European Network Remembrance and Solidarity
KAUNAS NINTH FORT MUSEUM
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HISTORY OF THE KAUNAS NINTH FORT

The Ninth Fort as part of the Kaunas Fortress

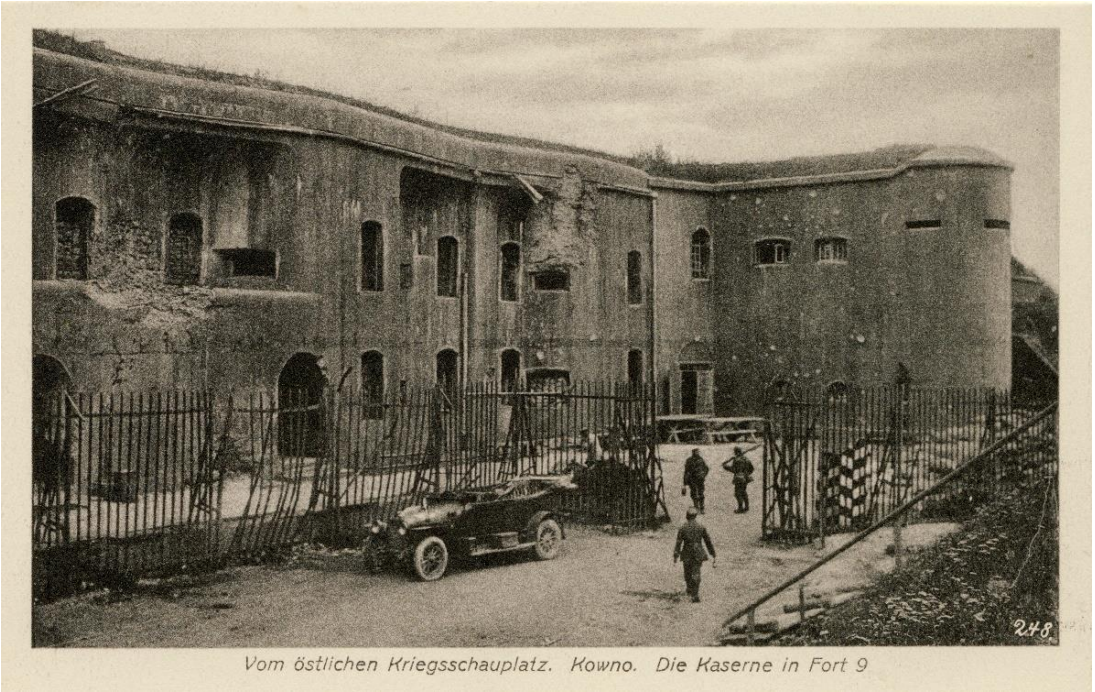
During the period between 1795 and 1915 the territory of the Republic of Lithuania belonged to the Russian Empire, and it was called a North-Western District. This was a border region, a kind of a gateway through which the enemy could potentially break through and into the further regions of the empire. A high level of threat was first demonstrated by Napoleon, whose Great Army (*Grand Armée*) in 1812 reached and burned down Moscow after advancing a thousand kilometres in several months. To prevent this from ever happening again, it was decided that a system of larger and smaller forts need to be built along the Western border of the Russian empire. Kaunas (Russian: *Kovna*, German: *Kowno*) was destined to become one such centre of fortification. In 1843, after the city was granted the status of a province centre, it started to grow and develop rapidly. A significant impact on the process was given in 1879, when the czar Alexander II decided to build a large military fortress around Kaunas that would comprise forts, artillery batteries and storage facilities around the city. The natural conditions were ideal for defence: the confluence of two large rivers (Nemunas (Russian: *Neman*, German: *Memel*) and Neris (or *Vilija*) as well as a hilly landscape.

The construction of the fortress stared in the 1880s and continued up to the Great War (or the First World War). The main enemy of the Russian empire was the united and strengthened German empire. The shortest distance between Kaunas and the German border in Eastern Prussia (today's Kaliningrad, Russian Federation) was only 70 kilometres.

Enormous financial and human resources as well as materials and equipment were allocated to the building of the fortress. The goal was for this fortress to reflect the newest technical advances of the time. This, however, was not achieved since technologies developed extremely rapidly at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, some technological advances would become outdated in a few years only. This tendency can be observed when looking into the engineering characteristics of different forts. Until the First World War nine forts were built, the Ninth Fort being the last and thus the most modern of the forts. The first period of the construction ended in 1903 but at the same time many improvements were being implemented until 1912. It is important to note that the Ninth Fort,

contrary to the first eight forts, was build using the reenforced concrete rather than red clay bricks. The fort rose on one of the highest places in Kaunas. First, the builders made the necessary spaces and rooms, made overlays and finally covered the entire building with a thick layer of earth. The thickness of concrete fort walls reaches up to two metres and the thickness of the layer of earth is around seven metres. Inside the fort electric generators were installed that ensured electrical lighting and were also used for electrical water pumps. An important technical innovation that must be mentioned is the telephone. The fort is a symmetrical building with a two-storied military barracks, a semi-caponier, internally located artillery galleries, ammunition and gunpowder storage chambers, a defensive wall, ventilation and drainage openings and other elements necessary for these types of buildings. During peaceful periods, the number of military crew was 250 soldiers, non-commissioned officers and officers. During a conflict period, the number of crew members was to be increased up to 450 individuals.

In the summer of 1914, when the Great War started, after the mobilisation, the number the Kaunas fortress crew increased to 60 thousand. However, at that time there was no clash between the enemy armies since the Russian empire itself attacked Eastern Prussia. The soldiers of the German empire managed to stop the attack and take the initiative into their hands. One year later, at the beginning of August 1915, they started an attack on the Kaunas fortress. The battles continued for eleven days – much quicker than expected. The Kaunas fortress fell. Its defence was poorly organized and the Russian soldiers gave in to panic early on. The Ninth Fort, unlike the first three forts, was practically undamaged. The German army did not need to storm the building as the Russian army crew had left the premises of the fort earlier.

