a victim when he visited a friend a few days after the invasion and the residence was raided while Brauns was there. Partisans took all the Jewish men from the building down to the courtyard and stood them against a wall. Brauns realized they would likely soon be shot, but his agency was restricted and his fate seemed unavoidable.²⁶⁵ However, he and others avoided that fate due to coincidental timing, which will be explained later.

²⁶¹ Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 8.

²⁶² Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 19.

²⁶³ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 45.

²⁶⁴ Abraham Resnick, Miami Beach, FL, U.S.A., 31 March 1995, interview 1975, segment 30, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019.

²⁶⁵ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 20.

“The ever-present danger of death”

Lithuanians’ motivations were mixed, and their actions were not centrally coordinated. Such unpredictability made it difficult for Jews to interpret events and act accordingly in their own self interests. What was clear was that Jews were in danger, simply because they were Jews. Because they could not change that circumstance, Jews in Kovno exercised agency by developing survival strategies. They made choices and decisions not only based on perceptions of Lithuanians’ motivations, but also their limited but growing knowledge and experience of the threats they faced as Jews. Because they learned that going outside was dangerous, many Jews tried to anticipate where they would be safest, and most felt safest in their homes. Yet even this survival strategy was not always successful.

Because the threat they faced was unexpected, Jews went outside during the first days of the pogroms when German planes were not conducting air raids. They quickly realized that going outside was deadly if someone encountered the wrong people on the streets. According to Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, “as of 25 June, any Jew who appeared in public was in danger.”²⁶⁶ Holocaust survivor Charles Anolik’s family repeatedly suffered the consequences of this new, terrible reality. He later recounted that his younger brother attempted to flee, “and of course they caught him and killed him.” His uncle went outside to “get his sister and...he got caught on the bridge and they shot him.” His cousins, too, were caught outside, arrested, and killed at the Ninth Fort.²⁶⁷ Morris Rich’s father was captured by partisans on “the first day.” His father was arrested as he was going to see if the trains were operating; he was later killed at the Seventh Fort.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 120.

²⁶⁷ Charles Anolik, Des Moines, Iowa, U.S.A., 12 December 1995, interview 10016, segments 28-29, USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, accessed on December 20, 2019.

²⁶⁸ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 24.

During this same period Margaret Kagan's father also left the shelter of their home in order to return his keys to his office and "never came back." His daughter later learned that he had been killed as part of the infamous Lietūkis Garage massacre. Kagan reflected on her father's concern about returning a set of keys, questioning, "in retrospect is that a commonsense thing to do?"²⁶⁹ At the time it was not irrational. Jews were just learning the danger that came from being on the street.

Although Jack Brauns described that walking on the street for a Jew was "almost a death sentence," it was not always one.²⁷⁰ Kagan's mother had left their home, was arrested, and returned home safely because an important Lithuanian partisan she knew recognized her where she was being held and "saved" her, a phenomenon which will be explored further in the next chapter.²⁷¹ Such a positive outcome, however, depended largely on who Jews encountered. Brauns recalled that it was especially risky for young men, if they were unlucky and encountered "a few of the people, they would take out a knife and stab you right on the street."²⁷² If a Jew happened to avoid "a few of the people," Lithuanians seeking to attack Jews, he or she might return home safely.

While some Holocaust survivors had family members that went outside and never returned home, most did not know what happened to their loved ones. As Avraham Tory wrote in his contemporaneous account, Jews caught by partisans and not killed on the spot were "dragged away in groups to unknown destinations."²⁷³ Neither Morris Rich nor Margaret Kagan knew their father's fates until much later. Both survivors said they heard "rumors" that their

²⁶⁹ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 16.

²⁷⁰ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 19.

²⁷¹ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 17.

²⁷² Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 19.

²⁷³ Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 8.

fathers were alive, doing hard labor somewhere, when they were in fact already dead.²⁷⁴ Kagan did not learn her father's fate until after the war, that he had been killed "that close to the 22 [of June]." Her family had been told that her father had "been sorting archives in east Prussia," and therefore she questions whether that was a deliberately planted rumor by the Germans.²⁷⁵ Until Rich found out the truth nine months after his father's disappearance, he held out hope that his father would return. Until Jews were confined in the Kovno Ghetto, Rich went to his friend's two-story house every day to keep watch for his father to return.²⁷⁶

After recognizing that local Lithuanians posed a threat, some Jews believed they would be safer if they moved locations. As with other choices made during this time, such decisions were based on Jews' limited knowledge. These were risky moves in retrospect. After deciding not to flee, Jack Brauns's family left their home and "took shelter" for several days in the hospital his father worked at until "the situation became a little quieter."²⁷⁷ Some families placed their children in environments they thought were safer. Because Anna Gure's family was well-off and believed that the Lithuanians were targeting wealthy Jews, the family sent her little brother to live with her maternal grandparents who lived more modestly.²⁷⁸ Soon after the invasion, Morris Rich's mother thought it would be "safer to live in the Jewish section" than where they lived, so she sent him to stay with his grandmother.²⁷⁹ When Rich saw the Germans arrive in Kovno a few days later, however, he went back to his own home. By doing so, he fortuitously but inadvertently avoided the pogroms that later took place in his grandmother's neighborhood in Slobodka.

²⁷⁴ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 53; Kagan, segment 18

²⁷⁵ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 18.

²⁷⁶ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 52.

²⁷⁷ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 19.

²⁷⁸ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 45.

²⁷⁹ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 42.

