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The Holocaust in Samogitia [LITHUANIA]

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Preface

The history of Lithuania as a mosaic consists of jolly and merry, cruel and sinister events. Though, there are unpleasant facts for the history. One of them – the Holocaust in 1941. It is one of the most dramatic 20th century history chapter for Lithuania as Europe. However, it is better to hear all the truth once in order nobody could reproach that Lithuanians choose to forget it and Jews would be sure that they are not forgotten.

"Collective responsibility does not exist – all of us can not take responsibility for the past and the Holocaust. Though, there is a historical responsibility which boundaries are much wider", - Klaipėda University DA Hektoras Vitkus tells about the Jewish genocide [1]. Thus, it is important to be acknowledged with the history of the Holocaust and to understand the point and reasons of it as well.

This book is dedicated to a broad society because the massive Jewish massacre sites are included into the heritage register. We consider that every municipality and every eldership would like to know about the monuments in their region. It will also be important for the tour guides as well. People who are interested in regional studies and museology and collect information about their rural districts can supplement their knowledge. The youth acquainted with this book will perceive not only the amount of the killed Jews but also the fact that it was done even by Lithuanians who were led by the Nazis: they killed unarmed civil inhabitants, even their neighbours and acquaintances.

The publication has been started translating into English in order more and more people could get acquainted with this material and it would be a testimony of the Lithuanian Jews tragedy.

A number of people assisted to prepare this book. We are sincerely grateful to them for it.

This book would not be published without sponsors. We are extremely grateful to those who understand that the Holocaust is a part of Lithuanian history and must be investigated.

The authors

1 .Šeškevičienė I., Žydų genocidas: žudė nepažinę. Pajūrio naujienos, nr. 76. 76(2021), 2011, rugsėjo 23 d., p. 10.

Introduction

Lithuania - a small country near the Baltic Sea but during the Second World War when it was occupied by the German Army, the Nazis with the assistance of Lithuanian collaborators assassinated about 200 000 Jews here (this number is empirical). All the Jewish community who resided in Lithuania from the 14th century – Vytautas the Great period, was destroyed.

SS units for special purposes were formed – Special brigade (Einsatzkommandos) and mobile assassination battalions (Einsatzgruppen). Local collaborators were asked to assist them. Thousands of Jews had been killed until the establishment of grand ghettos in Lithuania (until August, 1941). Firstly, the massive Jewish massacre started in German frontier – in Kretinga, Marijampolė, Tauragė Counties and in Kaunas. The massacre and pogroms were initiated by German security police and SS (Security Service) A operational group commander Walter Stahlecker and Gestapo and SS officers subordinated to him.

After the War, when the Soviets had occupied Lithuania for the second time, remembrance signs - monuments were put in more than two hundred massacre sites but Jews were named only as "soviet people". It was not written much about Jewish massacre; it was talk so much about killed young communists, communists and Soviet activists.

A number of articles appeared about the Jewish massacre since 1991 when Lithuania regained its independence but not many witnesses remained alive: some of them died, others emigrated to the USA, Israel and other countries. Almost none could tell how the massacre happened, who participated and etc. And the more time goes by, the memory fades. The events stated in 1941 will be our contribution to the process that this will not happen again.

There are five ethnographical regions in Lithuania: Žemaitija (Samogitia), Aukštaitija, Dzūkija, Suvalkija and Mažoji Lietuva (Lithuania Minor). Every region is divided into counties and rural districts. During the interwar period and in 1940 there were 23 counties in Lithuania. Several years ago we set to work – to describe in detail Jewish massacre in rural districts of every region while alive witnesses are still remained.

In Lithuania "rural Jews" firstly found their place in Žemaitija (*Zamet* or *Zamut* in Yiddish). Žemaitija Region (Samogitia) in North West and Middle Lithuania distinguishes for its original lifestyle, language and history from other Lithuanians regions.

Even in the end of the 14th century Jews resided in this region. They were pleasantly welcomed. Vytautas the Great provided Jews some privileges because he was certain that residence and collaboration with them will help the country to prosper more and more. Bigger and smaller communities were established, particularly after 1569 Union with Poland. Jews were known as good artisans: tailors, shoemakers, millers, wood and agricultural product traders, woodworkers,

manufacturers of metal items, household appliances and jewellery, and very often as independent farmers. During corporate lifetime decades Jews and non- Jews accustomed to and learned to value each other, there was a consensus useful for both.

In the end of 17th century the Jewish communities were divided into three districts: Kėdainiai, Biržai and Vyžuonai. First, one rabbinate in Kėdainiai supervised all Žemaitija (Samogitia). But later own structures appeared in communities, they elected their rabbis and governing council.

