

~~the country. Hitler established an atmosphere of fear and suspicion in Germany, which enabled his party to perpetrate increasingly aggressive policies. Jews were scapegoated by the Nazis, who blamed them for Germany's defeat in World War I and for its economic hardships. The Nazis also believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the so-called inferior races polluted Europe. Jews, Gypsies, and the handicapped were seen as a genuine biological threat to the "purity" of the German people, also called "Aryan." A policy of systematic murder developed out of such paranoia.~~

~~In the late 1930s the Nazis killed thousands of handicapped Germans by lethal injection and poisonous gas. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, mobile killing units began shooting massive numbers of Jews and Gypsies in open fields and ravines on the outskirts of conquered cities and towns. Eventually, the Nazis realized that they needed a more efficient way of exterminating such large numbers of people. In 1942, the Wannsee Conference laid out the Final Solution of the Jewish Question. The Nazis created a segregated and organized method of killing by establishing six extermination centers in occupied Poland, where large-scale murder by gas (and body disposal through cremation) was brutally performed. Victims were taken from their hometowns and cities and transported to these centers to await their deaths. Many victims of the Holocaust also perished in the organized ghettos and concentration camps as a result of forced hard work, deliberate starvation, and neglect, and from diseases that were rife in the appalling conditions of the ghettos and camps.~~

Yitskhok Rudashevski was a young Jewish man, the only child of Rose and Elihu Rudashevski, who lived in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius. In July 1941, the Germans massacred 35,000 Jewish men, women, and children in the Ponary forest outside Vilnius. In September, the remaining Jewish inhabitants were forced to live in a sectioned part of the city, designated as the Jewish ghetto. This law came with the German occupation of Lithuania between 1941 and 1944. Conditions in the ghetto were horrific, with little food available and the constant threat of violence from the Nazis. Despite these surroundings, Yitskhok continued to write in his diary.

~~Clara Schwarz went into hiding when her hometown of Zolkiew in~~

~~Poland was taken by the Nazis. Together with seventeen other Jews, Clara was forced to remain underground in the extremely cramped conditions of a bunker for two years, while Nazi soldiers lived above them and discussed their plans to exterminate the Jews, unaware of the people beneath their feet. For their survival, Clara and those hiding with her depended upon the continued existence and goodwill of the non-Jewish couple that also lived in the building. A trapdoor to their hiding place was hidden beneath the bed of this married couple.~~

YITSKHOK RUDASHEVSKI, LITHUANIA, 1940-42

JUNE 21, 1940

THE HITLERITES have attacked our land. They have forced a war upon us. And so we shall retaliate, and strike until we shall smash the aggressor on his own soil. I keep looking at the calm Red Army soldier who is standing on guard in our yard. I feel that I can be sure of him, I see he will not perish. He will perhaps be killed, but the star attached to his hat will remain forever.

JUNE 1941

OUR HEARTS are crushed witnessing the shameful scene where women and older people are beaten and kicked in the middle of the street by small bandits. . . . I stand at the window and feel a sense of rage, tears come to my eyes: All our helplessness, all our loneliness, lies in the streets, there is no one to take our part. And we ourselves are so helpless, so helpless! . . . It rains incessantly. We are so sad, so lonely. We are exposed to mockery and humiliation.

JULY 4, 1941

I AM looking through the window and see before me the first Vilna Jews with badges. It was painful to see how people were staring at

them. The large piece of yellow material on their shoulders seemed to be burning me, and for a long time I could not put on the badges. I felt a hump, as though I had two frogs on me. I was ashamed to appear in them on the street, not because it would be noticed that I am a Jew, but because I was ashamed of what [they were] doing to us. I was ashamed of our helplessness. We will be hung from head to foot with badges, and we cannot help each other in any way. It hurt me that I saw absolutely no way out.

SEPTEMBER 6, 1941

I go around with bleary eyes among the bundles, see how we are being uprooted overnight from our home. Soon we have our first view of the move to the ghetto, a picture of the Middle Ages—a gray-black mass of people harnessed to large bundles. We understand that soon our turn will come. I look at the house in disarray, I see things scattered that were dear to me, that I was accustomed to using. We carry the bundles to the courtyard. On our street a new mass of Jews streams continually to the ghetto. The small number of Jews in our courtyard begin to drag the bundles to the gate. . . . We, too, are carried along with the mass of Jews with their bundles. . . . People fall, bundles scatter. Before me a woman bends under her bundle. From the bundle a thin stream of rice keeps pouring over the street. . . .

I walk burdened and irritated. The Lithuanians drive us on, do not let us rest. I think of nothing: not what I am losing, not what I have just lost, not what is in store for me. I do not see the streets before me, the people passing by. I only feel that I am terribly weary, I feel that an insult, a hurt, is burning inside me. Here is the ghetto gate. I feel that I have been robbed, my freedom is being robbed from me, my home, and the familiar Vilna streets I love so much. I have been cut off from all that is dear and precious to me.