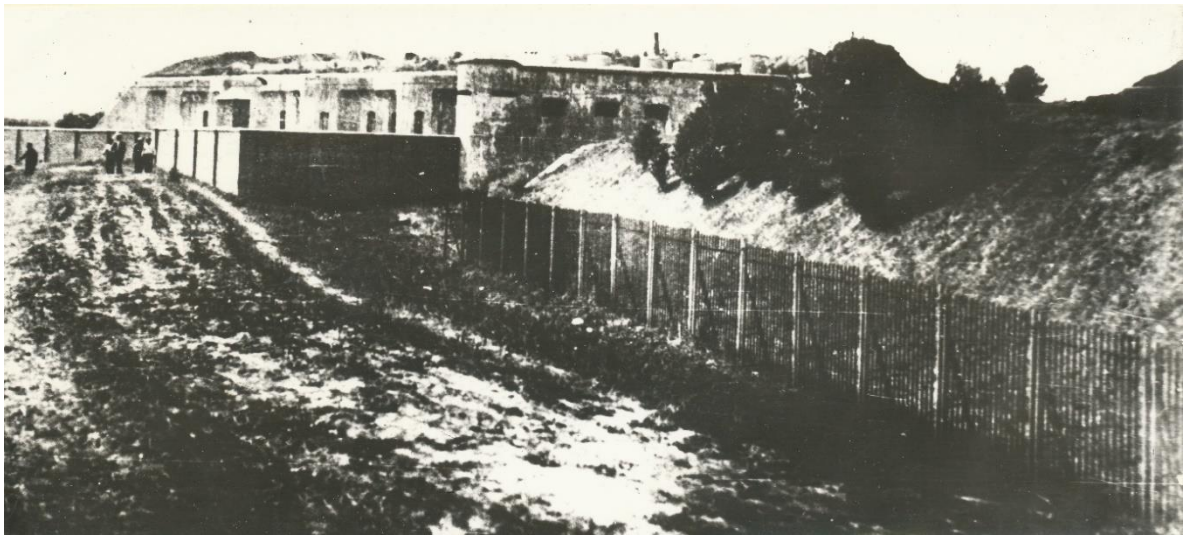


1. The Ninth Fort of Kaunas Fortress, 1915. (Collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum).

The Ninth Fort as the branch of the Kaunas hard labour Prison

The military history of the Ninth Fort ends quickly and without glory. The future of the building did not look any better either. After the Great War, Lithuania became an independent state with Kaunas as its provisional capital. The historical capital, Vilnius, belonged to Poland in the 1920s and 1930s. The young country did not have enough financial resources to support the Kaunas fortress, therefore, many of the objects of the original fortress were assigned to various government institutions. The Ninth Fort was turned into a prison in 1924. More precisely – it became a branch of the Kaunas hard labour prison. To ensure that the previous military object functioned as a prison, some changes had to be done. Bars were installed in the windows of the two-storied building (the barracks) and gates were put it to separate prison cells from the corridor. Three punishment cells were established too. Outside, right in front of the barracks, a six-metre-high fence was built using red bricks, thus forming a separate prisoners' yard. In the corners of the wall, two observation towers were installed. In addition, a few small constructions were built, one of which served as a meeting room for prisoners and visitors.

At first the Ninth Fort was intended to be turned into a prison for and a place of isolation of dangerous criminals and political prisoners, but eventually the situation became quite opposite: since the mid-1930s, mostly petty criminals were imprisoned here. The number of prisoners diminished from 200 to about 100. Collecting such a small group of non-dangerous prisoners was not accidental: they were more suitable for work. The Ninth Fort functioned as a farmstead with over 80 hectares of land. In approximately half of that area, potatoes and grain were planted and the other half was used as grazing land for livestock and horses. The prison also had an orchard of approximately four hectares. The produce made in the Ninth Fort was used for feeding the prisoners in other hard labour prisons around Kaunas, some of it made it into the general food market.



2. Kaunas Hard Labour Prison in the Ninth Fort, the 1920s. (Collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum).

Period of the Occupations

Such a monotonous and labour-intensive everyday life at the Ninth Fort ended in the summer of 1940 when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union. The communists were instantly released from prison and their places were taken by the people whose political views were incompatible with those of the new government. The number of prisoners increased in the next few months and the cells that previously were inhabited by no more than 20 prisoners were used by the Soviet security for keeping twice as many people. In the second half of 1940

and until 1941 the new Soviet government used the Ninth Fort as a transit prison, i.e. the place of temporary imprisonment where the prisoners had to wait before being exiled to the forced labour camps in the furthest areas of the Soviet Union, known as the infamous ***GULAG*** system.

On June 22, 1941, the dictator of the **Third Reich**, Adolf Hitler, waged a war against his previous ally, the leader of the USSR, Joseph Stalin. In a few days the German army took over Kaunas and in the coming week, the entire Lithuania. Thus, the Nazi occupation of Lithuania started and lasted a little more than three years (1941–1944). German security police and its structures instantly started a systematic annihilation of not only the supporters of the Soviet government, but also the entire Lithuanian Jewish community. The Ninth Fort, which technically was still a prison during the occupation, became one of the biggest and most horrifying places of the Holocaust in Lithuania.