After World War I when Lithuania regained its independence, the centres of Jewish residence became Telšiai, Raseiniai, Plungė, Jurbarkas, Šiauliai, Žagarė, Palanga and Kretinga near the frontier with Klaipėda Region, Kelmė, Skuodas, Salantai and Kražiai. These communities with resident Jews around belonged to Kėdainiai district. Biržai was the communities' centre of Pasvalys, Seda, Mažeikiai, Pumpėnai and Pakruojis.

We started from the least investigated Žemaitija (Samogitia) region which consists of six counties: Kretinga (12 rural districts), Mažeikiai (8 rural districts), Raseiniai (12 rural districts), Tauragė (13 rural districts), Telšiai (9 rural districts), the western part of Šiauliai County (10 rural districts); we have also adverted the Klaipėda Region (Klaipėda city and district, Pagėgiai and Šilutė Counties) [3;4;5].

In 1923 Jews amounted 7,6% (about 153 000 people) of two million Lithuanian habitants. At present only several thousand Jews are residing in Lithuania [1].

There is not much data about separate massacre sites: when, how many Jews and in what way Jews were killed. Some sites when the remains were moved to other cemetery completely disappeared, the indexes indicated the massacre sites disappeared as well. Our first book comprises Žemaitija Region where there are even 70 massacre sites. We have collected a lot of data: specified dates, circumstances, the participants of massacre, defined the places. In the future we are going to start working in other Lithuanian regions in order to look through all the Jewish massacre sites in Lithuania – less and less witnesses remain alive every day.

Chairman of the Board in the Lithuanian Research and Studies Center in Chicago dr. Augustinas Idzelis has been written in one of his articles that *historians often do not use all the sources* [2].

The data were collected from the massacre sites, the witnesses were searched and questioned, every message about the massacre process was fixed. We went deep into the articles which were printed in that particular area (rural district), and professional historians are not fond of that so part of the data is just lost. Now the access to the archives is open and it is possible to identify the number of killed people and the participants of the massacre. The testimonies were taken from the Jews who live in Israel and who have experienced the massacre horror. We have cited the books published in Israel (*Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities. Lithuania, ed. D.Levin, Jerusalem, 1996; Memorial Book of Skuodas (Lithuania), Tel Aviv, 1948; Esther Herschman-Rechtschafner Svekshna. Our Town* and etc.). We have also used video material where the testimonies of alive Jews are recorded. The communication with The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum and Jakovas Bunka Charity and Sponsorship Fund was an advantage as well.

We do not devalue the contribution of other authors who wrote about the Jewish massacre but the chronology of the Jewish massacre of all the county is described in our texts, not only separate episodes. Some articles are written in cooperation with museologists or specialists of regional studies.

We endeavoured to present the collected data in local or republican press. Two articles were published in the scientific magazine the *Genocide and Resistance*.

While we were collecting data for the book, we identified four Jewish massacre sites which were not registered officially. For example, in Kaunas, the second largest city of Lithuania, we have found the Jewish massacre site which was unknown, although according to Karl Jager report, on 30th August, 1941 125 Jews were killed here. We have also took the trouble to expose the monument with the title telling about the Jewish massacre. We add to the book the documentary *The Disappearing Past* (captions in English, duration 30 min) about unremembered Jewish massacre sites.

The title of the book *The Holocaust in Samogitia* is not accidental: it is an encyclopedic reference of the Jewish massacre in this region. It involves six counties in Žemaitija (Samogitia) (the maps of counties are taken from the book *Mūsų Lietuva* by Bronius Kviklys, vol. 1-4, Vilnius:Mintis, 1989-1991) and the occupied at that moment the Klaipėda Region. (The Klaipėda Region was conditionally attributed to Samogitia). Every rural district is described as a separate unit. Some events include several rural districts or even counties. The references are presented in order to avoid repetition and to find information easier.

In the beginning of the description of almost every rural district, the number of inhabitants and the number of Jews included is presented. Later, the arrests of Jews, the establishment of ghettos and the massacre and the massacre sites. In the end, the sites of the monuments are indicated. Brief conclusions, separated by stars, are necessary in some places in order the most important facts would be presented once more.

It is difficult to define the number of Jews in towns and villages because the population census did not occur in 1940 and the numbers in different sources differ. It could be admitted that in 1941 there were not Jews in Lithuania; except in the biggest ghettos, the number of Jews in province almost coincide with the number of the killed ones but in some sources it can be enlarged, in other – reduced.

The names of most Jews are not remained, if the first letter of the name is known, it is presented.

We present our opinion about the massacre time, the number of killed people and interpret them. Of course, we can sometimes make mistakes. If new information is detected, it will be possible to supplement but the reference must be presented.

The authors