In the days between the Soviet retreat and the establishment of German control in Kovno, Avraham Tory recorded Jews' overwhelming "fear that death lies in wait for them around every corner."²⁸⁰ Many families tried to anticipate where they would be safest. Most chose to remain in their own homes. The indiscriminate, unceasing nature of the pogroms prompted this strategy. The knowledge that when "the people went out to the street...they would never come back" motivated survivors like Abraham Resnick "to stay home as much as possible."²⁸¹ Morris Rich's mother decided that they should start hiding after his brother found the family that operated the nearby bakery on the floor of the shop, "all laying in a puddle of blood and all the throats were sliced." When he returned to recount what he had seen, their mother initially responded, "Don't talk like that. How do you know? Maybe you didn't see good."²⁸² The situation was incomprehensible to her, and thus she almost automatically discounted her son's story. Those Jews who were not murdered or arrested, who witnessed or experienced the Lithuanians' terror, had to learn how to cope with their new reality. When possible, they also attempted to telephone their friends and relatives to warn them of places in the city that might be dangerous.²⁸³ With such knowledge and experiences, *The Clandestine History* revealed that "Jews who by chance did not end up in the fort or in the garages, or in similar places, sat for weeks in their dwellings, afraid to stick their noses out into the street because of the ever-present danger of death."²⁸⁴ Avraham Tory confirmed in his diary that Jews "disappeared from the streets and from the life of the city. Now they are cooped up in cellars and other hideouts."²⁸⁵ At Morris Rich's

²⁸⁰ Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 7.

²⁸¹ Resnick, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 29.

²⁸² Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 36.

²⁸³ Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 8.

²⁸⁴ *The Clandestine History*, 68.

²⁸⁵ Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 7.

grandmother's house, his relatives literally hid in the cellar and covered the entrance to it with a carpet, table, and chairs.²⁸⁶

If not for this extra level of protection, Rich's relatives may have been discovered by Lithuanian partisans who broke into the home. Not finding their intended targets, the intruders decided the Jewish residents might be hiding in the nearby synagogue and decided to go there. The Jews in the nearby synagogue were subsequently murdered.²⁸⁷ Tory's description of partisans as "a pack of bloodthirsty dogs" who "prowled the streets and courtyards, seizing panic-stricken Jews who had managed to find various hiding places" appears accurate.²⁸⁸ Thus, even staying off the streets was no guarantee of safety. Anna Gure's family was targeted in their home three separate times. The first time, the partisans entered the home under the "pretext" that someone was shooting from the window. Anna was taken away with her father and uncle to the Seventh Fort.²⁸⁹ Luckily, they were soon released, unharmed, and returned home. A day or two later, the home was raided again, and the family was once more taken outside, but this time put against a wall. Gure recalled how the Lithuanians walked back and forth threateningly with their rifles, and she fully expected they would be shot. Instead they were once again left unharmed. After what felt like a long time, they were told they could go back into their home. She characterized the experience as "an orgy of torture," indicating that she believes the Lithuanians got pleasure out of treating the Jews in such ways. She reasoned that the partisans came to their home because "they knew who was there," that Jews lived there.²⁹⁰ The third time the family was

²⁸⁶ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 39.

²⁸⁷ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 40-41.

²⁸⁸ Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 8.

²⁸⁹ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 45-46.

²⁹⁰ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 48-49.

targeted, about a week after the Germans entered Kovno, the entire family was forced out of their home and sent to the Ninth Fort, where the male family members were subsequently killed.²⁹¹

When an interviewer asked Gure if what she experienced was like anything she had seen before, she replied, “No of course not...it was incredible.”²⁹² While she believes that “the Germans told [the Lithuanians] what to do,” she asserted that “the Lithuanians did it on their own, they knew what to do.” She described the Lithuanians as “real savages,” a description frequently reiterated in other written accounts and survivor testimonies.²⁹³ In reference to when her family was taken out of their home and placed against a wall, Gure commented that “the sadism was unreal.”²⁹⁴ *The Clandestine History* similarly purported that “many murders...happened only out of sadism.”²⁹⁵ When describing the attacks in Slobodka, the contemporaneous account recounted that Lithuanians “stabbed and slaughtered in the most brutal ways, men and women, old people and small children, without distinction. With terrible sadism they struck heads with hatchets, stabbed and shot.”²⁹⁶

The indiscriminatory attacks, the brutality of the murders, and the shock of being attacked by local Lithuanians in such ways were traumatic realizations for Jews, as it all contradicted what they had known, or thought they had known, about interethnic relations in Kovno before the war. Such unprecedentedness made full comprehension of their situation difficult, but Jews had to do the best they could to react to events as they were unfolding.

²⁹¹ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 50.

²⁹² Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 54.

²⁹³ Scholarly analyses also highlight the brutality of the Kovno pogroms. Konrad Kwiet writes that the “diabolic fervor” of Lithuanians in Kovno “rivalled anything known about the possibilities for human cruelty.” Konrad Kwiet, “Rehearsing for Murder: The Beginning of the Final Solution in Lithuania in June 1941.” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 12, no. 1 (1998): 13.

²⁹⁴ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 49. *The Clandestine History*, 70.

²⁹⁵ *The Clandestine History*, 70.

²⁹⁶ *The Clandestine History*, 69.

“The Germans know law and order, the Lithuanians don’t”

Although the Germans enabled the further perpetration of the pogroms and organized the mass killings at the forts, Jews primarily cite their fear of the Lithuanians, rather than the Germans, and attribute primary culpability for the violence of the first period to the former.²⁹⁷ Furthermore, accounts frequently emphasize the Lithuanians’ more brutal, chaotic behavior.

After her family’s capture following their aborted effort to flee the city, Nechama Shneerson noticed that the Lithuanian police and German soldiers “were already like brothers and sisters and helped each other right away what to do. What do we do now with the Jews?”²⁹⁸ Before describing the aforementioned sadistic, indiscriminate attacks in Slobodka, *The Clandestine History* noted that the groups of partisans had acted “with the concurrence and blessing of the German authorities.”²⁹⁹ Indeed, the Slobodka pogrom happened after SS commander Stahlecker arrived in Kovno with the first German Security Police unit (SK 1B) in the early morning hours of June 25. He encouraged the continuation of pogroms and met with leaders of the “Klimaitis gang.” The group was not associated with the LAF or Provisional Government, but consisted the primary actors responsible for killing about a thousand Jews in the Slobodka pogroms on June 25 and 26 as well as the Lietūkis garage massacre on June 27.³⁰⁰ Even if the pogroms did escalate due to German license and encouragement, Waldemar Ginsburg attributed much of the violence during this initial period to the “Lithuanian fascists which were in league with the Nazis,” not the Germans themselves.³⁰¹ He later reiterated this, emphasizing

²⁹⁷ Relatedly, Mark Roseman notes that “victims were often not in a position clearly to distinguish between individual initiative and orders from behind the scenes, but they could observe what kind of factors might mitigate threats or excite responses.” “Holocaust Perpetrators in Victims’ Eyes” in *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies*, edited by Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (London: Continuum, 2010), 95-96.

