

Eighty Years to “Operation Barbarossa” – The Children and Elderly *Aktion* in the Kovna Ghetto

by Ben-Tsiyon Klibansky

Background

In the end of 2011, the book “Expulsion and Extermination: Holocaust Testimonials from Provincial Lithuania” by Professor David Bankier of blessed memory, was published by Yad Vashem in English. This important book, which I had the great honor of completing and editing, opens with the following preface: “Whereas the Holocaust in the Lithuanian big cities of Vilnius and Kaunas has been studied in detail, there is almost no research about the annihilation of the Jews in the provinces”.¹ Was David Bankier correct when he stated that the Holocaust in the two largest Lithuanian cities has been thoroughly researched? I wish to describe one event that happened in the Kovna Ghetto – the Children and Elderly *Aktion* that took place over two days, April 27–28, 1944.

My grandfather, for whom I am named, was murdered in this *aktion*, but no one in our family knows on which day he was taken. In any event, we were sure that the place where he was killed was the Ninth Fort, a fortress adjacent to the ghetto, which was where most of the Jews of the city were massacred. As I read the memoirs of the survivors of the ghetto I was surprised to find that on top of not knowing for certain when he died, we also couldn’t be sure where he died. This is what Yakov Oleisky, who was the director of “ORT” in Kovna and in Israel and the Chairman of the Association of the Lithuanian Jews in Israel, wrote: “On those two days the Gestapo gathered 1200 people, amongst them 700 children, threw them into cargo cars, and they were taken to wherever they were taken and murdered”.² It is no wonder that Yakov Oleisky did not specify the location where they were transported. Indeed, Yosef Gar in his book “The Destruction of Jewish Kovna” which he wrote in Munich in 1948, just four years after the tragic event, discussed what happened on the first day of the *aktion*: “At the time, no one knew where they had taken the victims. Later we heard that they had been taken to Auschwitz...”,³ and regarding the second day he wrote: “we heard afterwards that they were taken to Fort IX and immediately shot and burned on a pile of wood which was constantly burning the bodies they had taken from the pits...”.⁴ Years later, Leib Garfunkel, the deputy head of the *Eltestenrat* in Kovna wrote in a more definitive manner: “On Sunday, March 27, the children and the elderly were driven towards the city. They were most likely taken to Auschwitz (Poland), where they were killed by gas. On March 28, the children and

¹ David Bankier, *Expulsion and Extermination: Holocaust Testimonials from Provincial Lithuania*, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2011, p. 8.

² Yakov Oleisky, ‘The Vocational School of the Ghetto’ [Hebrew], *Lithuanian Jewry*, IV, Edited by Leib Garfunkel, Tel-Aviv 1984, p. 138.

³ Yosef Gar, *The Destruction of Jewish Kovna* [Yiddish], Munich 1948, p. 209.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 212. Cf. Moshe Segalson, *My Memories 1941–1948* [Yiddish], [Tel-Aviv 1958,] p. 147.

the elderly were taken by the Germans to the Ninth Fort, there they were murdered the same day”.⁵ The testimony of Yitzhak Gibralter, a survivor of the Kovna Ghetto, brought up an additional claim: the victims from the first day were not actually taken to Auschwitz, but to Vilna. Gibralter pointed out a mass grave in the Vilna Cemetery with no marker, and claimed to me that this is the grave of those who perished on that day. However, according to a child captured in the *aktion*, Zusman, he was taken by train to Auschwitz, a ride that lasted six days, where, fortunately, he survived.

Thus, if the impression was created that the holocaust of the Jews of the Kovna Ghetto was already researched in detail, at least in connection to the mentioned *aktion*, there is a lack of clarity about its specifics, and the testimonies of the survivors just add to this feeling. I will not try to solve this mystery here. But still I chose to discuss the Children and Elderly *Aktion*, not because I have a personal connection to it but rather, for an entirely different reason: by many accounts, this was considered to be the worst *aktion* in the history of the Kovna Ghetto. I will quote, as an example of this, from the words of Leib Garfunkel, the aforesaid deputy head of the *Eltestenrat*, who wrote an article entitled “The Most Important Events in the Ghetto”, and when he got to this *aktion* he wrote: “March 27–28, 1944 were the most terrible days for the Kovna Ghetto”.⁶ Is this possible? Is it possible that the Children and Elderly *Aktion* which included 1200 lives was the worst? Worse than the “Great *Aktion*” two and a half years earlier where almost 10,000 people were shot within few hours? It seems to me that this definition from Garfunkel, who played such an important role in the ghetto, is sufficient to analyze the *aktion* in view of all the terrible events that occurred there, trying to identify its uniqueness and why it was worse than the preceding *aktions*.

