

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Bd. 29

2007

Nr. 1

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KAZIMIERZ SAKOWICZ, *Ponary Diary, 1941–1943: A Bystander's Account of a Mass Murder*, ed. Yitzhak Arad, trans. Laurance Weinbaum (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 176 pp. ISBN 0 300 10853 2. \$US 25.00. £15.95

RACHEL MARGOLIS and JIM G. TOBIAS (eds.), *Die geheimen Notizen des K. Sakowicz: Dokumente zur Judenvernichtung in Ponary*, trans. from the Polish by Elisabeth Nowak (Nuremberg: Antogo-Verlag, 2004), 144 pp. ISBN 978 3 9806636 6 3. EUR 12.80 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005), 144 pp. ISBN 978 3 596 16607 7. EUR 10.90

The Jäger report, perhaps the most chilling document detailing the murder of the Jews of Lithuania, constitutes a murderous tally of Einsatzkommando 3, a company-sized detachment (150 men) of Einsatzgruppe A. In the period from 4 July to 1 December 1941, this detachment descended on seventy-one different Jewish communities, in some instances returning more than once. In all, the Jäger report contains 112 entries listing mass killings, with the total number of victims given as 137,346 people. The vast majority of those killed were Jewish men, women, and children, but the document also mentions Russians, Poles, Communists, Gypsies, and the mentally ill. The Jäger report communicates cold, efficient killing, but we know that the numbers reported were not as exact as they seemed. Often representing conjecture, they sometimes underestimated the number of Jews killed. In her book *There Once Was A World*,¹ Yaffa Eliach reconstructed a massacre that took place in the Shtetl in which she was born. For 27 September 1941 the Jäger report lists the elimination of 989 Jewish men, 1,636 Jewish women, and 821 Jewish children in Eysisky (Eishyshok), and totals the deaths at 3,446. The date of the entry is not correct, as the massacre took place over two days. On 25 September the troops killed men; on the next day women and children. They also killed Jews from the surrounding villages, so that the total number was closer to 5,000. The report does not describe the other atrocities that happened on those days. 'I saw my beautiful cousin raped and raped until death must have been the only thing she longed for', one escaped witness wrote.

North of Eishyshok and just outside Vilnius is the town of Ponary, where Germans and Lithuanians massacred between 50,000 and

¹ Yaffa Eliach *There Once Was A World: A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok* (Boston, 1998).

Book Reviews

60,000 Jews, most of them from Vilnius, the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania'. They also murdered a significant number of Poles and Russians. Kazimierz Sakowicz, a Polish journalist, witnessed the murders from a hiding place in his attic. He lived in a cottage in the woods on the outskirts of Ponary, where the Soviets had dug large pits and ditches to hold fuel tanks. When the Germans occupied the area in June 1941 they killed Jews and others there, filling the pits and ditches with corpses. Sakowicz witnessed these killings, not once, but continually from the summer of 1941 to the summer of 1944, when he was himself killed. Sakowicz scratched laconic entries on loose sheets of paper, unsentimentally recording what he saw. He then buried the sheets in sealed lemonade bottles, which his neighbours dug up after the war and turned over to the Jewish Museum in Vilnius; thereafter the sheets of paper lay in the Lithuanian State Archive, tagged 'illegible'. In the course of a lifetime of collecting documents on the extermination of the Jews of Lithuania, Dr Rachel Margolis, a survivor, pieced the extant sheets together and transcribed them. First published in Polish in 1999, the entries in the form of a diary are now available in English and German translations with critical notes and historical introductions.

