

# THE VANISHED WORLD OF LITHUANIAN JEWS



Edited by Alvydas Nikžentaitis,  
Stefan Schreiner & Darius Staliūnas

On the Boundary of Two Worlds  
Identity, Freedom, and Moral Imagination in the Baltics

# On the Boundary of Two Worlds Identity, Freedom, and Moral Imagination in the Baltics

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Alvydas Nikžentaitis, Stefan Schreiner  
& Darius Staliūnas

Preface by Leonidas Donskis



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## Preface

Since 1990 Lithuanian political culture has demonstrated a new political willingness and ability to accommodate minorities and their languages and cultures. Lithuanian mainstream politics has had much success in embracing, or at least not alienating, the Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian minorities.

We could mention here some minor tensions with Lithuanian Poles in the late 1980s that reflected the dramatic history of Vilnius and its surrounding area in the twentieth century, but this is no longer the case – Poland and Lithuania recently reached an historic breakthrough in their relations to become very close allies and strategic partners.

At the same time, Lithuania has even become a sort of refuge against censorship and political persecution in neighbouring lands. As for the most fragile and vulnerable stateless cultures and minorities deeply grounded in Lithuanian history, these are more or less at home in present-day Lithuania. The existence of small groups, such as Tatars, Karaims, and Roma, does not, for example, cause conflicts.

Things are, however, far more complicated with regard to the Jewish minority. The problem for Lithuanian Jews is that quite a large sector of Lithuanian society – including not a few representatives of the intelligentsia – is still inclined to consider the Jews as collectively responsible for the mass killings and deportations of civilians, as well as for other atrocities committed during the Soviet occupation on the eve of the Second World War.

This represents the disgraceful adoption of the Nazi rhetoric that equated Communism with the Jews. In an effort to modify the charges that Lithuanians participated in the mass killings of Jews in 1941 and after, some Lithuanians have spoken of “two genocides,” or – as some Jewish writers have called it – “symmetry” in the suffering of both peoples.

The notorious theory attributing the disasters that befell Lithuania to Lithuanian Jews, which has been deeply embedded up to now in Lithuanian political discourse and popular consciousness, regards with a Jewish segment of the Soviet regime as having been decisive. At the same time, this theory includes considerations of allegedly subversive and treacherous activities on the eve of the Second World War of local Jewry, with the latter perceived as lacking in loyalty, patriotism, and civic-mindedness.

Hence, a derivative theory two genocides developed, which provides an assessment of the Holocaust and of local collaboration with the Nazis in terms of the revenge for the Soviet genocide of local population. It is



little wonder, then, that the theory of two genocides, which is just another term for the theory of the collective guilt of the Jews, has been qualified by Tomas Venclova, a prominent Lithuanian poet and literary scholar who teaches literature at Yale University, as "troglodytic," thus characterising people who are inclined to practice it as moral troglodytes. Regrettably, Lithuania has failed to bring war criminals to justice and provide an unambiguous legal assessment of those Lithuanians who were active in the Holocaust.

Also problematic is the parallel existence of Lithuanian and Jewish cultures, and it has been so for centuries. Antisemitism is by no means the only attitude to the Jews that can be ascribed accurately to Lithuanians. The predominant attitude may better be described as insensitivity to, and defensiveness about, inconvenient aspects of the past. The alienation of the Jews from their host countries and their cultures is more likely to have been a tragedy for the whole of Central and Eastern Europe, and should not be seen as confined to Lithuania.

The parallel existence of Lithuanian and Jewish cultures may therefore be regarded as the outcome of the afore-mentioned alienation. These two cultures may never have achieved mutual understanding, to say nothing of achieving an interpretative framework within which to embrace or critically question one another. Prior to the Second World War, Lithuania was famous for its very large Jewish community (about 250,000 Jews lived in Lithuania; only 20,000 survived the Holocaust).

The Lithuanian capital, Vilnius – occupied by Poland from 1920 to 1939 – was known around the world as the Jerusalem of the North, and many internationally eminent Jews lived in or were from Lithuania, among them the philosophers Emmanuel Lévinas and Aron Gurwitsch, the painters Chaïm Soutine (a close friend of Amedeo Modigliani in Paris) and Arbit Blatas, the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, the violinist Jascha Heifetz, and the art critic Bernard Berenson, one of the most sophisticated twentieth-century students of the Italian Renaissance.

Yet none of these individuals was ever considered a significant actor in Lithuanian culture – despite the fact that it was they who inscribed Lithuania's name on the intellectual and cultural map of the twentieth-century world.

Why? The answer is very simple: the Russian-speaking and Yiddish-speaking Jewish community in Lithuania was always alienated from the Lithuanian inter-war intelligentsia, which, for its part, cultivated linguistic and cultural nationalism both as a means of self-definition, and as a way of distinguishing rurally oriented Lithuanian compatriots (that is, the organic community; in Ferdinand Tönnies's terms, *Gemeinschaft*) from

“rootless,” cosmopolitan urban professionals (the mechanised, fragmented, diversified society, i.e., *Gesellschaft*).

Despite the fact that many Lithuanian intellectuals – among whom Jonas Basanavičius, Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius and Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas should be mentioned first – and ordinary people were sympathetic to them, Jews and other aliens were excluded from the Lithuanian cultural/intellectual mainstream. The specifically Lithuanian intelligentsia decided who belonged to the nation, which they perceived as the embodiment of a historical-cultural project, rather than as empirically identifiable social reality.

Yet a tiny minority of Lithuanian intellectuals showed, in recent years, a genuine interest in the history of, and a great sensitivity toward, their Jewish fellow citizens. The establishing in the year 2000 of the House of Memory in Lithuania, which is a non-government institution inspired by the Beth Shalom Holocaust Memorial Centre in Britain and which includes some public figures, is therefore a sign of hope for the future.

The names of Lithuanian public intellectuals who raised their voices against all manifestations of antisemitism in Lithuania – the names of the film critic Linas Vildžiūnas, the journalist Rimvydas Valatka, the educator Vytautas Toleikis, the Calvinist priest Tomas Šernas, the theatre critic Irena Veisaitė, and the journalist and film script writer Pranas Morkus, among others – signify the arrival of a new epoch and also the emergence of a new moral culture in Lithuania.

It would be naïve to deny the fact that antisemitism is still persistent and strong in present-day Lithuania. Its ugly face tends to appear in the guise of the most simplistic and primitive versions of anti-Communism, not to mention the myriad ways it lurks behind the conspiracy theories of society of various shades. At the same time, it would be inaccurate, if not unfair, to insist on the failure of modern Lithuanian politics and culture to face up antisemitism and the Holocaust in Lithuania.

In the brightest pronouncements and literary works of Lithuanian émigrés, the Holocaust had become an inseparable part, not to say wound, of modern Lithuanian identity. After the Second World War, the Lithuanian émigré poet Algimantas Mackus depicted the tragic fate of a Jewish boy in a moving poem, while another Lithuanian émigré writer, Antanas Škėma, joined the theme of the Holocaust with his novel, *Izaokas*.

Together with other liberal-minded émigré writers, scholars, and artists, Mackus and Škėma belonged to *Santara-Šviesa* (Concord-Light), a liberal, secular-humanist Lithuanian cultural movement in the USA

whose members initiated wide political and intellectual debates concerning the role of Lithuanian collaborators of the Nazis in the Holocaust. They also opposed the poisonous rhetoric and astonishing insensitivity with which not a few conservative Lithuanian émigrés assessed the greatest tragedy of Lithuania.

Out of this clash of sensibilities, came the remarkable and moving words of Vytautas Kavolis, an eminent émigré sociologist in the USA and a great intellectual influence in Lithuania after 1990. Kavolis wrote that we are all responsible for what happened to Lithuanian Jews in 1941 in the sense of our sharing the mode of discourse and the form of insensitivity, which inevitably led to the demonisation, exclusion, and extermination of Lithuanian Jews.

Aleksandras Shtromas, Kavolis's life-long friend and classmate in pre-war Kaunas, a close friend of Venclova, an eminent émigré political theorist and criminologist in Great Britain and the USA, was also a major figure in the context of Lithuanian-Jewish debates. He regarded the nations as moral actors of history and violently objected the group, nation and culture stereotyping. A Holocaust survivor perfectly aware of antisemitism in his native country and beyond, Shtromas was convinced that Germanophobia, Russophobia, Polonophobia, or Lithuanophobia are no better than Judophobia.

The Rabbi Joseph Klein Lecture, "The Jewish and Gentile Experience of the Holocaust: A Personal Perspective," which Shtromas gave on 10 April 1989 at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, one of the most provocative public performances Shtromas ever gave throughout his career, made clear his standpoint that no nation has the right to indict and judge other nations as collective criminals, and that the contempt for the countries, where the Holocaust occurred, comes to multiply and strengthen mutual hatred and demonisation. The propensity to demonise other nations and cultures, according to Shtromas, is the most painful trauma inflicted by the Second World War on many nations.