The Preceding Events in the Ghetto

I will review the events up to that Children and Elderly *Aktion*. Kovna was bombed on the first day of Operation Barbarossa, on June 22, 1941. At the time, 35,000 Jews lived there; several thousand refugees from the outskirts in western Lithuania joined those Jews in Kovna. Three days later, on June 25 the city was in the hands of the Germans. On the same day, actually that night, wildly violent outbreaks took place in the Kovna suburb, Slabodka. The pogrom was carried out by the Lithuanians, and they murdered with their hands, knives, axes and weapon more than one thousand Jews. On the following days, pogroms broke out in other parts of the city as well; in those pogroms about two thousand Jews were cruelly murdered. Along with these incidents there were also indiscriminate mass arrests of Jews, which continued for ten days. About 6,000 were taken to the Seventh Fort and held there under extremely difficult terms. On the night of July 7,

⁵ L. Garfunkel, ‘The Most Important Events in the Ghetto’ [Hebrew], *Lithuanian Jewry* (above, note 2), p. 72.

⁶ Ibid. Moshe Segalson in his memoirs in October 1945 also wrote: “A beautiful sunny spring morning, March 27, 1944, was the most cruel day for Jews in the Kovna ghetto” (Segalson [above, note 4], p. 18).

half of those arrested, Jewish men, were executed. The women and children were released several days later.⁷

On July 11, an ordinance decreed that all the Jews of Kovna had to leave their homes and move to the ghetto that had been created in Slabodka suburb. About 30,000 Jews were forced to live there.

I will skip the “small” *aktionen*, such as the “Intelligentsia *Aktion*”, which consisted of 500 Jews, or the *aktion* to destroy the small ghetto, which had 1500 Jews, and I will then go straight to the “Great *Aktion*”. On October 28, all the Jews were ordered to be at the “Democrats Square”, about 26,000 men, women and children. I will quote from the description of Rebetzin Rivka Volbe (nee Grodzensky), in her book “Your Faith at Night”:

This morning is deeply etched in my memory. It was very cold and thick snow covered the streets and walkways which we had to cross. We went towards the square. Out of the homes and courtyards more and more people joined us. Everyone was going in one direction – towards the square... In the early sun light we saw Lithuanian Partisans and German soldiers surrounding the ghetto. There was a very heavy guard. In front of us we saw five Germans of high rank – they started the selection process: these to the right and these to the left. This is how we stood, in rows, all day long, waiting for our turn... we didn’t know which side was better, to the right or to the left... Just standing there face to face with our worst enemy, looking into their cruel faces, confused us.⁸

I will just point out that our knowledge of “selections” of such type is from the period of death camps, but the aforementioned *aktion* was in October 1941, when there wasn’t even a single death camp in Poland. In this selection almost 10,000 Jews were taken and the next day were shot in the Ninth Fort.⁹ In an instant, more than one third of the ghetto’s population disappeared. I stress “disappeared” because at the time, the remaining residents had no idea what the fate of those who had been taken was. Rivka Volbe continued with her description:

The next day the workers weren’t taken to work in the German factories. In every house sounds of hysterical crying could be heard. It was terrible to be in the streets. People didn’t eat or sleep, they weren’t able to do anything, not even think! It is difficult to describe the pain and sorrow that enveloped us all. We felt as though our world had been destroyed.⁹

Several days later the German in charge of ghetto affairs arrived and announced that no more people would be removed from the ghetto. This was on condition that the Jews completed their jobs exactly. This began a period of 1 ¾ years of quiet, more or less. By “quiet” I mean there

⁷ Garfunkel (above, note 5), pp. 63–64.