The first killings of Jews in Kaunas started as soon as the German army entered the city. Nazi secret services instigated some anti-Soviet Lithuanian military organizations to start fighting against the Jewish community, which was officially accused of supporting the Soviet rule in Lithuania and orientation towards Moscow. Between the end of June and the beginning of July 1941, the city saw numerous bloody **pogroms**, during which several thousand lives were lost. One of the goals of this terror was to force all the Jews in Kaunas to be moved into the ghetto in the district of Vilijampolė ("Slobotka") as soon as possible. The first mass killing of the Jewish people started in July. The executions took place in some objects of the Kaunas fortress, first in the Seventh Fort, then the Fourth Fort. In autumn 1941, the leadership of the **SS** structures in Lithuania decided to move the killings into the Ninth Fort as it was further away from the city centre and located in a less densely populated area. Besides, the ghetto in Vilijampolė was relatively close to it. The first "action" – as the shootings were referred to in Nazi documents – took place here

3. The buckle of the Nazi Germany Army (Collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum).

on October 4, 1941. Approximately two thousand people of various ages were killed on that day. The process of the genocide on that day as well as later on happened in a similar manner, i.e. based on a pre-arranged plan. The guards would assemble the victims in a ghetto square and then marched them, on foot, to the Ninth Fort in groups. People had to walk about four kilometres. At the end of this journey, the prisoners would be brought together in the orchard, in some less frequent cases – in the yard or in cells. Before the executions, the people were robbed of their clothes and personal belongings. The shootings took place in long, deep pits that had been dug some time before, in the Western slope of the Ninth Fort. The place began to be called a "killing site". The murders took place continuously, one small group of victims after another was taken to the killing site. The killers made the condemned lie down at the bottom of the pit and surrounded the victims. After an officer's command, the shooting would take place. When a new group was brought, the "procedure" would be repeated. The new victims had to lie on the dead bodies or dying, convulsing people, one layer of bodies after another. Such a method of killing people was known among the SS as "the method of the sardine box". After the "action" was completed, the bodies would be covered with quicklime and a layer of earth. On October 29, 1941 the Nazis and their local helpers managed to kill a huge number of people from the ghetto in this way, almost ten thousand individuals. About half of all the victims were children. This was an instance when the largest number of people was killed in a day. This day is remembered and commemorated as the day of the "Great Action". Not only local Jewish population was killed in Kaunas. Over the last week of November 1941 the Nazis sent here five trains of Jews from the newly occupied territories of the Third Reich: various cities in Germany, Austria and the former Czechoslovakia. All of them were killed in the Ninth Fort. In May, 1944 the same tragic event happened to about 900 Jews from France.

4. The photo found in the field of mass massacre. (Collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum).

Since 1942 such large-scale killings of people at the Ninth Fort were not taking place, however, regularly organized were the executions of small groups from the ghetto as well as participants of the anti-Nazi resistance captured by the Gestapo. In 1943, after the Third Reich had experienced some significant failures at the Eastern front and in Italy, it became apparent that Hitler would not be able to win the war. By successful counter-attacking, the Red Army was advancing towards to West. Before escaping from Lithuania, the Nazis decided to attempt to destroy the mass graves of the killings. In November 1943, the SS formed a special team of the Jewish prisoners. It comprised a little more than 60 Soviet prisoners of war as well as some local ghetto residents. The team, having been assigned various different functions, was given a horrid job: some were ordered to dig out the decomposing bodies from the "killing site", while others were to look for golden teeth, rings or other pieces of jewellery; others were commanded to pile up the bodies, cover them with kerosene and burn them. The Nazis were hoping to hide the scope of the genocide, but their expectations were not met. On December 25, 1943, on Christmas night, the corpse burners escaped from the Ninth Fort. This event had been planned in advance. About half of the escapees were captured by the Gestapo and killed but a significant number of them managed to avoid being caught and survived until the end of the war. Later they told their escape story.Mass murders at the Ninth Fort were taking place until the very last days of the Nazi rule in Kaunas. The Red Army took control over the city on August 1, 1944. The second Soviet occupation started. The new government instantly started investigating the scope of the extermination of people during the Nazi times. Witnesses were heard, local Nazi helpers were arrested, excavations of murder sites took place. Some of the first people to visit the mass killing site were forensic scientists. They determined

5. The place where the remains were burnt in the defensive ditch of the Ninth Fort, 1944 (Collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum).

that the people killed here were buried in 14 long ditches. At this time many more disturbing details of the "genocide technicalities" became apparent. The most complicated task was to establish at least an approximate number of the victims since the documents were scarce and some of the bodies were destroyed by the corpse burners. During the Soviet times the number of the people killed at the Ninth Fort was said to be about 80 thousand, but currently researchers believe that the number must be about 50 thousand.

Commemorating the victims was postponed until almost 20 years after the mass murders began. Until that time the premises were used as storage facilities for various companies within Kaunas. At the end of May, 1959 a museum was established at the Ninth Fort and the first modest monument – a big, spherical rock with a commemorative plate attached to it – was erected next to the mass killing site. The inscription did not mention a single word about the Holocaust. In the Soviet times this word was a taboo since it did not fit into the propaganda-permeated narrative and the concept of the "friendships between nations". Communist ideologists did not want to emphasize the suffering and the scope of the tragedy of one, single nation within the Soviet Union. All nationalities were seen as a "Soviet people". In public rhetoric the Holocaust was usually euphemised as the "murder of Soviet citizens".

In 1984, next to the Ninth Fort a spacious memorial complex was established with a new exhibition building and next to the mass killing site an impressive 32-metre-high monument was erected. The author of this piece was a sculptor Vincas Alfonsas Ambraziūnas, the name of the monument was "Undefeated Lithuania". However, it did not change the official attitude towards the Holocaust. Conditions for great changes appeared only in 1990, when Lithuania regained its independence and re-established its statehood. Since that time the Ninth Fort functions as a place of the commemoration of the Holocaust victims and a space of public education where the darkest and the most painful events of Lithuanian history are revealed.

6. Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum (author S. Orlov).