OCTOBER 1, 1941

MANY PEOPLE have gathered in the two stories of the hideout. They sneak along like shadows by candlelight around the cold, dank cellar

walls. The whole hideout is filled with restless murmuring. An imprisoned mass of people. Everyone begins to settle down in the corners, on the stairs. Pillows and bundles are spread out on the hard bricks and boards, and people fall asleep. . . . From time to time, someone lights a match. By the light I see people lying on bricks like rags in the dirt. I think: Into what kind of helpless, broken creature can man be transformed? I am at my wit's end. I begin to feel very nauseated. . . .

We are like animals surrounded by the hunter. The hunter on all sides: beneath us, above us, from the sides. Broken locks snap, doors creak, axes, saws. I feel the enemy under the boards on which I am standing. The light of an electric bulb seeps through the cracks. They pound, tear, break. Soon the attack is heard from another side. Suddenly, somewhere upstairs a child bursts into tears. A desperate groan breaks forth from everyone's lips. We are lost. A desperate attempt to shove sugar into the child's mouth is to no avail. They stop up the child's mouth with pillows. The mother of the child is weeping. People shout in wild terror that the child should be strangled. The child is shouting more loudly, the Lithuanians are pounding more strongly against the walls. However, slowly everything calms down of itself. We understand that they have left. Later, we heard a voice from the other side of the hideout. You are liberated. My heart beat with such joy! I have remained alive!

SEPTEMBER 27, 1942

THE NEWS struck me like a clap of thunder: Teacher Gershteyn has died. How beloved and precious he was to me in his proud, pure appearance. . . .

The teacher Gershteyn suffered a great deal in the ghetto. He became grayer and grayer, his face darkened. He lived in a classroom of our school. He could hardly go up the steps, which he used to ascend so cheerfully. He had to stop on every step in his wrinkled coat, which probably served as a pillow for him. . . . Slowly, an old man before his time, he used to walk through the streets of the ghetto, but his head was erect as usual. That is how the best among us suffered in the

ghetto. . . . The ghetto was too difficult for Gershteyn, and he did not survive it. He stands before my eyes. He appears so beautifully, so freshly before me from the midst of our dreary life. Forever and ever will we remember you as our dear friend, the image of your proud figure will remind us of something that is precious and dear. What you have given us of yourself will always flourish among us.

DECEMBER 10, 1942

I MADE up my mind not to trifle my time away in the ghetto on nothing, and I feel somehow happy that I can study, read, develop myself, and see that time does not stand still as long as I progress normally with it. In my daily ghetto life, it seems to me that I live normally, but often I have deep qualms. Surely I could have lived better. Must I day in, day out see the walled-up ghetto gate, must I in the best years see only one little street, the few stuffy courtyards? . . . I wish to shout to time to linger, not to run. I wish to recapture my past year and keep it for later, for the new life. My second feeling today is that of strength and hope. I do not feel the slightest despair. Today I became fifteen years of age, and I live confident in the future, I am not worried about it, but see before me sun and sun and sun.

AFTERWORD

Yitskhok's final diary entry is dated April 7, 1943. In August 1943, the Germans resolved to empty the ghetto, sending some of the Jews to Estonia and murdering the remaining. Yitskhok and his parents fled to a hideout in his uncle's home. They survived for two weeks along with five others but were found out by the Germans in October. Yitskhok and his family were taken to the forest and murdered. One of Yitskhok's cousins escaped the massacre and joined the partisans in the surrounding forests. ~~After the war, he returned to Vilnius, whose population of 80,000 Jews had left or been killed, and found Yitskhok's diary.~~

~~CLARA SCHWARZ, POLAND, 1942-44~~

~~SUMMER OF 1942~~

~~THERE IS terror and panic in our city. The Jews are building bunkers (hiding places) of all kinds: underground, double-walled, or anywhere they can find a spot to hide. Others are looking for help from the gentiles. Others are crying in despair at the loss of their loved ones.~~

~~The cause of this is the trains crammed with Jews that pass our city on their way to Belzec.~~

~~The Jews are loaded in sealed cattle cars, 100-150 in each car. Belzec is located in a forest area, and that is where they are killed. What kind of death it is, we don't know. There are rumors that they are poisoned with gas, others say they are electrocuted, burned, or killed with guns. One thing's for sure, there is no return from there.~~

~~And now, the jumpers, the so-called *skoczki*, are beginning to appear. These are people who jump from the wagons, once they have succeeded in breaking the bars on the little window high in the car. A jump like this is very dangerous, but they have nothing to lose; they are doomed anyway. It's better to die on the spot than ride in the train with the knowledge of certain death. Most of them are naked because the heat in the train is unbearable. They have to be clothed once they have been given medical help. It's very rare for them to remain unhurt after jumping from such a height and having Germans shooting at them.~~

~~The first one to help them is Pepcia Fish. She is a hunchback but the only Jewish nurse in Zolkiew. She has a heart of gold. Young girls help her in this work, and I join them. I go with her and help dress the wounded, collect clothing and food. We get a little money from the Judenrat [Jewish Committee]; the Jews of the city give as much as they can. Most of the time, the *skoczki* are put in the hospital or in Jewish homes.~~

~~There are terrible tragedies, unbelievable tragedies. Parents jump and leave their children on the train, children leave parents, sisters leave behind sisters, and jump to save their lives. It's even worse than~~