⁸ Rivka Volbe, *Your Faith at Night* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1997, pp. 68–69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

were no more mass *aktions*. However, Jews were still murdered daily for no reason or hundreds were sent to forced labor camps in Latvia or Estonia.

The Lithuanian ghettos changed significantly after Himmler's order on June 21, 1943, when he commanded the ghettos to be eliminated and in their place to construct concentration camps.¹⁰ At that time there were three ghettos in Lithuania: in Vilna, Kovna and Shavl. The ghetto in Vilna which housed 19,000 Jews was closed after 5000 women, children and elderly were taken to death camps in Poland and in Ponar (near Vilna), and murdered. The rest of the Jews were sent to forced labor camps in Estonia and Latvia. Only 2000 Jews remained in Vilna and they were concentrated in four separate work camps.

This was not the fate of the Jews in the Shavl and Kovna ghettos. Although even there, Jews with their families were scattered to different work camps in the vicinity, the Shavl and Kovna ghettos actually became concentration camps. By definition, such camps were meant for people who were laboring. Whoever wasn't included in that description, children, the elderly, and the sick and handicapped, their fate was determined.

In reality, it happened first in Shavl. On November 5, several SS troops and Ukrainians surrounded the ghetto. After the Jewish workers left for their workplaces, the only ones left in the ghetto were children and elderly. That was when the Nazis began their work. They ordered the Jewish police to bring all those who remained to the main square. The Jewish police in turn went house to house and told the people to stay inside and to hide. In the end, the Germans did their own dirty work, and they dragged children and seniors from their hiding places. Similar acts took place simultaneously in the work camps surrounding Shavl. The trapped – some 600 children and 200 elderly – were put onto trucks and their fate wasn't known for a long time. However, a train employee witnessed the event and reported that they were taken to Auschwitz.¹¹

Word of this *aktion* reached Kovna two days later. Parents understood that the die had been cast, and their children's fate had been decided.¹² Everyone panicked and many began to look for ways to save their offspring, including, giving their children to Gentiles for safekeeping. This is how several hundred children were saved.¹³

¹⁰ Yitzhak Arad, 'The Murder of the Jews in German-Occupied Lithuania (1941-1944)', *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, edited by Alvydas Nikžentaitis et al., Amsterdam-NY 2004, p. 196. Arad saw the order as a response to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which had occurred shortly before, and this was to prevent similar organization and revolt.

¹¹ 'The History of the Shavli Ghetto' [Hebrew], *Lithuanian Jewry* (above, note 2), pp. 190–192.

¹² Moshe Segalson, the manager of the ghetto workshops, cited the German commander Wilhelm Geke's words on March 28 at the conclusion of the Children and Elderly *Aktion* in Kovna: "It was supposed to have happened four months earlier" (Segalson [above, note 4], p. 49).

¹³ See, for example, Yehuda Beilis, *Yudke: What the Heart Remembers the Mind Cannot Grasp: The Story of a Survivor of Hell*, Haifa 2003, pp. 98–106.

Children and Elderly *Aktion*

The concerns of the parents in Kovna weren't in vain. On March 26, 1944 the Jewish police were ordered to come to an empty lot adjacent to Nazi headquarters at dawn the next morning, in order to get instructions how to organize the camp from pending Soviet airstrike. After the morning assembly, the members of the police orchestra were taken to the headquarters, and the others were ordered to sit on the floor. At the same time, many cars and buses with the windows painted shut arrived in the ghetto. Gestapo men and Ukrainians alighted. They surrounded the sitting policemen and ordered them to crawl on all fours and climb onto the buses. The policemen in their military splendor were taken to the Ninth Fort and put into prison cells. First, an investigation began against the heads of the Jewish police and then against the rest of the policemen. They were required to show the Gestapo the "malinas", the secret hiding places which had been prepared in advance and dug throughout the ghetto behind walls and underneath the floors. During investigations, they were beaten and cruelly tortured. Of the 130 police officers who were imprisoned, 7 were unable to withstand the torment and they disclosed the hiding spots that they knew of.