Sakowicz's *Ponary Diary 1941-1944* forces our imagination of how these killings occurred into new territory. They happened with the help of Lithuanian shooters, often 'striplings of seventeen to twenty-five years' (p. 12),² whose brutality and sadism beggar belief. They forced Jews, often blindfolded and usually naked, to the pits where they were then shot, bludgeoned, or stabbed before they fell into the pits. Usually drunk, sometimes sober, the German SS and the Lithuanian shooters carried out the murders now with efficiency, now with cruelty, as if it were sport. They constructed a trampoline over the pit and shot men as they bounced over it. They also staged hunts inside a barbed wire area, and bludgeoned hundreds of children to death with their rifle butts when the ammunition ran out, sometimes throwing the 'whelps' into the pit before they bothered to kill them. As time wore on, and the fate of the Jews in Ponary became known to the Jews of Vilnius and the surrounding area, more and more Jews tried to escape. The massacres began to be drawn out. Shooters chased Jews who fled across fields and into the woods. They

² All quotations are from the English-language edition.

also tracked down Jewish mothers who hid their children in piles of clothes. The women begged their executioners, clutching the ankles of the merciless killers; but the Lithuanian shooters smashed the women's heads and threw their bludgeoned bodies into the pit. The pit filled up with corpses and was covered with sand, or left open to be used again the next day. In the open pits, a few wounded Jews survived, and escaped at night. Later, the Germans and Lithuanians shovelled chlorine on to the bodies, and 'those who "jump[ed] up" [were] finished off' (p. 141).

The diary records the killings as they occurred from September 1941 to November 1943. Not all of the sheets have been found, and the gaps give a false impression of respite. The diary also records periods of concentrated murder, such as April 1942, when the Germans liquidated four small ghettos—Swieciany, Mikhalischki, Oszmiany, and Soly—and diverted trains of Jews (who thought they were being sent to labour camps or to the ghettos of Vilnius and Kovno) to the killing pits of Ponary. Sakowicz calls Monday, 5 April 1942 'Judgement Day' (p. 69), as on that day the Germans and Lithuanians killed as many as 4,000 Jews. In an uncharacteristically long description of ten pages, Sakowicz describes how the Lithuanians drove the Jews to the pit and forced them to lie down on the ground; then, separating out a certain number, usually ten, the riflemen shot them, and the Jews fell into the pit. Many tried to run away, but the Lithuanian guards caught almost all of them, beating them savagely before murdering them. Sakowicz tells us of those who lined up and were shot, and those who ran—'a Jewish woman in a beet-red sweater', her child behind her, shouting 'Mama, Mama' (p. 76), or a family, a man with a child in his arms and wife and two teenaged daughters, who were overtaken and killed. The killing had a system, but it broke down into chaos. One Lithuanian shot another by accident. A Jew stabbed a German in the head when the train door was opened. But by the end of the day there was an immense carnage—the bodies of Jewish men, women, and children lying in the pits and strewn over the fields. In Ponary, Sakowicz remarks, the villagers refused to drink water unboiled, fearing that blood had contaminated it.

A market in shoes, trousers, coats, dresses, watches, jewellery, and gold teeth flourished, with the backpacks of the Lithuanian riflemen bulging after each day's work. The riflemen exchanged these

Book Reviews

items for money and vodka; it was a brisk trade and everyone in the area took part. 'For the Germans 300 Jews are 300 enemies of humanity', Sakowicz dryly noted, 'for the Lithuanians they are 300 pairs of shoes, trousers, and the like' (p. 16).

Himmler, as is well known, told his SS officers in October 1943 that 'this is a glorious page in our history but it never has been or will be written down'. He sent a *Sonderkommando* to Ponary, consisting of Jewish inmates, to exhume the corpses and burn them, eradicating all traces. But until his death, Sakowicz recorded the murders for posterity with an unsentimental eye. Consequently, and because of the labours of Dr Margolis and the expert editing of Yitzhak Arad, we can now conjure up in unparalleled detail an atrocity that ranks on a scale with Babi Yar (Kiev), Maly Trostinets (Minsk), and Rumbula (Riga). One can only hope that the *Ponary Diary* sparks a discussion in Lithuania similar to that initiated in Poland by the publication of Jan Gross's *Neighbours*.³ The diary will also prove indispensable for students and teachers trying to imagine the events depicted in the sparse entries of the Jäger report. Sakowicz puts killing where Jäger only recounts numbers.

³ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* (Princeton, 2001).

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