The problem of the representation and misrepresentation of the Other becomes central in the most internationally acclaimed of Tomas Venclova's thoughtful and penetrating political essays, such as "Jews and Lithuanians," "Russians and Lithuanians," and "Poles and Lithuanians." In more than one way, Venclova differs from those inter-war Lithuanian intellectuals – such as the writers Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius and Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas, or the philosopher Stasys Šalkauskis – who were sympathetic to the Jews and who empathised with Lithuanian Jews from a genuinely Christian standpoint.

In a way, Venclova also differs from the post-war liberal-humanist element in Lithuanian émigré culture in the USA, such as the aforementioned poet Algimantas Mackus. For Venclova, the Holocaust and the martyrdom of Lithuanian Jewry are not only a matter of sympathetic understanding and compassion, but also the crucial question of Lithuania's present and future. Venclova conceives of the destruction of the Jewish community in Lithuania as the destruction of the civic and moral foundations of Lithuania. A sense of metaphysical guilt here clearly means a realisation that I am part of a tragic history, since I belong to the country where a catastrophe occurred; I share the language, historical memory, and culture of the country where there occurred a crime against humanity.

Venclova's humanism manifests itself not only in his great sensitivity, but also in his rejection of rational and deterministic explanations of the Holocaust. Elsewhere he reminds us that every crime, like every act of heroism, contains a kind of "transcendental remainder," which powerfully resists all rational-action or rational-choice explanations. Ultimately, such explanations are worthless. Having stressed that the Kaunas pogroms contradict the entire Lithuanian historical tradition marked by religious and political tolerance toward Jews and by peaceful coexistence of both peoples, Venclova breaks all Lithuanian political and cultural taboos by touching upon the nerve of the story.

One of such taboos in Lithuanian history and historical memory still is the role and place of the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) in the 1941 uprising to restore Lithuania's independence and in the spread of antisemitic propaganda in Lithuania. In 1941, the provisional government of Lithuania started playing a complicated game with the Nazis, sincerely hoping to restore Lithuania's independence.

The game, as Venclova notes, was doomed inexorably to failure. It is difficult to imagine something more dubious than choosing between Stalin and Hitler. Nobody can deny the fact that the provisional government was inspired by the LAF. And the point is that it was members of the LAF who launched antisemitic propaganda employing such pearls of the Nazi rhetoric as "the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy," "a plot of the Jewish bankers and communists," "the Jewish yoke and exploitation," and the like.

This is not to say that the entire 1941 Uprising should be regarded as an overture to the Holocaust. But its fallacies and grave mistakes have to be admitted. Venclova was the first to do this. In his articles, he openly challenged the romanticised and patriotic version of the Second World

War history, which tends to glamorise both the LAF and the 1941 Uprising, thus calling for a transvaluation of those values. Quoting from editorials in wartime Lithuanian papers, Venclova showed black on white that some Lithuanian politicians and intellectuals, not to mention ordinary citizens, were deeply influenced by Nazism. What happened next was quite easy to expect – conservative and ultrapatriotic circles, particularly amongst émigrés, reacted noisily, thus adding insult to injury.

Even so, it seems there is a long way from propaganda, however ferocious and sinister, to mass murder. Yet Venclova places his interpretative emphasis and moral evaluation on the empirically elusive world of human connection and inter-subjectivity, rather than political history written in a conventional academic manner. In a world of moral choices and ethical self-fulfilment, nothing is unimportant, and every single detail of human experience or attitude acquires its meaning.

Being much in tune with Shtromas's idea that many tragic events of the twentieth century have resulted from the division of people into "us" and "them," Venclova comes to stress the spiritual isolation, which manifests itself in the division of people into categories. By distancing ourselves from a group of other human beings or our fellow citizens, we create a kind of political and moral vacuum, which sooner or later will be filled with theories and practices of exclusion and hatred – one more political and ethical message of Venclova's theory of otherness, dialogue, and inter-subjectivity.

*The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews* is a timely and important book, which initiates the book series, "On the Boundary of Two Worlds: Identity, Freedom, and Moral Imagination in the Baltics," with Editions Rodopi, B. V. At the same time, this book appears to be able to fill many gaps in Lithuania and beyond – the gaps of knowledge and historical memory.

It was prepared as a follow-up collection of papers presented by Israeli, American, British, German, Belarusian, and Lithuanian scholars of the Holocaust and antisemitism in the international conferences held in Nida (1997) and Telšiai (2001), Lithuania.

Having lost the Litvaks, Lithuania lost a significant part of its identity and self. It is through the moral integrity and scholarly dedication of the younger generation of Lithuanian historians, their well-documented research, and the courageous and timely social critique from some public intellectuals that Lithuania gradually comes to understand that the immensely rich and unique culture of Litvaks was, and continues to be, an inescapable part of its history, collective self, and political and moral existence.

Lithuania cannot become a modern actor of history without coming to terms with its painful history, and without realising that the way in which we discuss the Holocaust and deal with antisemitism tells everything about our ability to be a modern human being with powers of critical self-questioning, compassion, and sympathetic understanding, instead of a moron in the moral and political sense.

May this book contribute to awareness of what it means to be a human being in the twenty-first-century world.

Leonidas Donskis  
Executive Editor of the Book Series,  
"On the Boundary of Two Worlds:  
Identity, Freedom, and Moral  
Imagination in the Baltics"

## Introduction

To this day today Jewish history in Lithuania in general and Jewish-Lithuanian relations in particular are a matter of controversy and debate between Jews and Lithuanians as well as among Lithuanians themselves.

The land of Lithuania, once the cradle of a variety of developments in the social, religious, and cultural history of Ashkenazi Jewry, was turned into the deathbed of hundreds of thousands of Jews not only from Lithuania itself, but also from other European countries. The remarkable Lithuanian Jewish community, which once occupied a prominent place in the Jewish world and constituted a unique part of the Jewish world community, is no more. All that remains is memory. Within a few months at the beginning of the Nazi occupation of Lithuania in 1941 Nazi executioners and their local collaborators murdered almost all Lithuanian Jews. Only very few of them had a chance to escape and survive the Holocaust.

The history of the Jews in Lithuania covers more than six hundred years. Its beginnings date back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. From the very outset of Jewish settlement, Jewish and Lithuanian historical fates were intertwined. However, despite all research done on that past, there are still a number of chapters in that history which are still far from being sufficiently explored and elucidated, and many a question still awaits its answer. Without going into details, a few aspects of this history only may be recalled here. Over the years down to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Jewish community did not only play an important role in the history of Lithuania, but also saw itself as part of the Lithuanian population. The creation of the "Council of the Land of Lithuania" (*Wa'ad Medinat Lita*) in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, i. e. the establishment of an independent system of autonomy separate from the Polish Jews, as well as the emergence of various cultural centres in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in general and its capital in particular, indicate how far a "regional identity" of Lithuanian Jews had developed. Not without reason the latter city was named *Jerusholayim de Lite* ("Lithuanian Jerusalem") and considered to be the spiritual centre and cultural capital of those Jews who regarded themselves as Litvaks.

At the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, Lithuania became part of Tsarist Russia. In the history of Lithuania's Jews a period began which Zvi Gitelman once called "a century of ambivalence." On the one hand, as early as from 1794, Jews faced a mixture of outspoken anti-Jewish politics and forced "modernisation" for generations, and many attempts were made to turn them into "useful citizens" of the Russian Empire. The years 1827-1855, i.e. the reign of Nicholas I., were a particularly difficult time for

Lithuania's Jews, alleviated a little bit by the short-lived reforms of Alexander II. After his assassination and the wave of pogroms which erupted immediately after it and terrified hundreds of Jewish communities in the Pale of Settlement, the imperial government again started taking more and more restrictive measures against the Jews which were only lifted when the Tsarist Empire eventually collapsed.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, these difficult decades saw at the same time the emergence and growth of a variety of socio-cultural, religious, and/or intellectual movements which gained momentum particularly among the Litvaks from, for example, new rabbinic orthodoxy, specifically Lithuanian Hasidism and Musar-movement to the Haskalah (East European Enlightenment) and, as its offspring, political Zionism and revolutionary socialism, which both drew heavily on the age-old messianic idea in Judaism, to mention but a few.

After World War One, when Lithuania had (re-)gained its independence, there were about 154 000 Jews on its territory, roughly 7,5 % of the entire population and, thus, they constituted the largest minority group in the country. The experiences of Lithuanian-Jewish co-existence in the past centuries helped the Jewish community to identify with Lithuania and take an active part in the struggle for independence and the re-establishment of Lithuanian statehood, and in turn, to become, as it were, a privileged minority at least in the first years of the Lithuanian Republic. To meet the needs of the Jewish community, during the democratic period of the first Lithuanian Republic (1918-1926) a minister of Jewish Affairs was appointed and served on the Lithuanian Cabinet until 1924. Other representatives of the Jewish minority held high-ranking positions in the Lithuanian government, such as Rozenboym and Rahmilevitch, who were deputy ministers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Trade and Commerce respectively.