What was happening in the Kovna Ghetto at the time? After the Jewish workers went to their jobs outside of the ghetto or to factories that were in the ghetto, a car would be driving through the streets and on a loudspeaker announced that all the Jews were to remain at home and those who didn't would be shot.¹⁴ The Nazis began to go door to door and took with them children up until the ages of 12–13 and older people from the age of 55, as well as the sick and infirm regardless of their age. The Nazis did everything in order to expose all hiding spaces. Sonia Segal-Warshavsky, who worked in educating the children of the ghetto, described the atrocity:

The Germans hurried from house to house like wild animals; they looked in attics and cellars and grabbed the delicate victims, our precious children – the light of the lives and the future hope of those imprisoned in the ghetto. If a mother dared oppose the murderers – she and her child were murdered on the spot, or they would sic large dogs on her and during the tumult pull her child from her.¹⁵

The children and elderly who were caught were taken to buses. After the bus was filled, it would go in the direction of the city and return empty a short while later. Yosef Gar wrote: "In order to mute the sound of the children's crying as well as the mothers' who had been forced to bring their small children to the buses, the Gestapo played loud music. However, the heartbreaking scenes couldn't be silenced with Jazz music, and the entire area of the ghetto was filled with screams of anguished and tortured Jews who on one bright day were attacked by the Nazi murderers".¹⁶

¹⁴ See Segalson (above, note 4), p. 20 or the lyric description of Tzipora Bloch-Nayerman, 'Children Aktion in the Kovna Ghetto' [Yiddish], *Yad Vashem Archives, M.1/PF, 1129/222*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Sonia Segal-Warshavsky, 'Children of the Hebrew School in the Ghetto' [Hebrew], *Lithuanian Jewry* (above, note 2), p. 135. See also Segalson, *ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁶ Gar (above, note 3), p. 207. See also Segalson, *ibid.*, p. 20.

And how did the children themselves feel, the same children who had hidden from the terrible troops? Shalom Kaplan (later Eilati) and his mother heard the announcement from the megaphone that all residents were to remain at home. This is what he wrote in his excellent book “Crossing the River”:

From here on out, everything was done on auto-pilot, even though the blood flowed from the organs and the hands shook. Very quickly we dressed... Mother was able to grab a handful of food, and in a flash we scurried down to the cellar.

Since the Small *Aktion*, we practiced going down to the cellar several times... It was hard for me to imagine that some time something might really happen to us. Now we rolled inside among junk, pots, rags as deeply as possible... outside driving cars and soldiers marching could be heard. Tensed, we held our breaths, listening, waiting... suddenly, through the small hatch was heard from nearby... a blood curdling scream – Moishle!!! We heard gasping, some sort of struggle, moans of resistance; with cursing and angry insults the screaming was silenced to a tiny yelp, endless, like the sound of a seriously wounded animal, and we already knew – they were taking the children! What had been happening in other ghettos had now befallen us.

Again and again the sound of boots crossing the floor of our apartment, going into the rooms, moving and upturning furniture, refusing to stop. As though they had come with a roster that they couldn't put down until they crossed the last name off their list. Each time we hear those sounds we turn to stone – as long as they don't come down to the cellar, they should just be satisfied looking in the apartment, and they should just go. And all at once we heard the sounds of them turning towards the cellar's entrance. The sounds of two men... I don't dare breathe, my heart doesn't pound, I concentrate every part of me to shrinking as small as possible... the door is pushed with great strength, it responds by opening. They grope their way in and I am a pillar of stone. My eyes are so tightly sealed that it is doubtful if they will ever open... And suddenly something falls... and blocks their way. Apparently they don't have a flashlight... they turn around. I can hear their footsteps again, going up the ramp, leaving, fading away.”¹⁷

Eilati testified more to what he had heard in the cellar: “The horror continued. Wave after wave, between short periods of silence, it would burst out again, through the small window the sounds of aggressive marching, screams that penetrated the heart, swearing in German or Ukrainian, and the heart wrenching cries of bereaved mothers still holding their children... again and again sounds of hopeless struggling, moans could be heard, and then interrupted”.¹⁸

