Ponary Diary
Events in Wilno, September 1939–July 1941

For generations before its liquidation during World War II, the Jewish community of Wilno was a major center of Jewish secular and religious culture; world Jewry referred to the city as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” From the second half of the eighteenth century Wilno was part of tsarist Russia. Then in 1920 it came under Polish control, until September 19, 1939, when the Red Army occupied the city in accordance with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact apportioning Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe between Germany and the Soviet Union. A few weeks later the district was transferred to Lithuanian control. The local Jews welcomed the Soviets and later the Lithuanians, thinking that these rulers would protect them from the German menace. Indeed, during the months of Lithuanian control, Wilno, sandwiched between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, offered a center of vibrant Jewish life, and about 14,000 Jewish refugees moved to the city from German-occupied Poland.

In July 1940, the Red Army invaded Lithuania, annexing the country to the Soviet Union as a Soviet republic. The Soviet authorities banned activity by Jewish organizations and political parties. Jewish educational and cultural institutions were closed down and Jewish leaders arrested. The entire educational system was put under government control. In the state schools where Yiddish was spoken, classes in Jewish history and religion and in the Hebrew language were prohibited; the new curriculum was steeped in Communist ideology and sang the praises of Soviet
rule and Soviet leaders. Jews, especially the recently arrived refugees (including several leaders of the Polish Jewish community) and the Zionist youth movements, which continued to function clandestinely, sought ways to emigrate to the Land of Israel (Palestine) or other countries in the free world. Between September 1939 and the German invasion on June 22, 1941, about 6,500 Jews managed to leave Soviet Lithuania.

At the same time, a handful of Jews who had been members of the former Communist undergrounds in Poland and Lithuania found places in the new Soviet regime, chiefly in lower- and middle-echelon positions of the sort that had been off-limits to Jews in independent Poland and Lithuania. This situation, plus the fact that the Jews as a whole were favorably disposed toward the Soviet regime (which they saw as a bulwark against Nazi Germany), intensified the antisemitism that had always been rampant among the local Poles and Lithuanians.

Another factor in the new surge in antisemitism during this period was the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF), established in November 1940 by exiled representatives of the political parties in Lithuania who had escaped to Germany when the Soviets occupied the country. The LAF had underground branches inside Lithuania, where they disseminated vicious antisemitic propaganda through leaflets smuggled into the country. The leaflets called for a popular rising if Germany attacked the Soviet Union and the elimination, by whatever means, of the Jews from Lithuanian soil. One of the LAF leaflets—headed “What Are the Activists Fighting For?”—stated, “The Lithuanian Activist Front, by restoring new Lithuania, is determined to carry out an immediate and fundamental purging of the Lithuanian nation and its land of Jews, parasites, and monsters... [This] will be one of the most essential preconditions for starting a new life.”

On June 14–15, 1941, a week before the German invasion, the Soviet authorities in Lithuania banished “anti-Soviet elements” to Soviet Asia. Almost a fifth of the 20,000 deportees were Jews, some from Wilno. Even though more Jews, proportionally, were being deported than Lithuanians, the action did nothing to diminish Lithuanian antisemitism and Judeophobia. The fear of further Lithuanian deportations heightened the tension among the locals and increased the animosity toward the Soviet regime and the Jews just before Germany attacked the Soviet Union.

We do not have precise figures for the population and ethnic composition of Wilno on the eve of the German invasion. The last prewar census was conducted in 1931, when the city was under Polish rule. It listed 195,000 residents of the city, including 128,000 Poles (65.6 percent), 54,600 Jews (28 percent), and 2,000 Lithuanians (1 percent). The remaining 10,000 (5 percent) were Belorussians, Russians, Ukrainians, and others. This enumeration distorted the true picture. Because Wilno was a bone of contention between Poland and Lithuania, the Polish authorities wanted to show that the Lithuanians constituted a neg-

1. Liudas Truska, The Upsurge of Antisemitism in Lithuania in the Years of Soviet Occupation (1940–1941) (Vilnius, 2001), 23. [Lithuanian and English]
ligible minority in the city by inflating the number of Poles. According to Lithuanian documents submitted to the Germans after the German occupation, Lithuanians constituted 30 percent of the population and Jews nearly 40 percent; the balance were Poles, Belorussians, Russians, and others. There is no doubt that these numbers overstated the number of Lithuanians in the city. But both the Polish and Lithuanian figures yield an estimate of some 60,000 Jews in Wilno on the eve of the German invasion, including refugees from Poland.