HOLOCAUST IN LITHUANIA

The Holocaust is directly linked with the Nazi occupation of Lithuania (1941–1945). This connection cannot be cut off. In the independent Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940) the Jews constituted about seven per cent of the population, i.e. about 200 thousand residents of the country. Jews in Lithuania enjoyed a specific religious and cultural autonomy. At the beginning of the 1920s the Jewish community would delegate their own minister within the government of Lithuania and had their own representatives in the Parliament. On the other hand, one cannot claim that Anti-Semitism did not exist at the time, but it did not appear officially and it did not become violent. Some newspapers would print resentful, bitter anti-Jewish publications, mostly inspired by economic competition, but there was no official, state-supported Anti-Semitic policy. Over a twenty-year period there have been several domestic incidents recorded but these can under no circumstances be called a *pogrom* – in all of these known cases not only fatalities but also injuries were avoided. The authoritarian government of the Republic of Lithuania controlled the society effectively by preventing more prominent and open ethnic tensions and occurrences of nationality-based hatred. However, after the

collapse of the state, the situation changed drastically: the atmosphere of decline and moral decay was created that made the genocide practically possible.

The first Soviet occupation of Lithuania (1940–1941) escalated the tensions between the Lithuanians and the Jews. Alongside the previously existing stereotypes of the Jews, a new one emerged: a Jewish communist. The Nazi propaganda used this image effectively later, mixing it with additional "arguments" that spread hatred. It is important to note that the Lithuania and Jewish geopolitical orientations differed greatly. The Jews understood what dangers are posed to their community from the Third Reich, thus they expected some protection from the Soviet Union that had occupied Lithuania. On the contrary, the Lithuanians oriented themselves towards Germany, having been blinded by an illusion that Hitler will re-establish the Lithuanian statehood and avenge the Soviets for the terror that has been inflicted upon the country. The one-year period of the communist regime was horrifying: continuous arrests, the torturing of the political prisoners as well as forced deportations of thousands of innocent people to Siberia continued throughout the occupation. Some Jewish residents worked in the Soviet repressive structures, and this made the Lithuanians critically antagonistic and hateful towards the entire Jewish community. The one-sided stereotypical thinking was not defused even by the fact that many richer Jewish families (in total about two thousand people) suffered from the communist regime too.

The Holocaust in Lithuania started on the first days of the Nazi occupation and lasted until the end. Over the period of three years (1941–1944), 95 per cent (approximately 190 thousand) local Jews were killed. After the war only about nine thousand remained.

In Lithuania, like in other Eastern European territories occupied by the Third Reich, the genocide was carried out especially brutally, in an unscrupulous manner. In Western Europe the Nazis felt more apprehensive to shed blood so openly and at such pace – instead they tried to create a kind of a veneer of their being civilized. A very different story is how they behaved in "the wild lands", where they were not afraid of eyewitnesses that could potentially discredit them in the eyes of the "advanced world". The Slavic and Baltic lands east from Germany were considered by Hitler as a space for "Arian" colonisation. For the process to be successful, the plan was to push away or annihilate the nations that were not suitable for assimilation. The Jews were considered by the Nazis to be their gravest enemy and if the enemy is not destroyed, apparently, it will be impossible for the Reich to continue to exist for thousands of years to come. Various means of propaganda were used to spread the ruthless hatred. Pseudo-scientific

arguments were used to prove that the Jews are a "despicable, parasitic race", unworthy of being called a human and that it is the main cause of the reincarnated evil in the world.

The war that spread quickly over several continents offered Hitleriui the **"final solution"** to the whole "evil" problem – the annihilation of the entire Jewish race. It was started to be carried out systematically as soon as Nazi forces attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Lithuania became the threshold of this attack. The Nazis were successful, and the Soviet troops quickly retreated to the East. There was not enough time, nor enough resources for the evacuation of the civilians, therefore, only about 8 thousand Jews escaped from Lithuania to the Soviet Union. The remaining majority started to be killed during the first days of the occupation. The murders were executed mostly by the German security police groups that accompanied the Wehrmacht soldiers. The provisional capital of Lithuania, Kaunas, was occupied three days later and the remaining territory of the country – a week later. At the same time the secret police of the Nazi Germany started organizing the first mass pogroms of the Lithuanian Jews in the largest cities. The goal was to demonstrate that the residents of the "liberated" land are on their own trying to avenge the Jews for collaborating with the Soviet government. Besides, the terror was used to gather the Jewish population into ghettos – enclosed sections within a city – as soon as possible. The Nazis publicly declared that it was a way to isolate and thus to protect the Jews against the Lithuanian brutality. In reality, however, establishing ghettos was a cynical and cruel part of the Holocaust plan: to gather the future victims in one place since that could ensure a more effective and faster destruction.

The Nazis were successful in involving quite a large number of locals into the despicable public acts of killing innocent people. Those drawn into the massacres were first and foremost the participants of the anti-Soviet uprising. These armed men wearing civilian attire had a white armband that was their identifying symbol. That is the reason why in eyewitness accounts, memoirs and historical literature they were called "white bands". The Nazis began forming Lithuanian auxiliary police groups or "self-protection" battalions. Some of these groups directly took part in the Holocaust in Lithuania or Belarus. An especially infamous was the first Kaunas-based group. Officially it was called the **"National labour security battalion"**. The German security police instantly involved it into the mass murder of people. From July 1941 to the end of November the executions took place in the forts of the Kaunas fortress. At the same time the members of the battalion were formed into the SS-led

"Hamann flying squad", which travelled around various parts of Lithuania and killed the Jewish people gathered in small, temporary ghettos.