¹⁷ Shalom Eilati, *Crossing the River* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1999, pp. 145–147.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

The Germans did not avoid using axes and metal pipes. Into places where they suspected Jews were hiding, they threw hand grenades, and many died from these explosions. Many mothers went to great lengths to hide their small children, as Avraham-Beinish Guterman described it:

In one place they [the Germans] noticed stones. Under the stones the Germans found a plank, and below it – a pit in which a mother lay with a child. The boy was torn from his mother, and she was shot on the spot. Elsewhere the Germans entered the stable. A horse stood in it and ate hay from a sack. They removed the sack from the horse and found a small child in it.¹⁹

Mothers even gave their babies all kinds of drugs so they wouldn't reveal their hiding places, and many of them did not come back to life.²⁰

This is how the *aktion* continued all day long. In the evening the Jewish workers returned to their homes. One can only try to imagine their reactions upon finding out what had happened in the ghetto in their absence. Here is the shocking account from Rivka Volbe: "In all the streets mothers and fathers were returning home from work, pulling out their hair and screaming the names of their children, in desperation and hope that theirs had managed to stay hidden and any moment would come out of their hiding spot. However, for the majority, this was in vain. It looked as though people were going insane".²¹ Sonia Segal-Warshavsky summarized: "Profound grief and sadness fell on the ghetto. The wound was deep, the pain shattered the heart and the sorrow was unbearable; no words could minimize the worry and desperation of the bereaved mothers...".²²

The next day, March 28, 1944, the *aktion* resumed with even more violence and cruelty. According to the rosters that the Germans had, they understood that they didn't catch all the children on the first day, and they focused on "malinas". Yakov Oleisky wrote: "On the same day they came with search dogs, dynamite and penetration pipes. In door to door searches they found an additional 300 children and elderly".²³ Aryeh Segalson, who eventually became a judge in Tel Aviv District Court, wrote a detailed description in his fascinating book "In the Heart of the Citadel" what happened on that day:

Again the SS units and the Ukrainians broke into the ghetto... About half an hour later a loud explosion was heard and it was followed by two more. Not more than a few minutes passed, and it was already known to all... the SS men... were blowing up bunkers that were suspected of hiding children and the elderly... SS cars stopped near huts set up around the ghetto and let out SS men and Jewish policemen from the Ghetto Police... right after that, the residents of

¹⁹ Avraham-Beinish Guterman, 'On the Memorial Day of the Children and Elderly *Aktion* in the Kovna Ghetto' [Yiddish], *Pages of Jewish Lithuania*, edited by Yakov Rabinovitch, Tel-Aviv 1974, pp. 86–87.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87; Garfunkel (above, note 5), p. 71.

²¹ Volbe (above, note 8), p. 94. Cf. Gar (above, note 3), p. 210.

²² Segal-Warshavsky (above, note 15), p. 135. And Tzipora Bloch-Nayerman well defined the atmosphere in the ghetto in her poetry: "After the slaughter, the heart aches, in the ghetto – like a cemetery" (above, note 14, p. 4)

²³ Oleisky (above, note 2), p. 138.

the adjacent huts saw that the Jewish policeman was speaking with the SS and sometimes even pointing towards a hut. That is when the SS would go towards it and burst in... On the same day... the Germans found a bunker under a flour mill... a Jewish policeman had pointed to it. The SS found there children, adults and elderly. The children were taken to the Ninth Fort; the elderly and adults, some of whom were the parents of the children, were severely beaten... the next day they too were taken to Fort IX.²⁴

I opened my words wondering about the definition of the Children and Elderly *Aktion* as the most difficult event that happened in the ghetto. I think that Yosef Gar's summary accurately interprets this definition:

This was the worst *aktion* that had taken place in the Kovna Ghetto. During the other mass slaughters, when the ghetto lost 20,000 lives, entire families were taken out. This time, however, the pain was greater as children were torn from their parents. Even amongst the most optimistic Jews in the ghetto, this *aktion* took away all hope and the slightest expectation. All the speculations that the mass murder of Jews was behind them exploded like bubbles. It was clear that at the hand of the Hitlerian Angel of Death no Jew would remain alive, unless a miracle occurred.²⁵