The Germans entered Wilno on June 24, 1941, two days after the start of the invasion. In those two days about 3,000 Jews managed to be evacuated or flee to the Soviet hinterland, leaving about 57,000 Jews in the German-controlled city. Groups from the Lithuanian underground, calling themselves partisans, and soldiers from the 29th Lithuanian Territorial Corps of the Red Army, who had deserted en masse, attacked the retreating Soviet forces, murdering Jews as well. On June 23, after the Soviet authorities had fled, a provisional Lithuanian government, headed by Juozas Ambrasevičius, was established in Kovno (Kaunas). When Wilno fell, the Germans set up a military administration in the city. At the same time, Lithuanian activists set up a council to run the city, with German consent. The council organized itself as a national and sovereign regime, with a police and military force, subordinate to the Lithuanian provisional government in Kovno.

The Jews of Wilno were not touched by the wave of pogroms perpetrated by Lithuanians that swept Kovno, Szawle (Siauliai), and other towns. Although there were attacks against Jews, and dozens were murdered in Wilno during the first days of the occupation, these murders did not compare in scale with what was taking place elsewhere in the country. Because the Lithuanians who had seized power in the city were a minority, they wanted to prove to the Germans that they could impose order; pogroms would have interfered with this goal. The Lithuanian leadership in Wilno also had an interest in painting the majority Poles as enemies of Germany and sympathetic to the Jews. A German report dated October 15, 1941, reads, “In the view of the Lithuanian population in the Vilnius [Wilno] district, the Jewish question . . . takes second place after the Polish problem. The strongest argument of the Lithuanian populace in the Vilnius area against the Poles is that some of them are cooperating with the Jews.”

A few days after the Germans entered Wilno, the German military authorities and Lithuanian civil government issued orders requiring Jews to wear the yellow badge, forbidding them to use the sidewalks, subjecting them to a nighttime curfew, permitting them to buy food only at certain hours and in certain stores, and confiscating their property. On July 4, the Germans ordered the Jews to set up a Judenrat (council) and Jewish police force. The Jewish leadership selected Shaul Trotzki to head the Judenrat and named Jacob Gens, formerly a reserve officer in the Lithuanian army, chief of police.

2. Einsatzgruppe A Report, Nuremberg Document L-180 [Trials of the War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, Blue Set].
One of the first anti-Jewish actions was a roundup of Jewish men on the city streets, conducted chiefly by the Lithuanian "partisans." Most of those picked up were taken to work for the Germans and sent home when their work was done. Some, however, did not return; rumor had it that they had been detailed to work at more distant sites. As became clear some months later, though, those who did not come back had been murdered by their abductors at Ponary.

The organized mass murder of the Jews of Wilno began with the arrival of Einsatzkommando 9, a subunit of Einsatzgruppe B, one of four German killing brigades, on July 2. Before they reached Wilno, Dr. Alfred Filbert, the Einsatzkommando commander, informed his men of their mission in the occupied Soviet Union: exterminating the Jews and key officials of the Soviet regime and the Communist Party. Filbert explained that the order came from Hitler and requested absolute obedience from his junior commanders and soldiers.3

In early July the status of the Lithuanian administration in the city changed. The Lithuanian council, which had claimed sovereign power subject to the Lithuanian provisional government in Kovno, was abolished and replaced by a municipal government directly subordinate to the German commander in the city. The Lithuanian military units were disbanded; some of their members were reorganized into police units—both munici-


der the command of Einsatzkommando 9, a reinforcement that made it possible for the Einsatzkommando to greatly increase the scope of its killing activities in Wilno. Einsatzgruppen Report No. 21, dated July 13, notes, “In Vilnius by July 8 the local Einsatzkommando liquidated 321 Jews. The Lithuanian Ordnungsdienst [Ordnungspolizei] which was placed under the Einsatzkommando was instructed to take part in the liquidation of the Jews. 150 Lithuanian police were assigned to this task. They arrested the Jews and put them into a concentration camp [Ponary] where they were subjected the same day to Special Treatment [Sonderbehandlung—a euphemism for killing]. This work has now begun and thus about 500 Jews, saboteurs among them, are liquidated daily.”