Similarly, Jews were well established in economic and cultural life and contributed largely to it. Whereas in 1923 more than three quarters of the country's commercial and retail enterprises were owned by Jews, the situation changed dramatically in the late twenties and early thirties, when the number of Lithuanian-owned commercial enterprises grew constantly, while the number owned by Jews fell, reflecting at the same time the deterioration of Lithuanian-Jewish relations during those years.

As has already been mentioned, Jews took an active part in cultural life, too. The then Lithuanian capital Kaunas (Yidd. *Kovne*) hosted two Jewish theatres, and six Jewish daily newspapers were published there.



Jewish schools trained and educated Jewish youth and offered instruction in Hebrew and/or Yiddish. The Jewish community in Lithuania, however, was far from representing a single social group or a single class and one political orientation only. Except for the small number of wealthy Jews, most of them were rather poor, and it was they, who, incidentally, provided the majority of the members of the illegal Communist Party. Despite its place in Lithuanian society, the Jewish community led its own life. First attempts at integration date back to the end of the thirties only, when Jews started backing measures taken by Lithuanians against organisations and/or institutions of the Polish minority. In return, they earned the sympathy and support of certain Lithuanian intellectual circles.

As a result of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Lithuania was annexed to the USSR in summer 1940, and one year later, in June 1941, occupied by the German army. The most horrible chapter in the long of Lithuania's Jews began. According to research from different perspectives, the German occupation caused the death of about 200 000 Lithuanian Jews, and compared with that figure, only a few survived the Holocaust.

More frightful, however, than the mere fact that these crimes were committed with the active participation of local Lithuanian collaborators, is the interpretation and justification offered for these horrors afterwards. Already in the early forties Lithuanian propaganda and public opinion saw in the Jews allies of the Soviets and accused them of alleged collaboration with the KGB. When, in turn, Lithuanians participated in killing Jews, they were allegedly doing nothing but taking revenge on them.

The afore-mentioned historical dates and developments indicate some of the issues discussed during two conferences which were held in the Lithuanian towns of Nida (September 1997) and Telšiai (September 2001), respectively. A selection of papers presented at these two conferences is published in this book. In addition to that, the book includes a number of studies dealing with pertinent issues like Lithuanian-Jewish relations, the attitude of "the others" towards the Jewish community, the policy of tsarist and Lithuanian governments toward non-dominant ethnic groups, and the Holocaust in the provinces of Western Belarus which once were part of the Litvaks' homeland, too.

One of the most important questions repeatedly raised during the two conferences concerned Litvak identity, i.e. the question of what elements and historical experiences shaped it, and how it changed in the course of (modern) history as a result of the relations between Jews and

Lithuanians. This question is all the more important as researchers who so far dealt with the formation of national identities among minority groups in Lithuania studied it, generally speaking, either in context with the formation of other national identities, neglecting thus "the specificity of the Jewish case," or completely isolated from them, treating thus Jewish identity as something completely different and apart.

Therefore, the authors of the chapters in this book decided to look at the afore-mentioned issues from two perspectives, from a Jewish and a Lithuanian one respectively, intending thus to reformulate the *status questionis* and begin the discussion on them anew.

*The Editors*

## The Holocaust in Lithuania: An Outline of the Major Stages and their Results

*Arūnas Bubnys*

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the process via which Lithuanian Jewry was destroyed. We will attempt to establish the most important stages in the mass-murder process, outline their characteristics and assess their results. We must concede that this topic is a relatively recent arrival in scholarship in post-1990 Lithuania and Lithuanian research still lags behind the work done in Israel by Dov Levin, Yitzak Arad and Dina Porad and in Germany by J. Matthaeus, K. Stang and C. Dieckmann. In recent years Lithuanian historians, such as L. Truska, V. Brandišauskas, S. Sužiedelis, A. Eidintas and others, have achieved much in studying of the genocide of Jews in Lithuania. The aforementioned Lithuanian historians try conscientiously and objectively to research the weightiest issues that give rise most often to argument. We have in mind collaboration by Lithuanian institutions with the Nazis in carrying out the genocide of Lithuanian Jewry and the problem of national moral responsibility. Nevertheless, insufficient attention has been devoted so far to certain important aspects of the Holocaust, such as periodisation, specificity and the statistical features of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Since we have no studies for comparison from neighbouring countries, it is difficult to establish what was particular about the Holocaust in Lithuania.

It is widely known that after the Nazi Party came to power in Germany antisemitism became state policy. Later this was transferred to areas of Europe occupied by the Third Reich. We should stress that the persecution and destruction of Jews was initiated by Nazi Germany, but in certain occupied countries, including Lithuania, the Nazis managed to involve part of the local population and local collaborating institutions in this criminal action. Nazi propaganda succeeded in exploiting anti-communist and antisemitic moods that had developed during a year of Soviet occupation and convince some Lithuanians that Bolshevism meant Jewish power and that the Jews were primarily responsible for the misfortunes endured during Soviet annexation and occupation.

The Jewish Genocide (Holocaust) in Lithuania could be subdivided conditionally into the following periods:

1. End-June 1941–November 1941 and this period may be subdivided further into two periods:
  - a. End-June 1941–mid-July 1941.

- b. End-July–November 1941.
2. December 1941–March 1943.
3. April 1943–mid-July 1944.

We will now survey the processes that took place in each period and attempt to distinguish their most important features and offer summaries of their results.

The worst and most tragic period for Lithuanian Jewry was the second half of 1941. By December 1941 80 percent of Jews resident in Lithuania at that time were murdered. The initiative for persecuting and killing the Jews lay in the hands of the occupying forces. Preparing for war against the Soviet Union, the leadership of the Third Reich planned from the outset that the war in the east would differ markedly from the war in western Europe. In March 1941 Hitler already stressed that the war with Russia would be a fight to the death between two irreconcilable ideologies (Nazism and Bolshevism), a war of *Weltanschauung*. All real and potential enemies of Nazism were to be destroyed mercilessly. As we know, the Jews were regarded by the Nazis as the Third Reich's most important enemy. Hitler was convinced that the *Wehrmacht* would not be strong enough to carry out the tasks of ideological war. This was to be done first and foremost by *Wehrmacht* groups operating behind the front lines (*Einsatzgruppen*) controlled directly by the Reich's supreme security agency, the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*. Preparing for the attack on the Soviet Union the Nazis formed four operational groups, A, B, C and D. Group leaders were appointed directly by Himmler and Heydrich. Each section of the army (North, Centre and South) was allocated an operational group. The Northern Army which was to occupy the Baltic States and move against Leningrad was allocated Group A which comprised operational division (*Einsatzkommandos*) 2 and 3 and *Sonderkommando* 1a and 1b.<sup>1</sup> Operational Group A was headed by SS Brigadeführer Walter Stahlecker. *Einsatzkommando* 3 which operated in Lithuania was headed by SS *Standartenführer* Karl Jaeger. Operational Group A had around 990 men.<sup>2</sup>

On June 25 1941 Group leader Stahlecker arrived in Kaunas with the first *Wehrmacht* contingents and on July 2 1941 *Einsatzkommando* 3 led by Jaeger took over security police functions in Lithuania. Jaeger's staff set up its HQ in Kaunas and on 9 September 1941 the Vilnius district came under its control as did the Šiauliai District on 2 October.<sup>3</sup>

The slaughter of Lithuanian Jewry began during the first days of the Soviet-Nazi war. Even before the ghettos were set up in August 1941 thousands of Jews were killed in Lithuania. The earliest organised mass

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murders were committed in areas of Lithuania that bordered on Germany and in Kaunas. On the first day of the war Stahlecker arrived in Tilsit and instructed the Tilsit security police leader, H. J. Boehme, to begin the murder of Jews and communists within a 25 km band of territory in Lithuania. The Tilsit operative group comprising Gestapo, SD agents and Klaipėda's German police force soon began "cleansing" actions in the Lithuanian frontier zones. The Tilsit Gestapo group arranged the first murders in Gargždai on 24 June when 201 people were shot.<sup>4</sup> By 11 July 1941 the Tilsit Group had murdered 1,542 people in various sites in Lithuania and during summer 1941 their murder victims totalled 5,502.<sup>5</sup> The absolute majority of victims were Jewish.