²⁹⁸ Shneerson, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 35.

²⁹⁹ *The Clandestine History*, 69.

³⁰⁰ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 121, 123.

³⁰¹ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 49.

that the pogroms were “done quite independently of the German Nazi authorities.”³⁰² The first stage of violence ended soon after, on June 28, when the Germans disarmed the Lithuanian partisan groups and established local police battalions, known as the TDA or National Labor Service Battalions.³⁰³ From then on, large-scale unorganized killing did not occur within the city, but organized mass killings occurred outside of it, at the forts. Accordingly, in his August 4 diary entry Avraham Tory described what happened in Slobodka as a “bloody prologue.”³⁰⁴

On June 29 and 30, Jews who had been arrested throughout the week prior began to be brought to the Seventh Fort, which both local Lithuanian leaders and German officials identified as a “Jewish concentration camp.” Another “camp,” intended primarily for women and children, was planned to open at the Ninth Fort.³⁰⁵ At the Seventh Fort, two separate sections were established, for men and for women and children. The killing of Jewish men began on June 30, and for those that continued to be held, “the days that followed turned into endless torture of the detainees at the hands of the Lithuanian guards.”³⁰⁶ Both Germans and Lithuanians participated in the atrocities at the forts, the Lithuanians in the newly established TDA battalions and Germans from SKIb, EK3, and SS units.³⁰⁷ Altogether, about 5,000 Jews were killed at the Seventh Fort, half of whom perished on July 6. Historians Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis note that the Seventh Fort murders “constituted at that time the most extensive mass killings of unarmed civilians in the country’s modern history.”³⁰⁸

³⁰² Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 50-51.

³⁰³ Bubnys, “The Holocaust in Lithuania: An Outline of the Major Stages and Their Results,” 209.

³⁰⁴ Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 23.

³⁰⁵ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 135.

³⁰⁶ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 136.

³⁰⁷ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 138.

³⁰⁸ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 134.

Although the killings at the forts were organized by the Germans, it is clear from eyewitness accounts and testimonies that Lithuanians did most of the killing. Avraham Tory recorded that at the Seventh Fort, “thousands of Jews...were slaughtered by the Lithuanian ‘freedom fighters;’ some were killed in small groups, others *en masse*.”³⁰⁹ *The Clandestine History* also noted that “four to five thousand young men...perished there at the hands of the Lithuanian partisans in horrible ways.”³¹⁰ The majority of Jews killed during this initial period were killed at the Seventh Fort, and most were men. Women and children were also taken to the Seventh Fort and subjected to terrible conditions, but it does not appear that they were murdered *en masse*.

When Jews entered the forts, they did not know that mass killings would take place. When Anna Gure’s family was taken to the Ninth Fort, the women and men were separated upon arrival. She remembered hearing gunfire “minutes afterwards,” but never knew if her grandfather, father, and uncle were killed at that time or later. Although most Jewish men taken to the forts perished there, this information was not widespread. Gure noted herself, “we didn’t know that, you see.”³¹¹ Nechama Shneerson later reported the terrible conditions her mother and sisters endured for a week. Throughout their imprisonment they did not know what was happening to her father, as men and women were separated.³¹² Shneerson recalled that there was hardly any food and no toilet facilities. In addition to such squalid conditions, she remembered that every night “Germans and Lithuanians used to come in and take out women, younger women, rape them, sometimes throw them back, and sometimes you never saw them again.” Her mother slept on top of Shneerson’s oldest sister in order to hide and protect her each night, for

³⁰⁹ Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 23.

³¹⁰ Schalkowsky, ed., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 67.

³¹¹ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 52.

³¹² Shneerson, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 39.

seven nights, until they were released.³¹³ Their mother's actions demonstrate Jews' ability and determination to exercise agency even in constrained environments in order to gain a better chance of survival for themselves and loved ones. When the Shneerson women were released from the Seventh Fort after a week, Nechama noticed a "horrible" scent as they were leaving, what smelled to her like a burning chicken flesh. She reflected, "in those days, being as stupid as I was, I said, Mommy, is there somebody burning a chicken?"³¹⁴ Later, she learned that they were smelling the burning bodies of the men who had been murdered at the fort. But, at that point, they could not have understood or known, or even contemplated that that could have been the source of the smell.

Jews' descriptions of Lithuanians' actions contrast sharply with their perceptions of the Germans once they arrived in Kovno. As Morris Rich remembered, "Not even one German took act [*sic*] in the pogrom," and goes on to distinguish the perpetrators as such: "The Germans took later their business, systematically according to the books, and according to the orders of the system how to kill all the Jews, you know, to exterminate the Jews...But the Lithuanians, like butchers, they slaughter us."³¹⁵ As Margaret Kagan succinctly put it, there was a common "feeling that the Germans know law and order, the Lithuanians don't."³¹⁶ Some Jews felt protected by the Germans during the pogroms. Jack Brauns felt his life was saved by the Germans' arrival in Kovno. As he was lined up against a wall to be shot, he heard motorcycle noises and one of the partisans proclaimed, "The Germans are coming. We better leave right away." They left the scene, "leaving us with our life," recounted Brauns.³¹⁷ Although Kagan

³¹³ Shneerson, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 38.

³¹⁴ Shneerson, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 39.

³¹⁵ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 37.

³¹⁶ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 18.