A witness to the roundups of Jews during the first weeks of the occupation later remembered: “Gestapo [that is Einsatzkommando] men come in cars and stop outside Jewish homes. They hail the men out and order them to bring along a towel and soap. They wash the men out and order them to work for a few days, but they never come back. Groups of young Lithuanians and Poles appear on the streets, wearing white armbands. They round up Jews and take them to the police or jail.”

The force that carried out the murders at Ponary consisted of three subunits, each comprising several members of the Einsatzkommando and dozens of Lithuanians. One subunit brought the people to Ponary, generally in Einsatzkommando trucks. Another guarded the killing site, both outside—to prevent people, including German soldiers, from approaching the shooting pits—and inside, to keep the victims from escaping. Upon arrival victims were placed in a secure waiting area; here they were told to undress and hand over any valuables they had in their possession. They were then told to blindfold one another or to wrap their heads in a shirt and close their eyes. They were led, naked, from the waiting place to the shooting pit in groups of 10 to 20, walking single file, holding one another’s hands. At the head of the line walked a Lithuanian, who guided the first prisoner to the shooting pit. As soon as a group left the waiting area the killers would begin preparing the next group. Members of the third subunit, at the shooting pits, lined up the victims up at the edge of the pit and shot them. The victims would fall into the pit, where any who showed signs of life would be shot again. The people in the waiting area, only a few dozen meters from the pits, could hear the shots clearly but could not see what was going on. At the end of the day’s killing, the pits would be covered with a layer of sand. Sometimes this was done by the last group of Jews, who were then shot and covered with sand by Lithuanians from the firing squad.

In July 1941, while Einsatzkommando 9 was active in Wilno, about 5,000 Jewish men were murdered, along with a few Communists and non-Jewish Soviet officials. In July and August 1941, the Jews of Wilno still knew nothing about what was happening at Ponary. They believed that the men picked up in the

5. Ibid. 22. The 150 Lithuanian officials were the Ypatingi Buriai unit.
6. Mark Dworzecki, Jerusalem of Lithuania in Revolt and Holocaust (Tel Aviv, 1951), 20–21. [Hebrew]
roundups had been sent to work for the Germans. The fact that the victims were generally men of working age reinforced this belief. At the beginning of August, Herman Kruk, an inhabitant of the Wilno ghetto, wrote in his diary: “Yesterday about 400 women gathered in the courtyard of the Judenrat and demanded that the Judenrat bring back their husbands, who had been working for three weeks, and send others in their place.”

The victims’ clothes, along with any money and valuables they had taken with them—for they, too, believed that they were being taken to work sites and would need such things—were usually kept by the murderers. The money and valuables collected at the waiting area near the shooting pits were taken by members of the Einsatzkommando, who were supposed to hand them over to their superiors to be forwarded to the German authorities in Berlin. Originally, the victims’ clothes and other personal effects were left as booty for the Lithuanian murderers. They took some things for themselves, their families, and their girlfriends; the rest they sold to the local population. Among the locals, brokers started buying Jewish articles from the Lithuanian murder squad for resale. Later, when the Aktionen became more organized and inclusive, instructions were issued to deliver all the victims’ property, including their clothes and other effects, to various German authorities. Even then, despite the orders, some of


JULY 1941

July 11

Quite nice weather, warm, white clouds, windy, some shots from the forest. Probably exercises, because in the forest there is an ammunition dump on the way to the village of Nowosiolki. It’s about 4 p.m.; the shots last an hour or two. On the Grodzienka I discover that many Jews have been “transported” to the forest. And suddenly they shoot them. This was the first day of execu-

8. The Wilno-Grodno high road.
tions. An oppressive, overwhelming impression. The shots quiet down after 8 in the evening; later, there are no volleys but rather individual shots. The number of Jews who passed through was 200. On the Grodzieanka is a Lithuanian (police) post. Those passing through have their documents inspected.

By the second day, July 12, a Saturday, we already knew what was going on, because at about 3 p.m. a large group of Jews was taken to the forest, about 300 people, mainly intelligentsia with suitcases, beautifully dressed, known for their good economic situation, etc. An hour later the volleys began. Ten people were shot at a time. They took off their overcoats, caps, and shoes (but not their trousers!).

Executions continue on the following days: July 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19, a Saturday.