On June 25 Stahlecker arrived in Kaunas and set about organising actions to destroy Jews and communists. Later (on 15 October 1941) Stahlecker wrote a detailed report on his activities to Himmler. One of Stahlecker's main concerns was involving local people in the killings of Jews and hiding Nazi guilt. In the afore-mentioned report Stahlecker wrote:

After occupying the town there were efforts during the first hours to provoke anti-Jewish pogroms although it was difficult to arouse local antisemitic forces. The security police was ready on the basis of instructions to solve the Jewish question will all possible means as quickly as possible, but it was handy that at first at least they acted behind the scenes.<sup>6</sup>

After Algirdas Klimaitis's gang formed and armed itself Stahlecker managed to carry out mass pogroms in Kaunas. It should be stressed that A. Klimaitis's gang of around 300 men was not subject to either the Lithuanian Activists' Front [LAF] which had organised the armed anti-Soviet uprising or the Provisional Lithuanian Government. As Stahlecker wrote,

A. Klimaitis managed so to organise and begin the pogrom that neither the instructions we had given nor our initiative came to the fore. During the first night of the pogrom in the night of June 25–26 Lithuanian partisans liquidated more than 1,500 Jews, burned or otherwise destroyed several synagogues and set the Jewish quarter, where there were around 60 houses, on fire. On the following nights 2,300 Jews were neutralised in the same way. According to Kaunas's example other Lithuanian towns had similar actions albeit on a

smaller scale and these affected communists who were still in those places too.<sup>7</sup>

The figures for the number of Jews killed and buildings burned during those pogroms (3,800 and 60 respectively) give grounds for doubt. Witnesses of those events often only recall the killings in the Lietūkis garage on 27 June 1941, when more than a dozen or several dozen Jews were killed; but Kaunas people do not remember there having been great fires at that time. Gestapo-initiated pogroms continued in Kaunas until 29 June 1941. After that regular slaughters of Jews began in the Kaunas forts. Certain renowned Israeli historians such as Yitzak Arad and Dov Levin stress the active role of Lithuanian anti-Soviet partisans and rebels in encounters with Jews during the first two weeks of the war and the Nazi occupation. It is alleged that in the period between 22 June 1941 and 5 July Lithuanians perpetrated anti-Jewish acts and controlled the situation in Lithuania. For example Dov Levin calculates there were around forty places where during these days where Lithuanian groups carried out pogroms<sup>8</sup>. Israeli historians rely mostly on the evidence of Jews who survived the Holocaust. I think that these allegations and calculations should be checked. As we know, during the first week of the war the *Wehrmacht* occupied Lithuania and the country was brought under German military rule (until the end of July 1941). During the first week of the war the German security police and SD operational and special groups began operating in Lithuania. They took the initiative in carrying out murders of Jews and communists (the Tilsit Gestapo group and Stahlecker's group in Kaunas). Thus, the Provisional Lithuanian Government that formed at the beginning of the war, the civil administration, police and partisan groups were not sole masters of the country but had to carry out the orders of the German military administration and operational groups. On the basis of my work in Lithuanian archives, I cannot confirm the allegation that at the beginning of the war in dozens of places in Lithuania Lithuanian partisan groups would have carried out pogroms and murdered Jews. Even in such a large town as Vilnius there were no mass pogroms during the first week of the war. In addition we should pay attention to the situation that developed during the first days of the war. In many places in Lithuania anti-Soviet Lithuanian partisans were shooting retreating Red Army soldiers, Soviet officials and activists. There were many Jews among those retreating and some of them could and did fall victim to such encounters. Retreating Red Army and NKVD units also carried out

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dreadful acts of terror against Lithuanian rebels, political prisoners and even civilians (such as at Pravieniškės, Rainiai, Červenė and so forth). The red terror led to acts of revenge during which innocent people may also have died.

However, beginning with July 1941, when the whole of Lithuania was occupied by the Nazis and an occupation regime was set up there, persecution of the Jews took on a different form. There was a move from separate pogroms to the mass murder of Jews. This was done first of all in Kaunas. On 2 July 1941 *Einsatzkommando* 3A officially took over security functions in Lithuania. The Lithuanian partisans groups that had formed in Kaunas were disarmed on 28 June. That same day (28 June) work began on organising a National Labour Defence Battalion [TDA] led by Colonel Andrius Butkūnas. Together with the German Gestapo agents the TDA battalion began carrying out systematic mass killings of Jews in the Kaunas forts and the provinces. The first site chosen for mass murders was the Kaunas Seventh Fort. On the order of *Einsatzgruppe* 3A Commander Jaeger, 463 Jews were shot here on 4 July 1941 and on 6 July 2,514 Jews were slaughtered.<sup>9</sup>

According to the evidence of former TDA battalion members tried by the Soviet Union, we can conclude that the murders in Kaunas Seventh Fort were carried out by units 1 and 3 of the TDA battalion. Unit 3 took part more frequently in later murders of Jews and this was led by Lieutenants B. Norkus, J. Barzda and A. Dagsy. When particularly large mass murders were committed almost all members of the battalion took part, except for soldiers on other duties. In August 1941 Kaunas Jews were murdered in Kaunas Fourth Fort and from October 1941 in the Ninth Fort. Here executions were carried out until the very end of the Nazi occupation. The largest mass murder of Kaunas Jews took place on 29 October 1941. The evening before the murders the Gestapo selected Jews from the Kaunas ghetto. Around 10,000 people were selected for death. They selected families with many children, physically weak persons, old people and the sick for murder. Members of the TDA, later called the First Police battalion, also took part in the selection of ghetto prisoners. On 29 October the condemned Jews were driven out of the ghetto to the Ninth Fort where they were shot in huge previously-dug pits. According to Jaeger's report 9,200 Jews were killed in the fort on 29 October of whom 2,007 were men, 2,920 were women and 4,273 were children. Jaeger referred to these murders cynically as "the cleansing of the ghetto from unnecessary Jews."<sup>10</sup> Summing up the Kaunas murders we can say that from 4 July to 11 December 1941 the TDA battalion,

especially its third unit, together with the Gestapo, murdered around 26,000 Lithuanian and foreign Jews (from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia).

The greater part of Jewish murders committed in Lithuania in 1941, except for those in the Vilnius and Siauliai districts were connected with *SS Obersturmführer* Joachim Hamann's "flying unit" (*Rollkommando Hamann*). In his (in)famous report of 1 December 1941 Jaeger alleged that

the aim of killing the Lithuanian Jews was able to be achieved solely because a flying unit was formed from the battalions of *Obersturmführer* Hamann, who understood my aims completely and was able to effect collaboration with Lithuanian partisans and the relevant civilian establishment.<sup>11</sup>

Hamann's mobile unit was not full-time and did not have a permanent station. Usually it was formed for a specific action from several German Gestapo agents and several dozen Lithuanian TDA battalion soldiers. Hamann himself often did not attend the killings in the provinces and restricted himself to issuing orders for the TDA officers (Dagys, Barzda, Norkus and others). The flying unit joined murders in the provinces when all the preparation work had been done: the condemned Jews had been gathered in one place, local policemen and so-called partisans (with white armbands) combined to guard the victims, a secluded killing site had been selected (mostly in forests or distant fields) and pits had been dug.

To sum up the murders committed by the First Police Battalion (TDA) in the provinces, we can say that in Lithuania (the Kaunas, Alytus and other districts) unit 3 of this battalion murdered around 12,000 Jews in at least fifteen sites (not counting Kaunas). Hamann's flying unit was a very efficient tool for carrying out Nazi Holocaust policy. According to figures of murdered Jews (at least 39,000), only the German security police battalion and special SD unit in Vilnius, and the Second Lithuanian Police battalion (later called the Twelfth) organised and led by major Antanas Impulevičius in Kaunas could match Hamann's unit. However, Impulevičius's group murdered Jews in Belarus rather than Lithuania. In general it should be stressed that the role played in the Holocaust by Lithuanian police battalions was particularly significant. Although almost every type of Lithuanian police force (public police, security police, auxiliary police, partisan [white

armband] groups) played a role in the Holocaust (or "self-defence" Lithuanian police) in various ways (direct murders, transportation, concentration camps). Lithuanian policemen shot a Ukrainian.

The ghetto-bui shooting of Jews. Jurgis Bobelis, an adjutant for setting up the ghettos, was compelled to move in June-July 1941. Those who before the ghetto June-July 1941. August. The ghetto command Cramer's adjutant the Kaunas ghetto council of elders August 1941 a J. Kopelman. Later were to be killed German war requ

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armband] groups) took part in the persecution and murder of Jews, their role in the Holocaust was not so important as that of the police battalions (or "self-defence" units). On the basis of my research I can say that ten Lithuanian police battalions out of twenty five took part in the Holocaust in various ways (direct shooting, guarding the shooting sites during the murders, transporting victims to the killing sites, ghetto and concentration camp security). According to my calculations these Lithuanian police battalions together with the Gestapo and local policemen shot around 78,000 Jews in Lithuania, Belarus and the Ukraine.

The ghetto-building process proceeded in parallel with the arrest and shooting of Jews. The Kaunas military commandant, the Lithuanian Jurgis Bobelis, and the mayor, Kazimieras Palčiauskas, issued the order for setting up the Kaunas ghetto on 10 July 1941. All Kaunas Jews were compelled to move to the ghetto in the Vilijampolė suburb by 15 August 1941. Those who did not comply were threatened with arrest<sup>12</sup>. Even before the ghetto was set up around 10,000 Kaunas Jews were killed in June–July 1941.<sup>13</sup> The ghetto was enclosed in a barbed-wire fence on 15 August. The ghetto was guarded by German and Lithuanian police. The ghetto commandant was Kaunas Town District Commissar Hans Cramer's adjutant, Fritz Jordan. Around 30,000 Jews were locked into the Kaunas ghetto and its internal administration was headed by a council of elders whose chairman was the doctor, Elchanan Elkes. In August 1941 a Jewish ghetto police form was set up headed by Mikhail Kopelman. Later there were 220–230 ghetto policemen.<sup>14</sup> Ghetto Jews were to be killed gradually but first they had to be used to the utmost for German war requirements.