³¹⁷ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 20.

remembered that the Lithuanians were doing all the Germans' "dirty work" for them, she retained a positive memory of the Germans during this period. A Wehrmacht soldier had occupied an abandoned apartment next door to her family. He told them he disapproved of the Lithuanians' actions and said, "I only hope and pray they won't send me to the front before you are safe and sound in the ghetto."³¹⁸ Kagan felt that he "protected them" from the frenzied Lithuanians.³¹⁹ Brauns felt similarly, because his father was a well-respected, German-trained doctor, the Wehrmacht occupied their building but did not evict his family. He recalled, "I was protected by the German Wehrmacht [from] any bad deeds that could happen to me. No Lithuanian would even dare to enter our apartment," because of the Germans' presence in their building.³²⁰

Ultimately, after enduring a fear-filled, chaotic two weeks, Jews perceived a Ghetto as a place of refuge from the constant threat of death. The Germans' announcement on July 10 ordering Jews to be confined to a Ghetto was met with a sense of "relief." Many believed that "the pogrom had ended and now the Jewish question would be justly regulated in this or that manner."³²¹ According to Avraham Tory's July 8 diary entry, prominent Jewish community leaders had met with German and Lithuanian leaders and determined that, for Kovno's Jews, it was "either the present torment or the Ghetto, there was no third option." A footnote on the entry adds, that Tory later recalled "the participants in the meeting had not the faintest idea what the term 'Ghetto' entailed, what living there would be like, and, in general, what would happen to the Kovno Jewish community at large. One thing was clear: the present situation was unbearable

³¹⁸ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 16.

³¹⁹ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 18.

³²⁰ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 21.

³²¹ Schalkowsky, ed., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 70.

and must come to an end without further delay.”³²² Jack Brauns described the “psychological factor” of the Ghetto, that Jews “were happy to go to the Ghetto because they felt more secure behind a wired fence” and hoped “that their life will improve.”³²³ Waldemar Ginsburg confirmed the existence of such sentiments, explaining that due to “the state we were in, we were quite willing to be locked in a prison to be saved from the excesses of the...Lithuanian fascists.”³²⁴

In July, in light of their experience of the last few weeks, German order was seen as an improvement in comparison to Lithuanian disorder. Even the anti-Jewish policies that were instituted in the following weeks before the Ghetto was closed were welcomed by Jews as a reprieve from the chaos that abounded at the hands of the Lithuanians, whose motives and actions could not be predicted. They had no way of knowing the full extent to which they would continue to suffer after the Ghetto closed, although in different ways than before.

Conclusion

Kovno Jews’ new reality after June 22, 1941, was so drastically different that their prior knowledge and understanding of Jewish life in Kovno was, unfortunately, of little help to them. Their actions and decisions during the pogroms were thus based on personal experiences and limited information available. Fleeing east, moving locations, or staying inside one’s home were all decisions made with the hope they would avoid harm. In such a chaotic environment, however, no actions guaranteed safety and chance thus played a large role. Jews demonstrated agency not only in actions taken, but in active attempts to understand perpetrators’ motivations, even when they seemed incomprehensible. Indeed, while Jews’ decisions and actions were

³²² Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust*, 14.

³²³ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 22.

³²⁴ Ginsburg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 53.

restricted, those of the Lithuanians were not. They freely chose to participate or not in the violence. The next chapter reveals the effects of individual Lithuanian actions on Jews and explores a spectrum Jewish experiences, illuminating the role of chance and the intimacy of collective violence.

4 “An Entirely New and Utterly Horrifying Reality”: Personal Experiences and Perceptions of the Pogroms

Despite historian Andrew Ezergailis’ protestations regarding Jan Gross’s use of the term “neighbors,” the Kovno pogroms are clearly an example of “neighbors killings neighbors.”³²⁵ Even narrower meanings of the word applies in the case of Kovno, when some Jewish victims knew their Lithuanian attacker personally or even lived next door to them. Furthermore, “neighbors” appears in contemporary written accounts such as Avraham Tory’s diary and *The Clandestine History* and is used in postwar oral histories recorded a few years before Gross’s *Neighbors* popularized the term. In *The Clandestine History*, its authors lamented that, by the announcement of the creation of a Ghetto, Kovno’s Jews “had already put up with a great deal from our dear neighbors, the Lithuanians.”³²⁶ The use of the word in contemporary and postwar accounts indicates how utterly intimate the pogroms were for Jews.

Still, their Lithuanian neighbors’ involvement in the pogroms was not monolithic. Actions ranged from active participation in killing and looting to passive indifference, the latter quality describing how the majority of Lithuanians responded during the Holocaust.³²⁷ Widespread indifference, however, suggests a degree of acquiescence that began during the initial stages of violence. Historian Karen Sutton notes that after Lithuanians participated in the

³²⁵ Ezergailis, ““Neighbors’ Did Not Kill Jews,” 188, 205.

³²⁶ Schalkowsky, ed., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 70.

³²⁷ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 122.

persecution of Jews in the summer and fall 1941 “there were hardly any recriminations by Lithuanians against other Lithuanians who participated in actions against Jews.”³²⁸ Surely, in the chaos of the German invasion, non-Jewish Lithuanians were also frightened and looking out for their own well-being. However, some Lithuanians independently and actively chose to participate in the pogroms. Furthermore, widespread indifference meant that very few Lithuanians actively helped Jews try to survive. According to Sutton only 0.5 percent of the 10 percent of Lithuanian Jews who survived the war were helped by Gentiles.³²⁹ In the initial, chaotic period of violence there were several examples of Jews being “saved” by Lithuanians, but I hesitate to commend such actions, as the “rescuers” did so while participating in the violence; they chose to “save” some Jews but readily harmed others.

While the German invasion constituted an entirely new reality for all of Lithuania, it was most utterly horrifying for the nation’s Jews. Not only did Kovno Jews find themselves fearing for their lives, some encountered familiar faces among their attackers and bystanders. How did Jews’ prewar relationships with Lithuanians and personal experiences of antisemitism shape their perceptions of their neighbors’ participation in the pogroms? Did Jews’ prewar contacts with Lithuanians help them avoid harm? What kinds of interactions between Jews and non-Jews were deadly, and which ones were lifesaving? And can these experiences tell us anything about the motives of rescuers, even if erstwhile rescuers? If only a minority of Lithuanians participated in the pogroms, what were the roles and responsibilities of the majority of Lithuanians in Kovno and how were they perceived by Jews?

³²⁸ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 128.

³²⁹ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 130.