The Shaulists do the shootings, striplings of seventeen to twenty-five years. At the Juchniewicz house a military post was installed which guards the area. A group (5 people) of Jews goes to the post for shovels. It turns out that they are going to bury those shot yesterday. This goes on for a week. Then the post in the Juchniewicz house is wound up. Only the Shaulists do the shooting and guarding. At the Grodzieanka post they detain Jews returning to the city from Drusk[11] or from the city[12] and

then a group on its way to “work” joins them. In this way two Jews, among others, were “added,” young people going to Wilno by road together with a Jewish woman. The next three days—July 20, 21, and 22—are quiet.

July 23

A nice day. About 500 people are transported. Executions until late; cries of “I am not a Communist!” “What are you doing?” They began to escape; shootings throughout the forest the whole night and during the morning. They were caught, shot, and finished off. Many intelligentsia. A few reached Jagiellonow; they were caught and shot, but presumably a few escaped via the Grodno highway. Since July 14 they have been stripped to their underwear. Brisk business in clothing. Wagons from the village of Gorale near the Grodzieanka [railroad] crossing. The barn—the central clothing depot, from which the clothes are carried away at the end after they have been packed into sacks. Brisk business. They buy clothes for 100 rubles and find 500 rubles sewn into them. Shaulists with bulging knapsacks, with watches, money, etc. Brisk business—for a bottle of skaidroji (75 liters),[13] clothes, etc.

On the road the Jewish women ask, “Where is the work?”

From July 23 until the end of the month they shoot, with the exception of Sunday, July 27. All together, in July, in the space of 17 days, they have shot an average of 250–300 daily, that is, 4,675 total, only men, with one woman “added.” In addition to

9. Lithuanians who manned the firing squad at Ponary. The Saulia Sajunga (Riflemen’s association) had been a paramilitary nationalist organization before Lithuania fell into Soviet hands. Many of its members rose up against the retreating Soviet Army and then volunteered to serve the Germans.

10. Inhabitants of Ponary.

11. Druskiniki, a resort town about 120 kilometers southwest of Wilno.

12. Presumably Wilno.

13. Presumably some kind of vodka or other homemade alcohol.
this, practically every day a few or a few dozen people are brought by car, probably Communist bigshots. So that all together about 5,000 people have been shot. Ravens, the ravens remain, shots dispersed them. Piotr Kieźzik, a pupil of the priest Bielauskas of the Lithuanian shelter at Zarzeczy, goes mad. Kieźzik is a thief, he stole the Ruch printing press in Podrodzi, and other things.

Events in Wilno, August 1941

In late July 1941 the military government in Lithuania was replaced by a German civil administration, creating the Generalbezirk Litauen under Theodor von Renteln. The Generalbezirk was part of the Reichskommissariat Ostland, run by Hinrich Lohse; it also included Latvia, Estonia, and western Belorussia. Wilno became a Gebietskommissariat governed by Hans Hinger, and Wilno Province (excluding the city) was the Wilna Land-Gebietskommissariat, headed by Horst Wulff.

One of the first anti-Jewish measures taken by the new German civil administration of Wilno was the imposition of a fine on August 6 of five million rubles (500,000 Reichsmarks) on the community, to be paid the next day or the members of the Judenrat would be executed. This was an astronomical sum, considering that that the local Jewish population had lost most of its assets during the Soviet period or in the confiscations of the month and a half of German rule. But the threats produced a superhuman effort that raised the money—some of it in the form of valuables—and delivered it to the Germans.

On August 9, Einsatzkommando 3 was given responsibility for the Wilno district. About thirty of its members arrived in the city and became a permanent operational station of Security Police and SD (hereafter Sipo), placing the Ypatingi Buriai unit that had been carrying out the murders in Ponary under its command. While the Sipo was getting organized, the murders of Jews decreased. Sakowicz’s estimate of 2,000 victims shot in August evidently includes Jews from outside Wilno as well as non-Jews; it is also possible that the number is somewhat overstated. SS-Standartenführer Karl Jäger, the commander of the Einsatzkommando 3, filed a report on December 1 stating that between August 12 and the end of the month the Einsatzkommando under his command killed 425 Jewish men, 19 Jewish women, and 17 Communists (both men and women) in Wilno.14

AUGUST 1941

Shooting August 1 and 2, groups of more than 300 each. Kieźzik settled in at the Wereszko’s. The clothes are carried away after 9 in the evening, so that nobody will see, because no one can go out. They pass by us. I ask one of them if he will sell me the potatoes he is carrying in a sack on his back. Not saying anything he

14. Yad Vashem Archive 053/1.
walks on to the Wereszkos'. Kiejzik blackmails Jews such as the Ponas and the Szapiro families in the Ponary colony. At the Ponas house he stole a radio and, as I hear, many other things as well. He fakes inspections—"search for weapons"—and carries away clothing and other things. For the Germans 300 Jews are 300 enemies of humanity; for the Lithuanians they are 300 pairs of shoes, trousers, and the like.