The Vilnius ghetto was begun by Town Commissar Hans Hingst in the first days of August 1941. Practical issues were delegated to Hingst's adjutant and assistant for Jewish Issues, Franz Murer. The latter, together with Mayor Dabulevičius selected a site for the ghetto in the old town. On 6 September 1941 Vilnius Jews were transferred by the police to the ghetto. Before the ghetto was established German security police and special SD units killed between 10,000 and 20,000 Vilnius Jews in Paneriai. Around 30,000 people were located in Ghetto 1, and around 9,000–11,000 were imprisoned in Ghetto 2. But even after the Jews had been forced into the ghettos the killings continued until the very end of 1941. After several operations carried out in October 1941 Ghetto 2 was liquidated. All the inmates were murdered in Paneriai. Until the beginning of the Nazi-Soviet war around 57,000 Jews had lived in

Vilnius and by the end of 1941 around 33,000–34,000 had been murdered.<sup>15</sup> More than 20,000 Vilnius ghetto Jews were left to live for the time being and do war work required by the Germans. Jewish ghettos were set up in other large and small Lithuanian towns but most of these were liquidated in summer and autumn 1941. After 1941 only the Vilnius, Kaunas, Šiauliai and Švenčionys ghettos remained. According to the Israeli historian Y. Arad's calculations of the number of Jews murdered in Lithuania between June and December 1941, some 164,000–167,000 people, or approximately 80 percent of Lithuanian Jewry, were killed in those six or so months. At the end of this period there were only around 43,000 Jews in Lithuania: around 20,000 in the Vilnius ghetto, 17,500 in the Kaunas ghetto, 5,500 in the Šiauliai ghetto and 500 in Švenčionys.<sup>16</sup>

### 1. The Destruction of Lithuanian Jewry in Provincial Areas in 1941

How were Jews persecuted and killed in the Lithuanian provinces? Two periods may be distinguished here:

#### A. End-June 1941–mid-July 1941

This period was dominated by politically-motivated persecution. Jews were most often arrested, imprisoned and shot as former communists, members of the communist youth organisation, Soviet officials and supporters. Non-Jews were also terrorised for these reasons (Lithuanians, Russians, Poles and so on). In this period it was mostly male Jews who were persecuted. Women and children were murdered less frequently. The persecution and murder of Jews was organised by the German authorities (military commanders, officers in the security police and SD, and a little later, district commissars). However, the Lithuanian administration took part in this process from the very beginning of the Nazi occupation (district leaders, town mayors), as did the Lithuanian police and so-called partisan groups (with white armbands).

#### B. The second stage (end-July 1941–November 1941)

This was the period of racialist genocide. In this period Jews were not persecuted for political reasons but simply because they were Jews. At this time almost all Lithuanian provincial Jewry was slaughtered. Murders took place intensively from August to mid-September 1941. Temporary ghettos and isolation camps were set up before the mass murders got under way. This was a period of preparation for mass

murder. The ghettoisation of July and lasted until the third secret (16 August 1941). "Carrying out the administration officials up into ghettos and women, children, the ghettos and camps. fields a few kilometers important groups in flying unit (formed in defence units (in Jewish (white armbands) and German Gestapo officials were murdered with provincial murders and Vilkaviškis (15 provincial Jews had saved by local people

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murder. The ghettoisation process began in the provinces around the end of July and lasted until mid-August. A particularly important moment was the third secret memorandum of Police Director Vytautas Reivytis (16 August 1941), "On the detention and concentration of Jews in special locations." Carrying out the instructions and orders of Lithuanian administration officials and the Nazis, all provincial Jews were rounded up into ghettos and isolation camps. In many places all surviving Jews, women, children, the aged, were shot before the final liquidation of the ghettos and camps. Normally the murders were committed in woods or fields a few kilometres away from the ghettos and camps. The most important groups in the slaughter of provincial Jews were: Hamann's flying unit (formed basically by unit 3 of the TDA battalion), local self-defence units (in Jonava, Kupiškis, Zarasai etc), local partisan groups (white armbands) and police officers. Mass shootings were often led by German Gestapo officers but there were many small towns where people were murdered without direct German involvement. The latest mass provincial murders of Jews took place in Lazdijai (3 November 1941) and Vilkaviškis (15 November 1941). By November 1941 virtually all provincial Jews had been shot. Only a small number escaped or were saved by local people (hardly more than 3-5 percent).

## 2. Specific Features of the Holocaust in Lithuania

There were certain features that were specific to the Jewish Genocide in Lithuania. Previously in other Nazi-occupied countries, especially in western Europe, persecution of the Jews took place gradually in several stages. In Lithuania the killings began in the first days of the occupation. We can say that Lithuania was the first country where the Nazis set about carrying out their extermination policy from the start. In occupied areas of central and western Europe Jewish civil rights were restricted at first and later Jews were moved into ghettos and only after that did physical destruction begin. Each stage last between one and two years. Complete extermination was the last stage in a long process. No clear boundaries between these stages were seen in Lithuania. Practically juridical discrimination, ghettoisation and physical destruction took place at the same time. West European Jews were usually not murdered in their homeland but in concentration camps in Germany and German-occupied Poland. Most Lithuanian Jews were murdered not far from where they were born. Jews from Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia and France were transported to their deaths in Lithuania.<sup>17</sup>

Why did the mass murders begin so soon in Lithuania? We might offer the following hypothesis in response: The Holocaust was connected with the plans of the Third Reich's leadership to colonise and germanise the Baltic countries. According to Nazi racialist policy all Jews, as the greatest enemies of the Aryan race, were to be eliminated totally. Because Lithuania had a common border with Germany and Lithuania was supposed to become ground for German colonisation after the war, Lithuanian Jewry had to be shot immediately, that is, as Nazis understood it, this strategically important territory had to be cleansed of undesirable elements and prepared for colonisation. In addition Nazi Germany, seeking to ensure its border security sought to destroy most quickly those Jews who, in their eyes, were the most important source of disturbances behind the front and dissatisfaction with the occupying authorities. This also encouraged the Nazis to kill Lithuanian Jews as quickly as possible.

Another specific factor in the Holocaust in Lithuania is that the Nazis managed to draw a relatively high number of Lithuanian institutions and local people into carrying out the killings. This fact can be explained by the fact that unlike western and central European countries Lithuania experienced the Soviet occupation before the Nazi occupation. Pain inflicted during the Soviet occupation made a large part of the Lithuanian population enemies of Bolshevism and supporters of Germany. The Nazi-Soviet war was associated with the removal of the Soviet occupation and the hopes for restoring the Lithuanian state. Antisemitic propaganda from the Nazis and the anti-Soviet Lithuanian underground further popularised the anti-Jewish mood and stereotypes (Jew-Bolshevik). Therefore in Lithuania Hitler's policies, including that towards the Jews, received greater support than in western Europe. Once again in their history Jews became an easy object for revenge and attack, a kind of scapegoat for the misfortunes endured by the ethnic Lithuanian nation. These factors increased the scale of the Jewish catastrophe and helped the Nazis carry out their Genocide policy in Lithuania. The number of Lithuanian Jewry's dead (around 95 percent) was the largest in the whole of Nazi-occupied Europe. Although the Final Solution was organised and initiated by the Nazis it would not have been carried out so quickly and on such a scale without the action support of part of the Lithuanian administration and the local population. Since the main German military and police forces were sent to the front and the area closest to the front line the Germans lacked force to control gigantic territories and carry out their occupation policy consistently. We can give

the following figures around 660 German administration (the German district in the Lithuanian administrative district officials. Nazi policy (including support of the ethnic Lithuanian administration a perceived enemy a not only did not oppress their own.

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the following figures as an example. At the beginning of 1944 only around 660 German officials worked in the German civilian administration (the general commissariat and the district commissariats) while in the Lithuanian administration (at all levels, management, district administration, the police) there were around 20,000 ethnic Lithuanian officials. Thus the Germans comprised only 3.3 percent of the occupation administration staff.<sup>18</sup> The successful implementation of Nazi policy (including their Jewish policy) was inconceivable without the support of the ethnic Lithuanian administration. The nationalistic Lithuanian administration was interested in the liquidation of the Jews as a perceived enemy and potential rivals of ethnic Lithuanians and thus not only did not oppose Nazi Holocaust policy but in effect adopted it as their own.