But the miracle didn't occur, and there were Jews who expressed their wrath at God by throwing holy books and phylacteries out of the windows of their homes.²⁶

Only a few of the children of the Kovna ghetto and its elders managed to hide from the investigating and detective eyes of the Nazis and their Ukrainian aides during the *aktion*. However, the days of these survivors did not last long either, and most of them were killed during the liquidation of the ghetto from July 12, 1944.²⁷

Epilogue

At the end of my essay about the Children and Elderly *Aktion* in the Kovna Ghetto, I want to present the reactions to it from a completely different place. For this purpose, I will go back in time a little. Several days before the Nazis invaded Lithuania, in June 1941, the Soviets deported about 20,000 of its residents, of whom few thousands were Jews – active Zionists, Revisionists, industrialists and businessmen, or in other words, “anti-Soviet elements”. Amongst the deported were my parents. After a great deal of suffering, 1500 of them, including 180 Jews, were sent to a desolate spot at one of the northernmost tip of the world on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. There they had to help the war effort by fishing, salting, and preserving fish to be sent to the Front. This

²⁴ Aryeh Segalson, *In the Heart of the Citadel* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 2003, pp. 370–371.

²⁵ Gar (above, note 3), p. 213.

²⁶ According to the testimony of Rabbi Shim'on Segal.

²⁷ See Garfunkel (above, note 5), p. 72.

hardship, in cruel and unforgiving climatic conditions continued after the war as well. In 1947, the Jews in that desolate colony learned about the fate of their families and friends who remained in Lithuania, including the terrible Children and Elderly *Aktion* in the Kovna ghetto. My mother wrote about this in her book “From the Ends of the Earth”:

Horror gripped us as we heard about the awful *aktion* of the elderly and the children at Slabodka Ghetto in 1944. In this *aktion*, my grandmother Rochel and Mendel’s father were murdered... Mendel was very agitated about his father’s demise. When he found out the dates of the *aktion*, he sent a letter in Yiddish, on the third anniversary of his father’s passing, to his brother Yeshayahu who lived in the Land of Israel:

Dear Yeshayahu,

I am sitting here now and writing you this letter on Monday evening. I am coming now from the prayer *minyán* [Quorum] at Mother’s room, she should live to 120. I was the cantor and I prayed in memory of Father, three years since his passing. Three years that he is in the World of Truth. Three years since he was taken from us by the Hitler murderers... His last years were tragic, far from his wife and children, no one from whom to get comfort, and without even knowing where his wife and some of his children were. And more tragic – his death. Who knows what conditions there were, and who knows if he was brought to burial at all, did any trace remain of his bones? Oy, how awful is it to think of this. We don’t even know the right Memorial Day... I write this to you with endless tears pouring down my face.²⁸

My mother continued:

More than once, Mendel expressed that his participation in Beitar saved him, when he thought back, from the Nazis’ clutches; his position in this movement was the one which set in motion the Soviet regime’s decision to expel him from Lithuania to Siberia. Each of us thought back over the course his life had taken and his miraculous survival. In those moments I remembered something which had taken place several days before we were banished from Lithuania. One day, Marutka, our Christian maid, returned to our house and told us: “I just participated in an assembly for house maids. The Lithuanian leaders declared there that in a short time they will pave the streets of Kovna with the heads of the Jews!” Her shocking story scared us. Alas, they had been realized.²⁹

How much they were realized, one can learn from the lyrics of Tzipora Bloch-Nayerman in lamenting the result of the *aktion*:

²⁸ Gitta Langleben-Klibansky, *From the Ends of the Earth: The Struggle for Survival of a Jewish Girl from Lithuania on the Banks of the Arctic Ocean*, Elkana 2013, pp. 142–143.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

Childish voice, crying, no one hears,
Mother no longer calls her children
There is no trace of them left,
They were all slaughtered like animals...³⁰

³⁰ Bloch-Nayerman (above, note 14), p. 5.