In the summer and early autumn of 1941 almost all of the Jews from Lithuanian small towns, or shtetls, were killed. Not even babies were spared their lives. Each time the process of the genocide took place in a similar manner. First, the local Lithuanian administration would receive orders from the head of the German security police in Kaunas or Vilnius to register all the Jews of surrounding territories and to gather them in a protected place, such as a storeroom or a fenced territory. For several days the people were kept in such conditions, until the "flying" squad would arrive from Kaunas. The future victims were not told what was about to happen – they were told that preparations are under way for their relocation. The arrested people were even allowed to pack some things and take it with them. Telling lies was a way of preventing the people from panicking and their desperate attempts to escape.

7. A German coin, a pfennig, found in the field of mass massacre. (Collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum).

The Jews were marched on foot to the designated killing site, usually either by the police or the "white bands". They had to walk at least a few kilometres away from the shtetl. For the killing itself, a remote, rarely visited place would be selected, somewhere next to a forest. The pits were dug beforehand. The executions were carried out by the members of the "flying squad", and if they were not available, then a team of volunteers made up of local police officers and "white bands". First, Jewish men were shot, then women and children. Naked victims stood at the edge of the pit or lay in it before the shooting. Sometimes, the killers made cruel "improvisations" to the killings: people were killed using shotgun butts, wooden bats and in some cases people would be buried alive. The homes of the Jews destined to be killed were robbed by their Lithuanian neighbours; golden rings and other items of jewellery were secretly taken away from the victims by the guards and killers, although it was prohibited by the German authorities. It was declared that all the Jewish wealth belongs to the Reich.

At the beginning of autumn 1941, the Holocaust in Lithuanian provinces and shtetls ended. The hope to survive was still alive among the Jews who were imprisoned in the ghettos of the large cities, but even here the Nazis planned on diminishing the number of prisoners too. The idea was to destroy weaker women, children, the sick and the elderly first – those that could not work. The process started in the summer and reached its peak later in the autumn. The Jews from the biggest ghetto in Lithuania – the Vilnius ghetto – were killer in the Ponary (Paneriai) forest, a picturesque suburb of Vilnius, surrounded by pine-trees where the Soviets had begun establishing a storage facility for technical fuel right before the war. The pits that had been dug for this purpose were later exploited by the Nazis for murdering innocent civilians and turned the pits into mass graves. The mass murders were organized by the German security police and implemented by the special firing squad made up of Lithuanian Nazi collaborators. Until the end of 1941 more than 33 thousand people were killed in Paneriai.

At around the same time the Holocaust erupted in Kaunas, too. In July people were being executed at the Seventh Fort, in August and September at the Fourth Fort and from October to November in the Ninth Fort. Not only local Jews were being killed, but also those brought from the other territories of the Third Reich, from its so-called protectorates (e.g. Bohemia-Moravia). Over the period of six months, almost 30 thousand peoples were killed in Kaunas. At this time Lithuania had lost approximately 80 per cent of its Jewish community.

Since 1942 the speed and scope of the Holocaust in Lithuania decreased. In Western Europe, on the contrary, the Nazi authorities started implementing the "final solution to the Jewish question" (German: *Endlösung der Judenfrage*), that essentially meant a systematic and industrial destruction of the Jewish people in the territory of Poland occupied by the Third Reich. In several dozen death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, thousands of Jews were being killed using poisonous gas and their bodies were destroyed in the fires of the crematoriums.

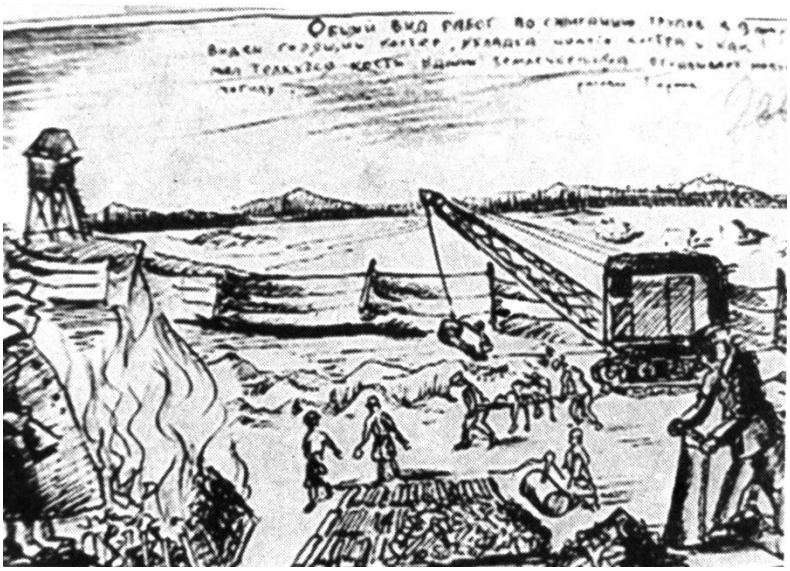
A specific situation in Lithuania in 1942 was determined by several reasons. On the one hand, almost all the Jews from shtetls and small regional areas as well as the weak, the "useless" residents of ghettos had already been killed, and, on the other hand, the industry and the infrastructure supervision of the Third Reich needed the cheap labour force. For some time, the Jews not yet killed were supposed to supply the necessary workforce. They worked as prisoners of the **concentration camps**, for many hours and only for a small amount of food. Under these conditions, many died from illnesses or exhaustion. No serious medical help was provided for

them, and if they misbehaved, e.g. by running away or if they became too weak to work, they would be shot.

In the middle of 1943, after the Battle of Kursk, a major breakthrough took place in the German-Soviet war. The front moved westwards and the Nazis understood that some of the previously occupied territories would soon be lost. While organizing the retreat, the Germans paid much attention to not only eradicating the evidence of their crimes, but they also started a new wave of killings. Within Easters territories they did not want to leave a single living Jew, neither as an eyewitness, nor as a "racial enemy" that they tried to destroy at any cost. The first and the most prominent occurrence of this policy in Lithuania was the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto that began on September 23, 1943. This date was commemorated in the independent Republic of Lithuania as the Lithuanian Jewish Genocide Memorial Day.