### 3. The Second Period: December 1941–March 1943

This period could be called a relatively stable or calm period. At that time there were no mass murders of Jews. Nazi efforts were concentrated in making maximum use of the Jews as a workforce in the interests of the German war economy. Almost all men and women of working age had various jobs in the ghetto workshops, different factories, firms and special Jewish labour camps. In the report of the German security police and SD chief in Lithuania in February 1943 it was said that daily around 9,600 Kaunas ghetto Jews worked in 140 work sites. 1,400 men and women worked in ghetto workshops. Most Jewish labourers carried out work required by the army and met military orders. Every week around fifty people died in the Kaunas ghetto as a result of hard labour, food shortages and poor medical care.<sup>19</sup>

The September 1943 German security police and SD chief's report said that after the SS took over the Kaunas ghetto the number of work teams was reduced from 93 to 44. There were provisions for setting up eight concentration camps: for 2,500 Jews in the Aleksotas barracks, for 1,200 in Ežerėliai, 1,200 in Šančiai, 600 in the army car park in Petrašiūnai, 500 in Palemonas, 500 in the Kaunas rubber factory, 400 in Marijampolė, 400 in Kaišiadorys and 2,000 in the Kaunas ghetto.<sup>20</sup>

Ghetto leaders were of the opinion that while the ghettos were economically useful for the Nazis, they would not be liquidated. Therefore the ghetto administration tried to employ as many workers as possible and increase their workload. For example, in summer 1943

around 14,000 Vilnius ghetto Jews (two thirds of the ghetto population) were working in various firms and Jewish labour camps.<sup>21</sup>

In April 1943 the German security police and SD chief in Lithuania informed the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* that at that time 44,584 Jews were left in the Lithuanian general district 23,950 in the Vilnius ghetto, 15,875 in the Kaunas ghetto and 4,759 in the Šiauliai ghetto. Around 30,000 Jews were doing jobs needed by the German army.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. The Third Period: April 1943–July 1944: Liquidation of the Ghettoes

The calm period came to an end in spring 1943. In February 1943 the Nazi administration decided to begin liquidating the ghettoes. This was done first in the districts of Svyriai and Ašmena which had been joined to the Lithuanian General District. At this time the Soviet partisan movement became stronger in the eastern part of the Vilnius District. Some of the Jews who managed to escape from the ghettoes joined Soviet partisan groups. This led the Nazi administration to begin liquidating ghettoes and labour camps in the Vilnius district. First in March 1943 the Švenčionys, Mikališkės, Ašmena and Salos ghettoes were liquidated. Around 3,000 people were moved from these ghettoes to the Vilnius ghetto and others were told that they would be transferred to Kaunas. On 5 April 1943 trains with Jews from the small towns of eastern Lithuania halted in Paneriai. Here the Jews were taken out and shot in the Paneriai woods. "Men" from the First Lithuanian Police Battalion took part in the killings. Around 5,000 Jews were murdered in all. Only a few managed to escape and return to the Vilnius ghetto.<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning of July 1943 the Jewish labour camps in Kena and Bezdonys that were part of the Vilnius ghetto were liquidated. Around 500–600 Jewish workers from these camps were shot by Gestapo and Lithuanian policemen. Around 600–700 Jews from the Baltoji Vokė and Riešė labour camps were transferred to the Vilnius ghetto or managed to escape.<sup>24</sup>

On 21 June Himmler issued an order to liquidate all ghettoes on Ostland territory. Jews who were fit for work were to be transferred to SS-controlled concentration camps. The Kaunas and Šiauliai ghettoes were turned into concentration camps and the Vilnius ghetto was destroyed.<sup>25</sup>

The Vilnius ghetto was liquidated on 23–24 September 1943. The inmates were divided into two groups. The men and women (around

11,000 in number) concentration camps (Kaiserwald), while the be murdered in Auschwitz around 1,200 Jews and a similar number shops in Subačius Street police and SD there before the Vilnius ghetto Estonia for work, 2 further 1,720 Jews 2,000–3,000 survivors two-thirds of these them joined Soviet

Killings were re was a particularly Kittel. SS men and houses, took child buses. Mothers with dogs. In two days up. 130 ghetto police those arrested (in Fort.<sup>29</sup>

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11,000 in number) who were fit for work were transported to concentration camps in Estonia (Kloga, Vaivara) and Latvia (Kaiserwald), while the elderly, women and children were taken away to be murdered in Auschwitz. After the Vilnius ghetto had been liquidated, around 1,200 Jews were left in Vilnius to work in the "Kailis" factory and a similar number were employed in the army motor vehicle repair shops in Subačius St.<sup>26</sup> According to data from the German security police and SD there were 24,108 Jews in ghettos in the Vilnius district before the Vilnius ghetto was liquidated; 14,000 Jews were transported to Estonia for work, 2,382 Jews were left in Vilnius and there were a further 1,720 Jews in the villages.<sup>27</sup> Of more than 50,000 Jews hardly 2,000-3,000 survived to the end of the Nazi occupation. Approximately two-thirds of these survivors were escapees from the ghetto and most of them joined Soviet partisan groups.<sup>28</sup>

Killings were resumed in Kaunas on 26 March 1944. That day there was a particularly vicious round-up of children led by W. Fuchs and B. Kittel. SS men and Ukrainian policemen entered the ghetto, visited houses, took children away from their mothers and threw them into buses. Mothers who resisted were beaten with rifle-butts and attacked by dogs. In two days around 1,700 children and old people were rounded up. 130 ghetto policemen were arrested. The next day (27 March 1944) those arrested (including 34 Jewish policemen) were shot in the Ninth Fort.<sup>29</sup>

As the front drew closer to Kaunas the Nazis decided to liquidate the concentration camps completely. The liquidation of the Kaunas ghetto began on 8 July 1944 when around 1,200 were transported by barge; on 12 July the Gestapo began burning ghetto buildings. Anyone who ran out of a burning building was shot. Almost all the houses and workshops were burned down. Hundreds of people perished in the flames or from Gestapo bullets. In all around 6,000-7,000 people were taken out of the Kaunas ghetto; around 1,000 were killed during the liquidation of the ghetto and approximately 300-400 Jews escaped.<sup>30</sup>

Men from the Kaunas ghetto were transported to the Dachau concentration camp and the women were sent to Stutthof. The Kaunas Jews sent to Dachau built an underground aircraft factory and did other work. Several prisoners died every day from exhaustion. Death rates were particularly high in October and November 1944.<sup>31</sup> In Dachau the former chairman of the Kaunas ghetto council of elders E. Elkes perished. When the war was ending Dachau was liberated by the

Americans. Around 1,000 Lithuanian Jews lived to see Dachau liberated. Around 100 returned to Lithuania and the rest remained in the west.

The women and children of the Kaunas ghetto were taken to Stutthof. On 19 July 1944 1,208 women and children were placed in this camp.<sup>32</sup> On 26 July 1,893 Jews from the Kaunas and Šiauliai ghettos (801 women, 546 girls and 546 boys) were moved from Stutthof to Auschwitz.<sup>33</sup> Very few survived to be liberated. There are data showing that only around 2,400 people, 8 percent of the population, from Kaunas ghetto lived to see the end of the war.<sup>34</sup>

Until October 1943 the Šiauliai ghetto was under the control of Šiauliai District Commissar Hans Gewecke and from 1 October 1943 the SS took control of the ghetto.<sup>35</sup> The ghetto became a concentration camp headed by SS *Hauptscharführer* Hermann Schleef. Since the murders of spring and autumn 1941 the ghetto had a relatively calm existence. There had been a selection of children and people unfit for work on 5 November 1943. This was led by SS *Sturmhauptführer* Foerster. That day SS and Vlasov men came from Kaunas to shoot or transport to the German camps (probably Auschwitz) 570 children and 260 elderly Jews. Jewish Council members B. Kartun and A. Kac volunteered to accompany the detainees.<sup>36</sup>

On 15 July 1944 the liquidation of the Šiauliai ghetto began. Around 2,000 Šiauliai Jews were transported in four stages to Stutthof and from thence the men were taken to Dachau and the women and children to Auschwitz. Šiauliai survivors in Dachau were liberated by the Americans on 2 May 1945. Only 350–500 Šiauliai Jews lived to the end of the war.<sup>37</sup>

It is very difficult to answer the question of how many Lithuanian Jews were killed in all during the years of Nazi occupation. Historians differed markedly on this issue. Numbers of Holocaust victims in Lithuania vary from 165,000 to 254,000. It is most probably impossible to give an exact figure. Neither full statistical records nor lists of the names of the dead survive in the archives. The present author bases himself on the following calculations: according to data from the statistics department, on 1 January 1941 there were 208,000 Jews (6.86 percent of the total population) in Lithuania.<sup>38</sup> At the beginning of the war around 8,500 Jews went to Russia. During the Nazi occupation 1,500–2,000 escaped from the Vilnius and Kaunas ghettos and 2,000–3,000 lived in concentration camps to the end of the war. Thus around 195,000–196,000 Lithuanian Jews were murdered. This figure is neither final nor indisputable, but the present author considers it to be close to

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reality. The Holocaust of Lithuanian Jewry is the worst tragedy of Lithuania's history. Never in Lithuanian history have so many people been killed in so short a time. Lithuanian society is insufficiently aware of the scale and severity of this tragedy and does not grasp its significance or empathise with its victims. However, over recent years more and more books and articles have been printed in Lithuania on this theme. This is not just an academic history problem but a moral problem for all Lithuanians. It is very important that we grasp the fact that the Holocaust was not just a Jewish tragedy but the total destruction of our fellow-citizens and thus it was a Lithuanian tragedy. Such an understanding does not come immediately or without effort. It requires certain effort on the part of historians, teachers, politicians and the mass media. Knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust are necessary to overcome nationalist and anti-democratic ideologies, expand society, foster tolerance and understand "other" cultures.