“Betrayed”

Compounding the unprecedented terror of the pogroms was the sense of abandonment and betrayal that Jews felt being attacked by fellow Lithuanian citizens. In chapter 3, we saw how Margaret Kagan’s family hid in a cellar while the Germans bombed targets outside the city. Kagan recalled the “changing attitudes” from the Gentile neighbors also hiding in the cellar. She had never before “felt unloved or discriminated against” because she was Jewish, but clearly remembered sensing her Gentile neighbors’ “animosity for the first time.”³³⁰ Both Jack Brauns and Morris Rich also felt as if a sudden reversal took place. Brauns recalled, “we had great neighbors, Lithuanians...We never had a problem with them, ‘til the Holocaust.”³³¹ Rich remembered that Jews were “very friendly” with non-Jews in his neighborhood. He then qualified his statement, saying, “it turns out, when the war starts, we didn’t know they were not friendly.”³³²

Both Brauns and Rich had recognized that antisemitism existed in Kovno, but they did not understand what had facilitated the disintegration of Jews’ personal relationships with non-Jews, which was thus perceived as abrupt. Similarly, the authors of *The Clandestine History* questioned, “It would seem that there had been so many friends of the Jews among the Lithuanians. Where were they all?” The account then explained, that during the pogroms “the most disgusting and shameful deeds were done to us...and there was no one to raise his voice on our behalf.” If Jews had been aware how antisemitic some Lithuanians were, then perhaps their participation in the pogroms would have not been a total surprise. Yet it was the lack of help extending to apathy from their neighbors and those they had believed to be friends that was

³³⁰ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 14.

³³¹ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 12.

³³² Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 22.

perhaps more distressing. Jews were dismayed to have observed, “on the part of many intelligent, previously quite decent Lithuanians such lack of understanding of the situation of the Jews, such lack of empathy, such lack of desire to help.”³³³ Some Jews had ascertained that the Soviets’ retreat left Jews vulnerable and they were being targeted and killed as “communists,” but it was more difficult to understand why Lithuanian hostility and indifference was so widespread, even amongst those not actively participating in the pogroms.

For Jack Brauns, the realization of the Jews’ new reality was so disturbing because he had grown up feeling secure and part of Lithuanian society. “Suddenly, I was betrayed from the same people that I lived with, that I trusted, that were my neighbors,” he recalled decades later.³³⁴ As someone who had characterized her family as “part of the Lithuanian establishment,” and who had not experienced antisemitism growing up, Margaret Kagan remembered, “I was shattered by the generality of the antisemitic excesses. I was flabbergasted.”³³⁵ More broadly, even for those Jews less integrated than Brauns and Kagan, *The Clandestine History* asserted “that the entire Jewish attitude toward the Lithuanian nation was shaken.”³³⁶ Jews’ relatively positive prewar relationships with Lithuanians and minimal personal experiences of antisemitism meant they felt totally forsaken in the situation unfolding after the war broke out.

Targeted Attacks

Jews’ prewar relationships with Gentiles were not predictive of whether they would be harmed or not by Lithuanians during the pogroms. Anna Gure recalled how the Germans did not “know who was Jewish and who was not,” yet the Lithuanians knew the Jews “very well,” which

³³³ Schalkowsky, ed., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 70.

³³⁴ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 21.

³³⁵ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 17.

³³⁶ Schalkowsky, ed., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 70.

enabled them to do “a magnificent job” targeting them.³³⁷ As previously stated, she believed Lithuanian partisans came to her family home because “they knew who was there.”³³⁸ However, she did not indicate whether she knew them personally. Morris Rich’s family was targeted by someone familiar: their next-door neighbor, Mr. Mazuras, with whom they were friendly. He did not have a telephone, so people used to call the Riches’ house and someone would go to Mr. Mazuras to tell him he had a phone call. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Rich’s family believed that Mazuras was some sort of “organizer,” and after the invasion, he was responsible for distributing weapons to Lithuanian partisans.³³⁹ After the invasion began, Mazuras came over to Rich’s house asking for “Chaim,” Morris Rich’s father, but he was not there; the elder Rich had likely been captured already by other partisans. Rich believed that his neighbor came over because “he had hate against my father” and would have killed him if he was at home.³⁴⁰

As also previously mentioned in chapter 3, Morris Rich’s other relatives also could not be found by those who sought them out. At his grandmother’s house, while his relatives hid in the cellar, they heard people enter the house. One of the voices the hidden Jews overheard belonged to a Gentile woman who had taken care of Rich’s grandmother, “a woman who knew all the people in Slobodka” and who “used to eat [at] the same table” with members of the Rich family “for years and years.”³⁴¹ When the intruders did not find any Jews in the house, the woman suggested they might be hiding in the new synagogue, something she might have known because she knew many Jews in the area. She proclaimed, “let’s go there.” According to Rich, the Jews in the nearby synagogue were subsequently murdered.³⁴² Interethnic integration and personal

³³⁷ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 43.

³³⁸ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 48-49.

³³⁹ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 24.

³⁴⁰ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 27.

³⁴¹ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 40-41.

³⁴² Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 41.

relationships in interwar Lithuania had mitigated Jews' experiences and fears of antisemitism. In the chaotic environment of the pogroms, these provided no guarantee of protection, and could even enable targeted violence.

Selective “Saving”

While ethnic Lithuanians targeted some Jews familiar to them, others selectively “saved” Jews they did know. In many cases, however, these perpetrators went on to indiscriminately target other Jews. Prewar integration helped some Jews when their lives were in peril and survival depended on the whim and will of an individual Lithuanian. When Morris Rich's neighbor Mazuras came to his home and did not find Rich's father, he told the remaining Rich family members, “I'm going to tell my partisans not to touch your house,” yet he still sought out and murdered other Jews.³⁴³ The family friend who later told Rich of his father's fate was also “saved” when he was recognized by a Lithuanian who was preparing to kill a group of Jews at the Seventh Fort. The family friend, Melamed, was standing in a group of Jews to be shot, when a partisan recognized him. According to Rich, the Lithuanian “gave the order not to shoot that group [of] people,” called out Melamed, and “gave an order to release him.”³⁴⁴ Similarly, Anna Gure's father was also recognized at the Seventh Fort by a Lithuanian and released. She recalled “it was supposed to be that all Jews are communists,” but the man “knew my father wasn't a communist” and sent Gure, her father, and uncle home.³⁴⁵ Alas, this would only be delay their fate, as her male family members were killed the following week.