The destruction of the Vilnius ghetto was extremely brutal: people were beaten and shot on the spot so that they would not resist the SS and their local helpers when they tried to transport them from the ghetto and into the death camps.

From mid-1943 to the mid-1944 similar fate was shared among all the other ghettos in Lithuania. At the same time the mass graves of the Holocaust victims were being conscientiously destroyed. Special teams made up of ghetto prisoners and prisoners of war (POWs) in Paneriai and the Ninth Fort dug the bodies from their graves, searched for golden teeth and jewellery, piled the bodies in large stacks and burned them. Once the burning ended, other members of the teams ground the bones and scattered them alongside with the ashes in the fields around the mass graves. This bizarre process of hiding the evidence was not fully implemented by the Nazis as they were short on time: the front was approaching too quickly.



8. The drawing by a participant of the escape A. Garnikas: excavation of remains in the field of mass massacre (Collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum).

In the autumn of 1944, the Red Army had occupied most of the territory of Lithuania. Almost none of the Jews were there. Very few of them saw the end of the war in concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Poland, even fewer survived by having been hidden in the homes of various Lithuanians. For helping the Jews and for the sacrifice that they made, the State of Israel has recognized the efforts and awarded 918 people from Lithuania with the title of *The Righteous Among the Nations* (or *The Righteous Gentile*). According to various data, the Holocaust in Lithuania was survived only about nine thousand Jews, i.e. only a few per cent of a flourishing pre-war Jewish community of almost 200 thousand people.

THE KAUNAS GHETTO

A ghetto is usually a separate quarter (or a part of it) within a city where a clearly identifiable racial (in some cases social) group (a community) lives a private life. Sometimes ghettos form naturally, as a phenomenon of long-term development; in some cases, however, they appear as an expression of forcible political will. In 1941, the establishment of the ghetto in Kaunas, like in other cities, was initiated by the German occupational authorities. It was the consequence of the ongoing war.

A forceful gathering of the Jewish population in a small, fenced territory is nothing short of the first practical phase of the Holocaust. Such conditions permitted the perpetrators to organize a fast killing of many people at once. The Nazis applied analogous patterns in all of the occupied Eastern European territories and Kaunas was no exception.

Just like in other places, to encourage the Jews to gather and be isolated in a separate area, the German security police initiated a series of bloody pogroms that were carried out by the local collaborators, the “white bands”. The rage went on not only in Kaunas, but also in Vilijampolė, the territory that would soon be turned into the Kaunas ghetto. In the period of a few days around 600 people were killed here.

Having been scared by this unimaginable terror, the Jews followed the instructions in the official order given by the Lithuanian collaborative administration supported by the German SS of July 10, 1941 to move to the ghetto by August 15. The moving into the ghetto was hasty, followed by bullying and threats. Families did not have the opportunity to take enough food or other necessities with them. All the remaining Jewish wealth was confiscated by the occupational authorities and the relocated Jews practically were robbed of the status of them as human beings. By a special order they were forced to wear a yellow, six-angled star on the left side of the chest, lost the right to walk on the sidewalk, use public transport, they had to follow other similar humiliating rules. The ghetto encompassed several fenced sections of Vilijampolė. The area was separated from the Kaunas Old Town by the River Neris (or Vilija – which is why this part was called like that). The residents of this part of town called the area *Slabotkė* or *Slabada*, which meant a village free of feudal labour requirements, a place of residence of free people. The Nazi occupation left this area with deep wounds of horrifically negative associations.

9. The Stars of David found in the field of mass massacre (Collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum).

Vilijampolė is an old suburb of Kaunas. Its history is closely linked with the local Jewish community. For a long time, without being allowed to settle in the city premises among the Christians, the Jews of "Slabada" formed a unique social and cultural medium. Therefore, the Vilijampolė of the 18th and the 19th centuries can rightfully be called a kind of the prototype of the ghetto. It was a poor, decrepit area of Kaunas, inhabited by modest peddlers, artisans, craftsmen, coachmen and workers or industrial factories. On the other hand, this place was famous for being an exclusive educational centre of Judaism. The rabbis-to-be came to study at the Vilijampolė yeshiva (a type of Jewish religious seminary) from various foreign countries. Famous philosophers and scholars of the Torah and the Talmud taught here. In 1930 the area was home to 14 synagogues.

It seems that because of these historical traditions and cultural heritage, the Nazis decided to gather the Jews of Kaunas in Vilijampolė – the place of the formation and flourishing of the Jewish community – before exterminating them. Over several weeks in July and August 1941, approximately 30 thousand people were crammed into a relatively small territory designated for the ghetto, although the number of residents before did not exceed twelve thousand (of which about eight to nine thousand people were Jews). Therefore, the living are was extremely scarce, the relocated inhabitants were squeezing is small spaces without even the minimal sanitary conditions. Food was scarce too. The inhabitants of the ghetto first ate by exchanging the objects they had into food from local residents or farmers. It was not an easy task: the territory of the ghetto was protected by the ex "white bands" who had by then joined the Lithuanian police battalion, who often robbed the Jews, bullied and beat them. Sometimes the "police" decided to have fun and, for example, shot without targeting a particular place, just through the fence thus accidentally killing or hurting the prisoners.