From August 3 through August 5, they don't shoot.

August 6

About 300 people, all with bundles, several wagons with valises at the back. They are going via Ponary—the settlement—"for work."

August 7

No shootings.

August 8

About 200 people are shot. They only shoot in the afternoon. They beat them with clubs on the way. Dawid Kassel: We were on the road, we worked.

August 9 and August 10

No shootings.

August 11

For the first time, [the Jews arrive] in the morning, at about 8 o'clock (because what kind of "work" is there at night?). The daughter of a certain Z. Bialostocki from Francziszanksa Street came; [she told us] they were taken on Saturday, August 9, to Lukiszki, and then on Monday to Ponary. The daughter had a certificate, but she was already too late, because they were shot about 9–11 in the morning and it was already 3 p.m.

The passenger car NV-370 had two amused Lithuanian "ladies" (dames) in the company of a certain "gentleman" who were on a day excursion to see the executions. After the shootings they returned; I did not see sadness on their faces.

In July there was a case in which, in order to torture a party of Jews on the field near Nowosiolki, gymnastics were thought up.

August 12 through August 15

No shootings.

August 16

In a group of 200, a middle-aged, emaciated Jewish woman in a navy-blue dress with white dots went arm in arm with a man.

15. Szakowicz seems to mean that the daughter brought a certificate stating that her father was employed and should not have been picked up.
She was the first woman in the group from Wilno. Many children aged twelve to fifteen years and old people, who are carried because there are no more wagons. Wagons for a few days, then they didn't bother with such things.

August 17 and August 18

No shootings.

August 19

There were already two women [among the victims]. A young blonde, intelligent looking—all together about 100 people. Many young people.

A Karaite[16] taken from the street was already in the pit when a German, who was present at the beginning of the execution and to whom he turned claiming that he was not a Jew, freed him. He drank water at the Rudzinskis' and then went to Wilno. Supposedly he lives on Kijowska Street.

They shoot in groups, from behind, in the back, or with grenades or machine guns, when it's raining or late.

One escaped in his underwear as far as Deginie. He was hunted down and shot. Children were herding cows, and he ran

16. Karaite were members of a Jewish sect that emerged in the eighth century. Their center in Lithuania was the township of Trakai (Trakai) near Wilno. Some claimed that their racial origin was non-Jewish but Turk-Mongolian, and the Germans did not consider them Jews so they were not subject to the Final Solution policy.

August 1941
to them, but they ran away. A few meters farther the rye was already tall.

Normally they shoot 10 at a time. They blindfold only those who so desire. The second group sees the first killed, but they don't bury the first group. No! They step over the corpses to the next (candidates)—corpses.

August 22

It turns out that on the pleshchadka[17] on August 22 one of the Jews struck a German with a bottle on the temple. The German fell down, and they carried him. This happened when the German tried to take the valuables from the man condemned to death.

Since August 22 the Germans have been taking the valuables, leaving the Lithuanians with the clothes and the like.

August 22, 11:30. My wife and I gather up the buckwheat to take away. At this moment we see Kiejzik running up the road in the direction of the Grodno highway. I say to my wife that Jews are being brought, because Kiejzik is hurrying to "work" (in a new suit). I follow after him—on the highway more than 100 people are being led, among them 7 Jewish women, one of whom is quite handsome, very young. Twenty minutes later a volley of gunfire reverberates. Next to the hut is a woman; it turns out she is the servant of the owner of the sawmill, Szapiro. She explains that yesterday Szapiro's son, 18-year-old

17. "Square," close to the shooting pits, where the victims undressed.
Sioma Szapiro—a pupil in his last year at the Polish gymnasium (in Bolshevik times that gymnasium was located on Dominikanska Street, opposite the town hall)—was picked up on the street when he went to work in the morning. She brought him an overcoat, food, and other things. I don’t know what happened to her. She is a Christian; so far as I could see she brought for him, among other things, a pupil’s coat.