³⁴³ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 27.

³⁴⁴ Rich, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 51.

³⁴⁵ Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 47.

In such a chaotic environment, luck played a considerable role in survival. Even within one family, some family members were “saved” while others were not. After Margaret Kagan’s father left and never returned, her mother went to the Red Cross office to see if she could locate her son, as he had not yet returned from summer camp. Kagan’s mother was arrested by a partisan who, after finding the jails full of arrested Jews, took her to the temporary headquarters of the partisans. She was told that normally first they rape Jewish women, then shoot them. According to Kagan, her mother heard a voice belonging to someone named Jurgis Bobelis, the Lithuanian police chief who commanded the Lithuanian patrols responsible for arresting and executing Jews during the pogroms.³⁴⁶ When Bobelis found out that “Mrs. Shtromas” (Kagan’s mother) was being held, he told the partisans responsible for arresting her, “Are you crazy, do you know how much Shtromas has done for Lithuania? Release her immediately.”³⁴⁷ Mrs. Shtromas was subsequently released, disturbed by the experience but unharmed physically. Kagan’s father had no such fortunate encounter.

Although he “saved” Kagan’s mother, Colonel Bobelis had made the radio announcement ordering one hundred Jews to be shot for every German that Kagan overheard while hiding in the cellar. Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis relate that following that announcement, “the pogrom-filled atmosphere reached fever pitch.”³⁴⁸ Bobelis’ contradictory actions further illustrate the role of “luck,” the severe restriction of Jews’ agency, and the unpredictability of the pogroms. If he had not arrived and recognized Kagan’s mother, she might not have survived.

The assertion of one’s Lithuanian identity sometimes resulted in being “saved,” even without personally knowing Lithuanian perpetrators. According to Nechama Shneerson, her

³⁴⁶ Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania*, 127.

³⁴⁷ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 17.

³⁴⁸ Dieckmann and Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews*, 118.

father was able to escape death after showing proof of his military service.³⁴⁹ He took the chance of telling one of the Lithuanians, “you are going to kill now a man that was fighting for the independence of Lithuania.” He then produced a medal and his military papers proving that he had volunteered to fight in the Lithuanian army.³⁵⁰ The Lithuanian looked at his papers and, noting that Shneorson’s father was higher ranking, declared, “Let’s go.” He told him, “I’m going to put you in another jail. I want to take you away from all this.” Her father protested that the man would also have to take the other Jews as well. “If you’re not helping them the way you’re going to help me, then I don’t want to be left alive either,” was her father’s plea. The entire group, about thirty-seven people, was removed from the Seventh Fort, alive. After being taken to another jail, Shneorson’s mother was able to plead with the authorities to get him released.³⁵¹ In rare situations such as Shneorson’s father experienced, the disorder of the Lithuanian pogroms proved to be an asset and allowed some Jews to assert their sense of agency, at great personal risk, by demonstrating their “Lithuanian-ness.”

Anna Gure told a similar story. While her male relatives were ultimately killed at the Ninth Fort, Gure says she and her female family members were among those released from there. One of the Lithuanian guards asked if any of the women there had male family members who had fought for Lithuanian independence. Gure’s mother told him that her brother had worked in the Lithuanian embassy in Berlin. They were consequently let go.³⁵² It is unknown if they would have been killed otherwise. It is notable, however, that questions about defending Lithuanian independence were asked at all, demonstrating that Jewish integration in interwar Lithuanian society could help Jews then avoid harm, but it was no guarantee.

³⁴⁹ Shneorson, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 43.

³⁵⁰ Shneorson, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 45.

³⁵¹ Shneorson, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 46-47.

³⁵² Gure, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 55-56.

While the actions of erstwhile rescuers cannot be commended, such examples are indicative that, in some cases, integration might overcome dehumanization. It is more difficult to engage in violence when it is still possible to recognize the victim as an individual human, either as a former friend or fellow Lithuanian. Unfortunately, in cases of neighbors killing neighbors, it appears rage, resentment, or opportunism were more powerful.

Opportunism and Indifference

The majority of Lithuanians neither killed nor saved Jews. As Margaret Kagan observed, “I am sure, and I am convinced, that it is a small minority of people who are always able to do the most ghastly, the most terrible things, when it comes to circumstances like that.”³⁵³ Although they might not have participated in the violence themselves, the pogroms provided opportunities for Lithuanians to capitalize on the violence fomented by others. Sonia Stern’s family had attempted to flee the invasion but were forced to turn back. When they returned after two or three days, they discovered that their Lithuanian neighbors had moved into their house. They told Stern’s family that it was not their house anymore, that “you Jews have nothing anymore, nothing belongs to you anymore,” and threatened to call “the Gestapo.” With little choice to do otherwise, the family abandoned their home; the new residents would not even let them take food, belongings, or a family picture because its’ frame was valuable.³⁵⁴ In this same period, Margarete Kagan learned from a friend that two Lithuanian boys whom she had gone to school with had been overheard discussing if they could go to Kagan’s house to loot it. She recalled, “I was shocked that they would even contemplate doing it.”³⁵⁵ They did not go through with it, but

³⁵³ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 17.

³⁵⁴ Stern, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segments 28-30.

³⁵⁵ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 15.

even the fact they would consider doing so exemplifies the sense of freedom and opportunism some Lithuanians felt amidst the pogroms, and the sense of fear this imbued in Kovno's Jews.

Even Lithuanian indifference was hurtful, psychologically if not physically. When Kagan's family's flat was looted, they were taken out into the street and forced to line up against a wall. She says non-Jewish neighbors looked down from above, whispering to each other, "They will shoot them, they will shoot them at any moment." She remembers thinking she would rather be killed than wounded, but "they raided and took whatever they wanted and let us go back in."³⁵⁶ Her comments reveal the sense of hopelessness created in such a chaotic situation when an individual's sense of agency is severely restricted, when one is experiencing an entirely new and utterly horrifying reality. Death would have seemed as the only way to escape from an otherwise inescapable situation.

