

## **The Destruction of the Jews in Provincial Lithuania**

by Ben-Tsiyon Klibansky

A number of years ago, Professor Dan Michman, head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research at “Yad Vashem”, asked me to examine and edit a manuscript of a book written by the late Professor David Bankier. The book focused on the destruction of the Jewish community in provincial Lithuania. Until then, my research had been limited to the Lithuanian Jewish community before the Holocaust. However, I felt it was important to bring this book to the mass audience, and therefore, I agreed to Professor Michman’s request.

While reading the first chapters of the writings, I felt incredibly shocked. Although I had read the detailed fourth volume of the monumental book “Lithuanian Jewry” and Dov Levin’s edition of “Book of Communities – Lithuania” about the magnitude of the holocaust in the towns of Lithuania, this manuscript offered for the first time, in depth historical research that described in chronological order the shocking events in the Lithuanian provinces as well as the systematic and terrifying actions that obliterated the Jewish communities in a matter of four to five months.

The research that was brought in the manuscript was based on a collection of testimonies that is housed in the archives of “Yad Vashem”, which is the fruit of Leib Konyuchovsky’s labor. Konyuchovsky was an engineer in the town of Alitte and a survivor of the Kovna Ghetto and the German labor camps. Immediately after the end of World War Two, he took it upon himself to find survivors from the Lithuanian provinces and get their testimonies about the events in their towns before and during the war. After two years of tireless work, he had 150 authentications from witnesses who described clearly the fate of individuals and families from their communities. They recalled the names of the Jews who were tortured and murdered as well as those of their murderers, some of whom they were acquainted with first hand.

When David Bankier decided to research the destruction of the Jews in provincial Lithuania, he used about half of the testimonies from Konyuchovsky’s collection. In these reports he saw a way to present the events from the victims’ perspectives and to balance the historiography of the Holocaust which was based on the murderers’ testimony. The many testimonies he surveyed immediately highlighted a unique phenomenon – the Jews’ murder by the long pits was preceded by different stages that were never described in any of the statements of the Germans or the Lithuanians about the Holocaust in provincial Lithuania: humiliation, stigmatization, isolation, slave labor and concentration of the victims in temporary ghettos. These steps which were taken by the Lithuanians alone in most cases, were repeated in the towns from east to west and from north to south of Lithuania.

There is no doubt that the humiliation of the provincial Jews and their murders resulted from the Germans' direction. However, from the testimonies, it is clear that their Lithuanian partners went far beyond the Germans' dictates. Had it not been for their wicked enthusiasm, the destruction would not have been so complete. It was the Lithuanians who humiliated, murderously beat and tormented the Jews while they were driven to perform menial jobs in the streets; it was the Lithuanians who staged presentations belittling Jews on Sundays before cheering audiences, they who gathered Jews to "devil dances" and hit the "dancers" cruelly until they passed out or died, they who sadistically tortured the Jews by the death pits before murdering them. This zeal didn't abate while they fired upon them, when they smashed children's heads on the surrounding tree trunks to save bullets and while they tirelessly hunted down for fugitives until their capture. When they completed their vicious destruction, they divided the better clothes of those they had murdered amongst themselves. Afterward, they invited the towns' dignitaries to banquets celebrating the final elimination of their Jewish neighbors.

The edited manuscript was published in English and was named "Expulsion and Extermination". In addition to the systematic manner that the book reveals in the process of murdering the Jews, it describes in detail facts far more horrifying: in the execution of provincial Lithuanian Jewry – by my calculation more than 110,000 murdered souls, who were tormented, tortured, robbed, and treated inhumanly until their death in a way that is unmatched – the perpetrators who took part were not only "white partisans", who were former members of the Nationalistic Riflemen Union clubs, police officers and forest watchers, but all levels of the local Lithuanian population; from the barber to the school principal and from the close neighbor to the classmate in school. This scathing truth is important to learn and to understand for all today, especially for students of higher learning in Lithuania.