The occupational authorities appointed a special commander of the ghetto, the SS officer Fritz Jordan, who was put in charge of the fates of 30 thousand people. Being a faithful National-socialist, this officer continued to create the atmosphere of humiliation and fear with great satisfaction. The residents of the ghetto were ordered to form their own self-governing bodies. They did not have a say in the governing of the ghetto, but the Nazis needed these structures so that they could demonstrate that the Jews themselves add to the mass killing of other Jews. The ghetto police are remembered in this context: they were put in a position where they had to make personal decisions, an unimaginable dramatic moral choice. However, even in such horrible conditions, many of the ghetto police officers tried to help other prisoners in the ghetto by sabotaging the Nazi orders or in other ways in the best way that they could.

The highest self-governing body of the ghetto was the Council of the Elders, whose chairperson agreed to be a well-known and respected doctor Elchan Elkes. One of his secretaries for a long time was Abraham Golub. Having survived the Holocaust, after the war, he left Lithuania for Israel, changed his name to Avraham Tory and published his unique notes about what he saw and experienced at the Kaunas ghetto between 1941 and 1944. There is a version of the book in English (Tory, A. *Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary*).

The orders of the Council of Elders of the ghetto were followed by different committees in charge of separate spheres of life. They would give out food cards, directed the prisoners to workplaces, organized medical care and later coordinated cultural activities.

10. Ammunition tubes of rifles "Mosin" and "Mauser" found in the field of mass massacre (Collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum).

As soon as the ghetto was established, the Nazis started to exterminate the people there straight away. The first prisoners to be killed were the Jewish intelligentsia. The well-educated prisoners of the ghetto were offered an attractive employment opportunity, which turned out to be a trick, to organize the Archives of Kaunas. The gathered candidates were all taken by the "white bands", taken to the Fourth Fort and shot there. Then the Nazis started taking care of the other "useless" elements of the ghetto. Those included the sick, women and children. At the beginning of October 1941 the German security police, with the assistance of the local collaborators, burned down the ghetto hospital with live people still in the building. Soon the first mass murder was organized at the Ninth Fort. On October 4 about than two thousand ghetto prisoners were killed here, more than half of them women and children. On October 29, during the "Great Action", almost ten thousand Jews were murdered in the pits of the Ninth Fort.

Cruelty and violence accompanied not only the final stage of the murders but the prelude of the event, the selection procedure that had been happening the night before, at the ghetto. The Nazis turned this process into a sophisticated sadistic ceremony. Before making the final decision, the SS guards would rehearse the selection process. Such "trick" was used before the action of October 4. The ghetto prisoners were told to gather in the main square of the ghetto, then the trial selection took place. After this, everyone was allowed to get back home. This was done to make the prisoners less alert. Soon such selection was repeated. This time it was not a rehearsal but rather a tête-à-tête with death.

In 1941 the ghetto was divided in two parts. One of them was the big ghetto and the other one – the small ghetto. This was where the people destined to be killed were kept. In the morning of the killing the Jews from the small ghetto were marched on foot about four kilometres to the Ninth Fort. No one returned from there. The Jews remaining in the big ghetto watched over the fence this tragic procession. Many were aware of how everything will end. The prisoners of the ghetto could not resist this systematic destruction by organizing themselves into an uprising: they were paralyzed by fear, which was a result of the continuous terror. The guards of the ghetto did not hold back and could publicly beat or shoot anyone who did not follow their orders. Every given chance was used to express that a Jewish life is worth nothing and anyone can take it away without any repercussions. A part of the Jews lived in the ghetto illegally: they were hiding from being taken into the group of the ones destined to be killed. Those in hiding could not work and did not get food cards, thus they were totally dependent on the relatives and friends who had made a choice to help them.

Such nightmarish conditions existed in the Kaunas ghetto throughout the autumn of 1941. Over the period of several months, it lost more than half of its residents. The year 1942 was somewhat calmer. The Nazis needed cheap workforce, so they did not rush to get rid of the remaining Jews. Instead, teams were formed from them, and they were assigned the most difficult jobs, usually ditched by paid Lithuanian contractors. Many Jews were forced to walk in the early morning from the ghetto to the suburb of Kaunas called Aleksotas, where they were assigned to be repairing the runway of the local airport. Many were also working in the further suburbs of the city: made bricks, dug peat, and worked as builders. Within the ghetto itself there were many tailor shops, repair and craft workshops.

The working Jews received slightly better food rations while others were in danger of being famished. About 50 people would die every week in the ghetto because of exhaustion or illnesses. In order to avoid famine, illegally smuggling food products was becoming more and more significant. Those working in Kaunas or around it would exchange valuables or jewellery for food from the free people and would secretly smuggle it into the ghetto. It was not an easy task: one had to get through the checkpoint that was located next to the main ghetto gates. The guards were often tricked or bribed Around the edges of the ghetto gardens were cultivated where the prisoners grew some vegetables. In the summer the Jews were even allowed to swim in the Neris river.

Overall, the life in the ghetto in the time period between 1942 and 1943became more stable, therefore, opportunities and willingness to experience some kind of cultural activity became apparent. A semi-professional orchestra came together and arranged concerts to lift the spirits of the community and the strengthen their hope of overcoming the challenges that lay ahead. A secret education of children was organized, and adults were taught various skills. Around the same time, youth groups of resistance against the Nazis were forming. Some members of these groups managed to escape the ghetto and get to the Soviet partisans in the South-eastern forests of the country. In 1943 a secret transit of the Jewish children illegally born in the ghetto began. Children were moved to Kaunas and surrounding villages and given to generous, well-meaning Lithuanians. The children were hidden in carts, potato sacks, among objects etc. This way a couple of hundred children were saved.

After the first two years of the war, the Third Reich started losing its occupied Eastern territories one after another. The front was coming towards Lithuania. Understanding that soon enough they will need to retreat, the Nazi government in Lithuania began destroying the ghettos. They were all given the status of concentrations camps. That was supposed to ease the solution to the final "Jewish question". At the end of March 1944 the gestapo staff and their helpers from various battalions initiated the "Children's action" at the Kaunas ghetto: they searched for and caught children, threw them into trucks and took them away. Their fate is not clear to this day. It is believed that the majority of them was taken to the Auschwitz and Majdanek concentration camps and destroyed there. Others (about 800) were killed at the Ninth Fort.