After a strong wind and many clouds, beautiful weather (it was Friday). At 4 p.m. Arbon N5401 returns to Wilno; an hour later, near the house, as I was gathering the buckwheat, Kieziik acts like himself again. From the bundle of bed linens on his back clothes can be seen. He goes calmly, he is not embarrassed in front of anyone. He is walking in the company of a Lithuanian.

Saturday, August 23

Fine warm weather. At 8:30 in the morning; Arbon N5491 is coming from the direction of Wilno. What is going on? This time a few Germans on the bus, a few civilians, and 12 Jewish women, young ones I believe. The bus turns on the main highway and heads toward the forest.

A short time later I hear some crying and spasmodic moaning. After a moment, a volley; later a few individual shots, then everything quiets down. At 9:30 the Arbon passes the Grodzienka (without the women) in the direction of Wilno.

With the Karaites it was the case, I think, that on August 18

he had already been assigned to the fourth successive group of 10 slated to be shot.

It seems that on August 23 there were two groups of Jewish women, each made up of 6 women, or 12 women all together. The first group—young Jewish women—were shot by a Lithuanian. Kieziik boasted to Havelowna that stripped naked they looked very pretty. The second group, delivered a few hours later, was liquidated not by the Shaulists but by the Germans. Apparently the Germans corroborate that the ones shot were nude; they did not deliver them to the Shaulists but shot them themselves.

In all likelihood this was the reason why the Lithuanians were angry and got their revenge by spreading rumors that the Germans “contaminated the race with the Jewish women.” Because the Germans, after bringing the Jewish women, removed the Shaulists as far as the gate; nearly an hour elapsed from the arrival until the first shots were fired. That Kieziik told the truth about the nudity can be corroborated, because the next day silk stockings were being sold.

August 24 and August 25

No shootings.

August 26

Eighty-eight people were shot, of whom 6 were Jewish women. The majority, as can be seen from their clothing, etc., did not
come from Wilno, but from outside the city, from the small towns. And so Ponary has become something of a central base. Markowski got the date confused from July and August to August 25.

During August there were shootings on the 1st, 2nd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 16th, 19th, 22nd, 23rd, and 26th: all together, ten days, 2,000 people shot.

Last week, that is, July 27–29, the Shaulists were already saying that next week there would be as many shot in one day as were shot in the whole month of August. And that is how things turned out.

Events in Wilno, September 1941

Following an Aktion in which thousands of Jews were murdered, the Jews of Wilno were shut up in a ghetto on September 6, 1941. Unlike previous Aktionen, in which only men were killed, the ghetto Aktion did not discriminate; the victims were men and women, children and old people. This change was the result of a decision to liquidate all the Jews in the occupied areas of the Soviet Union.

The procedure the Germans followed to establish the ghetto in Wilno differed from their methods elsewhere. In other places they would usually select a predominately Jewish neighborhood and bring in Jews from other parts of the city or neighboring towns to join the local population. In Wilno the authorities first killed the Jews in the neighborhood they had selected and then brought in Jews from the other parts of the city to the now empty neighborhood. The reason for the change, claimed the Germans, was that the Wilno Jews had shot at German soldiers.

The Aktion, which is known as the Great Provocation, was actually the result of a staged attack by the SiPo. On the afternoon of Sunday, August 31, two Lithuanians in civilian clothes entered a house in the Jewish neighborhood from which they fired on a group of German soldiers milling outside the Pan Cinema. No one was injured in the shooting, but the Germans were able to accuse the Jews of making the attack and to represent the Aktion as a reprisal. On September 1, Hingst published the following statement: “Yesterday, Sunday afternoon, shots were directed from an ambush at German soldiers in Vilna [Wilno]. Two of these cowardly bandits were identified—they were Jews. The attackers paid with their lives for their act—they were shot on the spot. To avoid such hostile acts in the future, new and severe deterrent measures were taken. The responsibility lies with the entire Jewish community.”

The removal of the Jews from the area selected for the ghetto and their transportation to Lukiski and from there to Ponary lasted from August 31 to September 2. The people were held in cells or the prison yard at Lukiski for a day or two, with no food or sanitary facilities. During this period the Lithuanian guards robbed them of their money and valuables. Starting on September 1, the Jews were taken from Lukiski, transported to Ponary, and

shot. In Jöger's report he notes that the death toll on September 2 in Wilno was 864 Jews, 2,019 Jewesses, 817 Jewish children (punitive action because German soldiers had been shot by Jews). 20 In his diary Kruk put the figure higher, at about 5,000, which is closer to Sakowicz's estimate. 21 This Aktion also claimed the lives of most of the members of the Wilno Judenrat, whose offices were in the area from which the Jews were removed. The disproportionate number of women killed to men was owing to the fact that many of the men had already been murdered in July and August.