Helping

Some neighbors killed, others looted, and most others remained indifferent. In the more than two dozen testimonies I examined, there are few mentioned instances of Lithuanians genuinely helping Jews during the pogroms. When Charles Anolik was asked if his father's non-Jewish work associates tried to help his family, he responded definitively, "No. Right away we were just all by ourselves."³⁵⁷ Still, he did recount that a woman who worked for the family as a maid brought them food while they were sheltering in their home during the pogroms.³⁵⁸ Abraham Resnick's family was also "fortunate." A Lithuanian, their apartment manager, helped them. He warned the family when it was safe to go outside to get food, "or when we should stay

³⁵⁶ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 17.

³⁵⁷ Anolik, USC Shoah Foundation, segment 30.

³⁵⁸ Anolik, USC Shoah Foundation, segment 40.

away.” According to Resnick, their “destiny was in his hands.”³⁵⁹ This is apparently not an overstatement. *The Clandestine History* similarly asserted that building managers “played a decisive role” during the pogroms. The “fate” of the Jews living in a building “was sealed” if a manager was opportunistic and conspired with Lithuanian looters.³⁶⁰

Remarkably, Jack Brauns’s family was offered protection from the “chief of police” in Kovno, who was a friend of his father. Brauns cannot recall the man’s name but says he “came to our house and told us that we could come to hide in his house any time,” reasoning that “he couldn’t conceive that anybody will come to look for us in his house.” Brauns’s father refused the offer, but Brauns remembered the man as “very generous,” as he later brought food to the family. When telling this story, Brauns commented, “There were a lot of great people,” meaning non-Jews.³⁶¹ For example, he cited help the family received from their maid who brought his family food when it was not safe for Jews to go outside. She also was entrusted with Brauns’s mother’s fur coat and gold items, which she returned after the war. He says her actions “showed there were a lot of decent people who behaved decently and risked a lot.”³⁶² Other Jews may not, and do not, make the same claims of widespread Lithuanian decency as he does. It is indeterminable if his family benefited because they were extremely privileged and well-connected compared to other Jews in Kovno, or if they simply knew kinder Lithuanians. Regardless, Brauns’ family was fortunate to have experienced such help. Most Jews were not offered protection or aid from their Gentile friends.

³⁵⁹ Resnick, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 32-33.

³⁶⁰ Schalkowsky, ed., *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 68-9.

³⁶¹ Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 21.

³⁶² Brauns, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 21.

Not All Lithuanians, But All Jews

Just as individual Jews experienced and perceived the pogroms differently, they remembered the pogroms differently decades later. Remembrance of Lithuanian participation and attribution of blame is complicated, and there can be no unbiased assessments by those who lived through such terror. Yet, survivors themselves tried to mitigate their assignment of blame to Lithuanians, perhaps to reconcile their new reality with their old. Before remarking that the “whole country went crazy” after June 22, Sonia Stern emphasized that she and her family had non-Jewish neighbors, classmates, customers, and friends.³⁶³ She initially began to say that after the war broke out “the whole Gentile population...” and then stopped herself mid-sentence, amending that “I cannot say all of them, there [were] some that tried to save Jewish lives;” albeit, “very few.”³⁶⁴

Margaret Kagan warned of the importance of not assigning blame to all Lithuanians. She emphasized that not all of them are “Jew killers,” likening that generalization to how antisemites perceive Jews, as a monolithic people. She subsequently avowed that she is a “great believer in judging individuals, not nations.”³⁶⁵ Again, while not all Lithuanians actively participated in the pogroms, all Jews in Kovno experienced the trauma of those events perpetuated by a minority of Lithuanians.

³⁶³ Stern, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 16.

³⁶⁴ Stern, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 18.

³⁶⁵ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 59. Her perspective could be in part due to the fact that she and her husband survived in hiding, helped by gentile Lithuanians, after escaping the Kovno Ghetto in fall 1943. She has frequently returned to Lithuania to reunite with her “saviors,” and says she has also “met with lots more Lithuanians who are absolutely wonderful.”

Conclusion

Eyewitness accounts convey the intimacy of the pogroms. It was a different kind of persecution than what Jews would later experience. They felt violated: they were attacked in their own city, sometimes in their own homes. They felt betrayed: they were targeted by their neighbors. They felt abandoned: most of their Lithuanian friends and neighbors remained indifferent to their suffering. In comparison to such widespread negative experiences, the few instances of being “saved” or receiving aid seems negligible. However, such acts were not inconsequential. Although infrequent, lives were saved. The choices of Lithuanians to act or not act continue to color Jews reactions to the unfolding pogroms and their remembrances of events decades later.

Conclusion

Approximately 35–40,000 Jews lived in Kovno before June 22, 1941. Only 3,000–3,500 survived the war, thus the fate of the city’s Jews aligns with the fact that about 90 percent of all Lithuanian Jews perished during the Holocaust. Approximately 80 percent of the country’s Jews had already been killed by the end of 1941, within six months of the German invasion of the Soviet Union.³⁶⁶ In Kovno approximately 6,000 Jews were killed in the first two weeks after June 22. Victims of the Holocaust are often reduced to numbers, dates, places, and statistics. While such information reveals the scale of mass murder, it does not convey the fact that it was also personal in that individual lives and families were destroyed. My work has aimed to honor the individual victims, their voices, and their experiences. Doing so is one of the only ways to attempt to capture the horrific nature of these events. If the horror of the Holocaust can still seem incomprehensible in hindsight, it is important to attempt to understand how it was comprehended by those experiencing the events as they were unfolding. The victim perspective presents a humanized illustration of the intimate nature of the violence Jews experienced in Kovno.