11. A child's shoe found in the field of mass massacre (Collection of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum).

After a few months, the liquidation of the ghetto was completed. On July 8-12 Nazi units in Vilijampolė organized a hunt for people. Around six to seven thousand people were captured, taken to the train station, crammed into the trains and were sent away, men to Dachau and women to Stutthof concentration camps. Only a small part of them survived.

During the ghetto liquidation, some Jews tried to escape or hide in buildings. Whoever was noticed, was shot on the spot. Understanding that it would be impossible to catch all hiding

Jews, the Nazis set the seemingly empty ghetto on fire. Most houses were wooden so the fire spread rapidly. Fire was used to get rid of those still hiding in the hiding places. It has been calculated that approximately one thousand Jews were killed during this operation and only around 300 – 400 survived. Most of Vilijampolė was engulfed in flames for a few days.

When the Soviet army entered Kaunas on August 1, 1944 the ghetto territory looked like a macabre, burnt-out area where instead of buildings, piles of scalded debris and tall, black chimneys of where stoves used to be stood. Because of the fire, Vilijampolė changed a great deal after the war: it lost its authenticity since not many buildings from the ghetto period remained there.

FURTHER REFERENCES

1. You can learn more about the Kaunas Ninth Form Memorial Complex and the history of this place in this short virtual tour: The Memorial Complex of the Ninth
2. More about the escape from the Ninth Fort on December 25, 1943 can be learned from the eyewitness' (Alex Faitelson's) personal account in the book written by his son: Faitelson, Yakov. *The Escape from the IX Fort – "the Fort of Death"*
3. A short but informative Yad Vashem video about the life in the Kaunas ghetto: The Lives of Jews in the Kovno (Kaunas) Ghetto
4. The everyday life of the Kaunas ghetto was well documented by Zvi-Hirsh Kadushin (George Kadish), who secretly photographed the ghetto life: Cvi-Hiršo Kadušino (Zvi-Hirsh Kadushin / George Kadish, 1910–1997) fotografijose

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

GULAG (abbreviated from the Russian: Glavnoje upravlenije ispravitelno trudovych lagerej, translation: "chief administration of the correctional labour camps". From the 1930s to the 1960s, the branch of the repressive organs of the USSR in charge of forced labour camps and colonies, in some cases also in charge of exiles' specialized (labour) living villages.

The Third Reich – it is important to know that the National Socialists themselves described their reign from 1933 to 1945 as the "Third Reich". They used the term the "Third Reich" for their National Socialist propaganda. In nationalist ideology already in the 1920s the "First Reich" was seen as the "Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation" in the Middle Ages; Bismarck's Empire since the foundation of the Empire in 1870-71 was seen as the "Second Reich" and the "Third Empire" as the empire that was to come. The National Socialists took up this concept because they saw themselves as the realisers of this idea. They saw this empire as a "millennial empire", i.e. an empire "almost" for eternity.

Pogrom: an attack of a group of people belonging to the majority on a group of people belonging to a particular religious, racial or national minority or an attack against their possessions usually sanctioned by and / or supported by the authorities. The term "pogrom" is usually used to talk about attacks against the Jews.

SS is the abbreviation for the "Schutzstaffel" (Protection Squad) of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (German abbreviation: NSDAP). The SS was founded in 1925 and was a paramilitary organisation. Its members wore uniforms and carried weapons. They persecuted, abused and murdered people whom the Nazis had declared their enemies. The SS was the organisation most responsible for the genocidal killing of estimated 5.5 to 6 million Jews and millions of other victims during the Holocaust. The SS was also involved in commercial enterprises and exploited concentration camp inmates as slave labourers. After the war, the SS was banned and declared as a criminal organisation by the Allies.

"The Final Solution" or **"The Final Solution to the Jewish Question"** was a term coined and used by the bureaucrats of the Nazi Germany which meant a plan to annihilate all the Jews in Europe. The term was first used on July 31, 1941 in a memo by Hermann Goering to Reinhard Heidrich, in which Heidrich was asked to set up "primary organizational, practical and financial means for the implementation of the plan of the final solution to the Jewish question" and later the concept spread. The decisions as to the implementation and coordination of the "final solution" were made at the Wansee Conference on January 20, 1942.

The National labour security battalion was established on June 29, 1941. The battalion was organized by the Kaunas military commandant during the first days of the Soviet-Nazi war. The German military administration needed behind-the-front armed units to perform auxiliary functions: to protect military objects, look after the prisoners of war as well as to manage public

order and security. Therefore, the administration did not resist that an armed Lithuanian unit should be created. In most cases the people who joined the labour security battalion were Lithuanian anti-Soviet rebels and army officials from independent Lithuanian times. At first, the battalion protected military and civilian objects but at the beginning of July 1941 they joined the mass killings of Jewish residents under the initiative of the occupational government.

The Hamann flying squad (German: Rollkommando Hamann) was a mobile squad led by the SS Obersturmführer Joachim Hamann, who was responsible for killing, together with local helpers, around 70 thousand Jews between July and October 1941. Among those killed were almost all the Jews of Lithuanian provinces. The squad was made up of ten SS soldiers and 30 members of the 3rd company of the National labour security battalion.

Concentration camps were sites of isolation and slave labour set up by the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s to eliminate political opponents. From the summer of 1938, they were used as prisons for German Jews, and during the war also for prisoners of war of, inter alia, Polish, Romani and Soviet origin. Concentration camp inmates were weakened by hard physical work, beatings and negligible food rations, which led to high mortality rates. The German abbreviation for concentration camp is “KZ”.

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