It was after this Aktion that news of what was happening at Ponary began to filter back to the Jews in Wilno. Sakowicz describes women and children who were only wounded and, apparently after dark, managed to crawl out from under the pile of corpses and escape. (The men had been shot first, in the morning and early afternoon, so that even those who survived the shooting and fell into the pit alive were buried by the corpses that fell on them later and were suffocated or died of their wounds in the pit. The women and children were shot later in the day; those who were still alive were able to climb out of the pit after nightfall, when the firing squad and guards had gone home.) Most of the survivors were captured and shot, but a few managed to reach Wilno. Kruk records in his diary under September 4, 1941, that

20. Yad Vashem Archive 018/245.
With help from the peasant woman, Trojak and two women managed to return to the ghetto.  

On September 5, rumors spread among the Jews that they were about to be confined in a ghetto. At dawn on September 6, Lithuanian police units fanned out in the streets where Jews lived and in the neighborhood earmarked for the ghetto—the area that had been cleared of its residents in the Great Provocation Aktion. Two ghettos were set up and closed off, and the city was divided into districts. The Jews of the first district were deported to Ghetto No. 1, those from the second to Ghetto No. 2, and those from the third to Lukiszki Prison. The removal of 40,000 Jews to the ghettos and 6,000 to Lukiszki took place in the space of twenty-four hours without any involvement of the Judenrat, which had been liquidated several days earlier. The transfer was implemented by the Lithuanian municipal police and members of a Lithuanian police battalion, whose commandant was Antanas Iskauskas. New Judenräte were established in both ghettos to arrange matters of housing in the densely populated ghettos and organize essential services such as burial, health care, and water supplies.

Jews taken to Lukiszki were held until September 10, when they were transported to Ponary and murdered. While they were in Lukiszki their money and valuables were taken from them. According to Jäger’s report, 993 Jewish men, 1,670 Jewish women, and 771 Jewish children—3,334 in all—were shot in Wilno.

22. Ibid., 89–91.

September 1941

(Ponary) on September 12. 23 This figure is much larger than the number given by Sakowicz but is less than the 6,000 found in Jewish sources.

The German authorities intended Ghetto No. 1 for artisans and workers who held Scheinen [certificates] and Ghetto No. 2 for everyone else. Consequently there was a mass transfer of thousands of persons between the two ghettos. On September 15, about 2,000 Jews en route from Ghetto No. 1 to Ghetto No. 2 were diverted by their Lithuanian guards to Lukiszki and from there, after two days, to Ponary, where they were shot. According to Jäger’s report, 337 Jewish men, 687 Jewish women, 247 Jewish children—a total of 1,271 Jews—and 4 Lithuanian Communists were murdered in Wilno on September 17. 24

Sakowicz presents this Aktion through the story of two non-Jews who were included with the Jews brought to Ponary to be shot.

SEPTEMBER 1941

Tuesday, September 2

Wind. A strong rain, cold, clouds. At 7 in the morning I go to Pirczupki. Along the road, down the main road, and into the square a passenger car comes, followed by two trucks carrying Jews. When I was near Chaszbijewicze, shots had already been

23. Yad Vashem Archive 053/1. There is a mistake in Jäger’s report. The real number is 3,434.
24. Ibid.
fired. Half an hour later on the road there was a long procession of people—literally from the [railroad] crossing until the little church—two kilometers (for sure)! It took them fifteen minutes to pass through the crossing. There were, as it turns out, 4,000—so says Jankowski; others claim that it was 4,875, exclusively women and many babies. When they entered the road (from the Grodno highway) to the forest, they understood what awaited them and shouted, "Save us!" Infants in diapers, in arms, etc.

Eighty Shaulists did the shooting, while the fence around [the pit] was guarded by 100 Shaulists. They shot while they were drunk. Before the shooting they tortured men and women horribly (Jankowski).²⁵ The men were shot separately. The women were stripped to their underwear. [They had] many items—furs, valuables—because they thought they were going to the ghetto. The Lithuanian platoon commander went on to the road in a woman's fur; he was drunk (Kalinowski).