## Notes

1. Krausnick, 1985, 124–25.
2. Hilberg, 1990, 303.
3. Krausnick, 1985, 151–52.
4. Krausnick, 1985, 142; Potsdam, *Bundesarchivabteilungen* [BAP], Report from USSR No. 14: 82.
5. Krausnick, 1985, 142; *Masinės žudynės*, part 2, 26.
6. *Masinės žudynės*, part 2, 19.
7. *Masinės žudynės*, part 2, 19.
8. See Y. Arad's paper in this volume.
9. *Masinės žudynės*, part 1, 131.
10. *Masinės žudynės*, part 1, 135.
11. *Masinės žudynės*, part 1, 138.
12. Vilnius, LCVA f. R-1444 ap.1, b.8, 140: Order of Kaunas Commandant No. 15, 10 July 1941.
13. *Enzyklopedie des Holocaust* vol. 2, 804 ("Kowno").
14. History of the Kaunas ghetto Jewish Police (in Russian): Vilnius, LYA f. K-1, unattributed document file, b.345, fos11–13.
15. *Enzyklopedie des Holocaust* vol. 3, 1601 ("Wilna").
16. See Y. Arad's chapter in this volume.
17. Porat, 1993, 22–23.
18. Paper delivered by C. Dieckmann, "Überlegungen zur deutsch-litauischen Kooperation 1941–1944," in the the Hüttenfeld conference *Das Jahr 1941: Die Fragen an die litauische Geschichte*, 29–30 Sept 2001.
19. *Masinės žudynės*, part 1, 243.
20. Vilnius, LCVA f. R-1399 ap.1, b.62, fos60–61: report from German Security Police and SD chief in Lithuania to the Supreme Reich Security Department [RSHA] in Berlin, Sept 1943.
21. *Enzyklopedie des Holocaust*, vol. 3, 1601 ("Wilna").
22. Vilnius, LCVA f. R-1399 ap.1, b.26, fos55–56: report from German Security Police and SD chief in Lithuania to the Supreme Reich Security Department [RSHA] in Berlin, April 1943.
23. *Masinės žudynės*, part 1, 172; interrogation report of J. Oželis-Kozlovskis, 16 Dec 1944, Vilnius LYA f. K-1, ap.58, b.27968/3, fos12–48.
24. Report of interview of A. Rindziunskis, 21 Dec 1945 from former Latvian SSR KGB Archive No. N-18313, t.3 ap.164; I. Guzenberg, "Vilniaus geto darbo stovyklos ir 1942 m. gyventojų surašymas," in: *Vilniaus getas: kalinių sąrašai*, vol. 2, 14–15.
25. Arad, 1990, 88.

26. *Masinės žudynės*  
 27. Report of German  
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 28. *Enzyklopedie des*  
 29. Confirmation of  
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 30. Vilnius, LYA f.  
 31. *Masinės žudynės*  
 32. Archiwum Mu  
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 34. *Enzyklopedie d*  
 35. Interrogation r  
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 36. *Masinės žud*  
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26. *Masinės žudynės* part 1, 247–48; Arad paper in this volume.
27. Report of German Security Police and Vilnius SD department, 11 November 1943: Vilnius, LCVA f. R–1399 ap.1, b.33, fo.4.
28. *Enzyklopedie des Holocaust*, vol. 3, 1603 (“Wilna”).
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30. Vilnius, LYA f. K–1 ap.10, b.102, fo.217.
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32. Archiwum Muzeum Stutthof, I–II B–10, 169–189: Prisoner list, 20 July 1944.
33. Archiwum Muzeum Stutthof, I–II C–3, 43–67.
34. *Enzyklopedie des Holocaust*, vol. 2, 806 (“Kowno”).
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37. *Lietuvos rytas* 26 July 1994; report of interrogation of E. Gens, 21 Jan 1948: Vilnius, LYA f. K–1, ap.58, b.42809/3 fo.12–13.
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## Holocaust and Musar for the Telšiai Yeshivah: Avraham Yitshak and Eliyahu Meir Bloch\*

Gershon Greenberg

### I. Avraham Yitshak Bloch

When Yosef Layb Bloch, the Head of the Ets Hayim yeshivah of Telšiai (or *Telzer Yeshivah*) died in 1930, his eldest son Zalman (b. 1887) transferred his natural right as successor to be *Rosh Yeshivah* (yeshivah director) to his younger brother Avraham Yitshak (b. 1890). The yeshivah (a religious academy for males thirteen years old and older) began in 1875 under the leadership of Zalman Abel, Meir Atlas and Tsevi Ya'akov Oppenheim in an effort to synthesise traditional rabbinic texts with *Musar* (moralistic) literature. It was led by Eliezer Gordon ("Eliezer Telzer") 1881-1910, and then his son-in-law Yosef Layb Bloch. Avraham Yitshak, along with the other yeshivah directors Eliyahu Meir Bloch and Azriel Rabinowitch, built the yeshivah's tradition of excellent Talmudic scholarship. Shimon Shkop and Hayim ("Hayim Telzer") Rabinowitch were on the faculty. Study and prayer went from 8:00 AM - 10:00 PM daily except for Sabbath, for five consecutive one and a half year programmes.<sup>1</sup> Before succeeding his father, Avraham Yitshak led in establishing a preparatory school (*Mekhinah*), directed by brothers-in-law Hayim Mordekhai Katz and Avner Akliansky, along with Pinhas Halpan with secular studies required by the government, a seminar for advanced rabbinic study (*Kollel Harabanim*), directed by Katz; male and female branches of the Yavneh teachers institute (*Beit Midrash Lamorim*) headed by Avraham Mordekhai Vesler and Shmuel Hayim Dunash; and *Beit Midrash Lamorot* and a branch of the Yavneh Hebrew High School for Girls (*Gymnasion Ha'ivri Lebanot*).<sup>2</sup>

By November 1939 the yeshivah was endangered by war and financial collapse. Avraham Yitshak Bloch wrote to the president of the yeshivah's international organisation (*Histadrut Talmidei Yeshivat Ets Hayim Betelz*), Avraham David Burak in Brooklyn, that an attempt was being made to send some of his leadership to America to raise funds to help cover costs for destitute refugee students from great yeshivas of Poland who were streaming in through Vilnius. Despite the distress, he assured, the yeshivah was full, the learning intense, and all were committed to ascending in holiness (*Vehakal mesorim le'aliyah ulehitalut bakodesh*). Bloch prayed that God would have mercy and restore what had been destroyed.<sup>3</sup> In June 1940 he cabled *Der Morgen Zshurnal* in New York that the "Yeshivah and religion have not been affected by the change in

government which has now taken place in Lithuania through Russia's military penetration." The editor added that the yeshivah was asking for immediate help to support the dormitory and the kitchen, which now served five hundred students.<sup>4</sup> On 3 July 1940 the Soviets annexed Lithuania and on 30 July ordered the evacuation of the yeshivah building.<sup>5</sup> Its contents were moved to the *Mekhinah*, the Torah scrolls being left for last, and on 4 July the building began its transformation into a Lithuanian *Volkschule*. Learning continued in the *Mekhinah* and in different *Batei Midrash* (learning houses) in Telšiai. In early August 1940 Avraham Yitshak Bloch cabled *Der Morgen Zshurnal* that "the yeshivas continue with their fruitful work, anticipating as always that the yeshivas American Jewish brethren will not let them disappear."<sup>6</sup> In September, the yeshivah published its last issue of *Peri Ets Hayim: Kovets Letorah Veda'at* in Kėdainiai.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. *Bitahon* and *Mesirat Nefesh*, 1939–1940<sup>8</sup>

In his lecture entitled "The Loftiness of the Days of Judgment" of September 1939, Avraham Yitshak Bloch stated that *Halakhah* in its larger sense would be the best way to cope with the growing difficulties, for as a self-enclosed entity it was outside the upsetting reach of contemporary events. Specifically, if one drew strength from God's presence (I Chronicles 16:11), kept God ever in mind (Proverbs 5:19) and permeated life with Torah, then *Musar* (moralistic conduct) and *Da'at* (wisdom) could resist their impact. As a model, Bloch pointed to Mordekhai's response to Haman's decree of destruction. Since it was the sixteenth day of *Nisan*, when a flour offering (*Omer*) was brought during the days of the Temple, Mordekhai engaged his students in the relevant laws (Leviticus 2:2; bMegillah 16a), and this gave them power to endure.