This thesis used eyewitness accounts to explain what Kovno Jews expected to happen after the German invasion and why their reality was so unforeseeably different. In order to highlight the unprecedented nature of the pogroms, it examined “what was known and what *could* have been known” about Jewish life in interwar Kovno. Overall, Jews felt secure in independent Lithuania. Although levels of integration varied and most Jews acknowledged the existence of or experienced antisemitism, it was accepted as an enduring condition of Jewish life

³⁶⁶ Arad, “The Murder of the Jews in German-Occupied Lithuania (1941–1944),” 177.

in Lithuania. That Jews in Kovno had “a good life,” as characterized by Anna Gure, was especially true in comparison to the experiences of Jews in Germany in the mid-to-late 1930s and Nazi-occupied Poland after 1939. Although information on the Nazis’ activities was limited or often dismissed as rumors, there was the sense that whatever was happening to Jews in those places would not befall the Jews in Kovno. This “complacency,” as identified by Waldemar Ginsburg, persisted through the year of Soviet occupation, during which some Jews were more fearful of Soviet arrests and deportations than a potential impending Nazi invasion.

After uncovering what Jews could have expected to happen after the German invasion – that is, they could not have expected violence to come first from local Lithuanians– we saw how Jews acted when “confronted with an entirely new and utterly horrifying reality.” During the pogroms, Jews had to rely on previous knowledge and experiences in their evaluation of unfolding events to guide their actions and decisions. Yet everything they had known about what it meant to be a Jew in Kovno changed overnight on June 22, 1941, when trouble came from an unexpected direction. While facing “the ever-present danger of death” at the hands of local Lithuanians, Jews exercised agency in their attempts to comprehend the perpetrators’ motivations and develop survival strategies according to their perceptions and experiences during the pogroms. Not only were Jews shocked by the Lithuanians’ independent instigation of violence, but the cruelty exhibited during the pogroms furthered their terror. Therefore, some Jews perceived the arriving Germans relatively more positively since their initial actions restored order in the city.

Kovno Jews felt betrayed by their neighbors, both those who actively participated in the violence and those who were acquiescent or indifferent bystanders. While most Jews’ previous perceptions of interethnic relationships were shattered, others were “saved” due to their prewar

associations or when recognized by erstwhile rescuers. Still, very few accounts reveal experiences of receiving aid or protection during the pogroms. Although a minority of Lithuanians participated in the violence, the indifference and passivity of the majority was just as harmful to Kovno Jews, both to their physical safety and to their psyche. Not only did their neighbors not offer aid or shelter to help their chances of survival, remembrances of such abandonment endure for survivors.

The June 27 Lietūkis Garage massacre is perhaps the most well-known event of the Kovno pogroms. The photographs which exist exemplify much of what stood out to Jews who experienced the pogroms—the brutality of a small number of Lithuanian perpetrators and the support, acquiescence, or indifference of the majority of Lithuanians. This thesis has sought to move beyond examining such landmark events, first in examining the initial period of violence as an event in itself, not as a “prelude” to future stages of persecution, and second in analyzing the various victim accounts to reveal details on individuals’ initial traumatic experiences and related responses. Contemporary “official” accounts, such as Avraham Tory’s diary and *The Clandestine History*, recorded the collective Jewish experience. Each detailed how events unfolded and revealed how Jews responded and adapted to their new, constantly shifting reality. Postwar oral histories provide details of how individuals confronted that reality and highlight the contrast between life in Kovno before and after June 22, 1941. Individual accounts reveal the concurrent roles of agency and luck in survival and interacted in the unpredictable, chaotic environment of the pogroms. Survivor accounts may benefit from hindsight, but they also show that even decades after traumatic events it is hard to fully comprehend what happened, even for those who went through it.

The victim perspective indirectly and unintentionally sheds a different light on perpetrators. The local Lithuanians who attacked Jews were not all virulent antisemites. Many had known and unproblematically interacted with Jews in interwar Lithuania. When given the license to do so, however, those who were opportunistic, resentful, or motivated by any variety of reasons, attacked unprotected, readily identified scapegoats. The intention of much of the literature reviewed in Chapter 1 was to create a framework for understanding the source of the violence that the Kovno Jews experienced. Scholars have illuminated the ways in which perceived differences amongst groups be exacerbated in times of instability and activated in times of crisis to direct violence at “the other.” Chapter 2 essentially explored whether Jews perceived themselves as “other.” Most did not, yet many Lithuanians must have believed so, thus contributing to their readiness to participate in the pogroms or their unwillingness to take action to help Jews. Thus, as demonstrated in Kovno, interethnic integration alone does not prevent the onset of collective violence. The “Judeo-Bolshevik myth” and associated antisemitic sentiments persisted in the minds of many Lithuanians, even as Jews and Gentiles lived next to each other, worked with each other, and sat near each other in classrooms. When such latent hostilities were unleashed, the violence was directed by (mis)perceptions of Jews. Yet the violence Jews experienced was very real.

In concluding remarks for her USC Shoah Foundation video testimony, Margaret Kagan asserted that “we need to educate people” and “tell them this can happen, very easily,” that evil “happens imperceptibly.”³⁶⁷ The imperceptibility of the potency of latent antisemitic hatreds before June 22 1941, is part of what made the pogroms so utterly horrifying. How easily the Lithuanians turned against or turned their backs on the Jews amplified their sense of shock.

³⁶⁷ Kagan, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, segment 60.

Evil and hatred will always exist. Sociopolitical crises will always occur. People will always be scared and seek to blame “others;” and there will always be those, although perhaps a minority, who will act on such emotions. Therefore, it is imperative that scholars, educators, and societal leaders continue to work to ensure that differences are not seen as threatening, and to promote tolerance. Although perhaps imperceptible to most or deemed inconsequential, the existence of latent prejudices in our society is not benign. They can easily be manipulated during times of crisis to unite “us” against “them.” These same forces directed individuals to attack places of worship in Christchurch, New Zealand and Poway, California in the present-day and incited the eruption of much larger scale violence in Kovno, Lithuania in the past. It is important to study the initial phases of violence and the victims’ experiences so that that no future populations have to experience such an “entirely new and utterly horrifying reality” as the Jews in Kovno did in June 1941.

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