The way they shot, the group [of shooters] stood on the corpses. They walked on the bodies! [The bodies were] immediately covered over the next day. There were many wounded. One woman escaped to Dohna. She was shot in the arm. Next to her in the pits she saw two of her children killed, and in another pit her husband perished. That day the Henecks met 5 bleeding Jewish women, their clothes torn to shreds.

Two thousand Jews were brought here, among them men, women, and children.

On September 3 and 4 there was a brisk business in women's clothes! Next day a small child was found in the forest near the pit, playing in the sand. He was thrown into the pit and shot (Jankowski). In another case an infant was torn from the breast it was suckling and shot (Krypkowa).

These shootings were a punishment for the bogus shooting at German soldiers in Wilno on Sunday, August 31. There, on the outskirts of the city, Hengst announced that Jews would be punished for the shooting on the previous Sunday. The shootings took place over the whole day, after which the Shaulists continued to drink [until] the next day.

On the day after September 3 (Wednesday), a Jewish woman went to the Jankowskis' on her way to Wilno. A Lithuanian saw her—a Shaulist. He jumped onto the porch, and asked "Juda?" When she answered "Yes, Juda!" he began to beat her mercilessly and dragged her to the forest, where he shot her.

The Lithuanians took many valuables because the people "dispatched" to the ghetto were told that they could take these with them; thus they brought their valuables, warm clothing etc. Lithuanian women came for the clothing.

September 8

A sensation—an inspection in Ponary in the apartment of Kiejkik, who is then arrested.

September 12

Again, about 2,000 are shot.

September 17

A sensation—Kiejkik is among the Jews marched up, and there is another peasant from Chazbjejewicz who was seized beyond
the wire where he went to steal clothing. Both of them were forced to put on coats with Jewish stars. Kiejsik was sent to the first line of those to be shot. He was killed. It turns out that one of the main reasons he was shot was that he dared take watches from the Jews when they belonged to someone else, in any case not to the Shaulists.

Events in Wilno, October–November 1941

On October 1, 1941—Yom Kippur—there was an Aktion in both ghettos. Around noon, when the synagogues were packed with worshipers, Germans and Lithuanians entered the ghettos and began to arrest people. The Aktion came as a total surprise to the residents. According to Kruk, 1,200 men were taken from Ghetto No. 1 and 1,700 from Ghetto No. 2, including many who held Scheinen and had thought themselves immune. In his diary Kruk describes that day's events in Ghetto No. 1: “People started looking for hiding places. Jews in prayer shawls ran through the streets looking scared. The prayer houses emptied out. Everyone looked for a hole to hide in.”26 The detainees were taken to Lukiszk and from there, over a period of a few days, in small groups to Penary. About 4,000 Jews were caught by this “Yom Kippur Aktion.”

Ghetto No. 2, whose residents did not have Scheinen, was liquidated in three further Aktionen between October 3 and October 21. In the first, on the night of 3–4 October, more than 2,000 people were taken away. They were told that they were going to another ghetto where there was a labor shortage. When they realized that they were actually going to Lukiszk, they fell to the ground and refused to move, the first case of passive mass resistance by the Jews of Wilno. The Germans and Lithuanians began shooting; dozens of Jews were killed or wounded, though a few got away. Jäger’s report notes that 432 Jewish men, 1,115 Jewish women, and 436 Jewish children were murdered on October 4. The second Aktion took place on October 15–16. According to Jewish sources, some 3,000 people were taken away in this Aktion, although Jäger reported only 1,146 killed: 382 Jewish men, 507 Jewish women, and 257 Jewish children. The third Aktion, which completed the liquidation of Ghetto No. 2 and its residents, took place on October 21. Germans and Lithuanians went from house to house searching for hiding places. That day about 2,500 Jews were taken from the ghetto directly to Penary and murdered. Jäger’s report states that 718 Jewish men, 1,063 Jewish women, and 586 Jewish children were shot in Wilno on October 21, making the total number of deaths for the three Aktionen 5,496.27

While Ghetto No. 2 was being liquidated and its residents murdered, preparations were under way for the partial liquidation of Ghetto No. 1. All the work certificates issued to the Jews were canceled and replaced by new certificates, called Gele Sheynen (yellow certificates) because of their color. Each of the new certificates protected its holder, his or her spouse, and two of their

27. Yad Vashem Archive 053/1.