The *Musar* and *Da'at* reflections by Avraham Yitshak Bloch centred on carrying out *Mitsvot* (Scriptural commandments) before death – a paradigm for the *Mitsvot* amidst the current threat, which he designated as an *Et pekudah*, a moment of visitation in the sense of crisis. Bloch brought forward the view of Yonah Gerondi (1200–1263) that when a *Mitsvah* was performed preceding one's death it evidenced a total life of Torah-observance, and when a *Mitsvah* was trespassed it evidenced a total life of Torah-trespass. The relation to a single *Mitsvah* at the boundary between life and death retroactively defined and epitomised all of one's life (*Sha'ar Sheni* 16<sup>a</sup>. In *Sha'arei Teshuvah*). Bloch recalled his father Yosef Layb Bloch's saying that after a person died all his deeds were gathered up in eternity. There, in eternity, they had equal stature, no matter their original position in time and space or respective importance.

Genesis 22:1 ("Abraham... as he was about to die all... thereafter, vis a vis rede... goes to the grave, all de... some approached death,... become equalised.")

In a subsequent und... (*Kovei el Hashem*) (... unfolding catastrophe ce... and so the response had... which Bloch understood... eleventh century Jewish... according to the elabora... consisted of absolute tr... any circumstances; fai... best. It was ever-cons... consciousness in momen... *Bitahon* was the practi... human effort and me... grace. It involved aba... Him and being lovingl... When one trusted in... sustained the world wo...

*Bitahon*, Bloch be... ascents and descents o... *ami yetaref. Tefilat Ya... The Men of the Gre... assures and insures... *lutsadikim*). Because... positive results would... who was completely... intruding upon those... (an insurance for the... whatever effort man... God determined wh... Chapter 4. In *Hovot... protected those who... *Morch Nevukhim*, vo... *Bitahon* had ex... dimensions. Ideally... uninterrupted cons...**

Genesis 24:1 ("Abraham was old and well stricken with age") meant that as he was about to die all Abraham's deeds were collected for evaluation thereafter, *vis a vis* redemption. The Sages averred that "When a person goes to the grave, all deeds are detailed before him" (bTa'anit 11<sup>a</sup>). As one approached death, the single act mediated between a lifetime of *Mitsvot* as differentiated by time and space and *Mitsvot* in eternity which became equalised.<sup>9</sup>

In a subsequent undated lecture of this period, "Wait on the Lord" (*Kavei el Hashem*) (Psalms 27:14), Bloch focused on *Bitahon*. The unfolding catastrophe came about in relationship to Israel (Yevamot 63<sup>b</sup>), and so the response had to come from Israel. It had to be one of *Bitahon* – which Bloch understood primarily in terms of *Havot Hatevavot* by the eleventh century Jewish philosopher Bahyah Ibn Pakudah. For Bahyah – according to the elaboration offered by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky – *Bitahon* consisted of absolute trust in divine providence and omnipotence, under any circumstances; faith that whatever happened, God meant it for the best. It was ever-conscious, rather than dormant and crystallising into consciousness in moments of crisis – objective or existential. In essence, *Bitahon* was the practice of the presence of God. It displaced reliance on human effort and merit with attribution of worldly success to divine grace. It involved abandoning oneself totally to God, meditating upon Him and being lovingly prepared to die for the sanctification of His name. When one trusted in God this way, for Bahyah, the divine love which sustained the world would in fact surround one on every side.<sup>10</sup>

*Bitahon*, Bloch began, was the ultimate form of response to the ascents and descents of life (See *Mi yesh lo umi yityaser ... mi yeshaket umi yetaref. Tefilat Yamim Noraim*). It had present and future dimensions. The Men of the Great Synagogue prayed "In the Land of Israel God assures and insures the pious" (*Be'erets Yisrael misha'en umivateah latsadikim*). Because God directed all action, one may have *Bitahon* that positive results would emerge (an assurance of the present) and that God, who was completely good (Psalms 5:5), would prevent evil from intruding upon those who adhered (*shedivek* – related to *Devekut*) to him (an insurance for the future).<sup>11</sup> Bloch referred to Bahyah's statement that whatever effort man made (and every human effort should be made) only God determined what would actually be achieved (*Sha'ar Habitahon*. Chapter 4. In *Hovot Halevavot*) and to Rambam's premise that God protected those who trusted in Him from all evil (Psalms 91:2. Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim*, vol. III, Chapter 51.

*Bitahon* had existential (subjective) and ontological (objective) dimensions. Ideally, it involved continual *Devekut* (adherence) to God, uninterrupted consciousness that there was none besides God;

consciousness of God's presence, which connected one to eternity.<sup>12</sup> In an earlier lecture "Prayer" (*Tefilah*) Bloch spoke of keeping God in mind at all times. When this happened, particularly through prayer, God's *Shekhinah* (divine presence) entered in and with it the rule of providence. Conversely, if one severed thought from God for but a moment, God's protection to divine inspiration would close for that moment.<sup>13</sup> This consciousness, he said in "Wait on the Lord," assured that God's protection would become an objective reality ("I will fear no evil for Thou art with me." Psalms 23:4). Bloch implied the existence of a meeting point between God and man prior to experience, a point which unfolded below and above. The process began with man: "The awakening from below and depended upon the awakening from above" (*keyadua, hitorerut* from above *teluyah behitorerut delitata*). With the belief that God was present in His goodness, all would in fact turn out to be good. In turn, God would strengthen the existential *Bitahon*, indirectly furthering the objectively good life (Psalms 27:14).<sup>14</sup> Bloch called upon those of his yeshivah community to fill their minds and hearts with *Bitahon*, suspend doubts about the future, expect God's effecting a positive outcome, and leave no room for despair or collapse. This indeed, was God's intention. According to the sixteenth century Kabbalist Hayim Vital:

It arose in God's will [to create the world in order] to enhance His creatures, such that they would recognise His greatness and be worthy of becoming a chariot to the above, adhering to him (Hayim Vital, *Sha'ar Hakelalim* 5<sup>a</sup>. In *Ets Hayim*).

In God's world, according to Moshe Hayim Luzzatto (Ramhal), man ascended and adhered to God by keeping the *Mitsvot* (*Perek Alef*. In *Mesillat Yesharim*). Upon achieving the *Devekut* of *Bitahon*, God would protect a person from evil and affliction would end (Psalms 11:1).<sup>15</sup>

Bloch spoke of the objectively-good reality evoked from God by man in terms of *Hesed* (merciful love) and *Rahamim* (compassion). For Bahyah, faith in God's infinite *Hesed*, consciousness of the divine presence and the goodness it brought, opened up the channel to divine *Hesed*. *Hesed* was implicit to creation, having been created by divine will. It was ready for man, and awaiting his initiative (*Sha'ar Habitahon*. Chapter 2. In *Hovot Halevavot*). God's *Rahamim*, also infinite (Lamentations 3:22), affirmed His *Hesed* (*Hatov ki lo kalu rahamekha vehamerahem kilo tamu hasadekha me'olam kivanu lakh*. In *Modim anahnu lakh*). The act of "Waiting upon the Lord" (Psalms 27:14) set the process in motion.<sup>16</sup> Bloch pointed out that *Bitahon* in itself had such

value for the eighteenth century who had it would be contrary to His will. Bloch added. When in plight, one in effect cited the rabbinic sages.

R. Nathan used to say to his disciples, others said to him, since it is written, and that which is written (bBerakhot 60b).

Having explained the blended with objective creation to being He took into account as] bruises his fin heaven" (bHullin revealing God's greatness. Ramhal's view that effective goodness (*Sim hazot*), and that confrontation between of goodness (*Sim* from the cruel reality the hand of the world and from the hand between the terrible destroyer (understanding Ramhal pointed to collective, for (*Behashgahah*). it came to the world from others (Ramhal remain at home outside where Bass, *ad Exod* that the pious cause a plague (part of innocent became 141:2).<sup>19</sup>

value for the eighteenth century Gaon of Vilna that he averred that a thief who had it would succeed; that God's *Hesed* could even be invoked contrary to His will if *Bitahon* was present. The converse was also true, Bloch added. When *Bitahon* was absent and one only lamented one's plight, one in effect distanced God and generated objective suffering. He cited the rabbinic sages:

R. Nathan used to follow Rabbi Hamnuna. Once he sighed and the others said to him: This man wants to bring suffering upon himself, since it is written: "For the thing which I did fear is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of hath overtaken me" [Job 3:25]. (bBerakhot 60<sup>a</sup>).<sup>17</sup>

Having explained that the subjective assertion of God's goodness blended with objectively real goodness, moving it from being implicit to creation to being explicit in history, Bloch suddenly was struck by doubt. He took into account that God's providence was total: "No man [so much as] bruises his finger here on earth unless it was so decreed against him in heaven" (bHullin 7<sup>b</sup>). He believed that the world was moving towards revealing God's oneness, blending divine presence with itself. He shared Ramhal's view that when God hid His face, it precluded the renewal of His effective goodness (*Shehistir panov lehadash bo davar hanhagat tov vera hazot*), and that descents were followed by mending (*Tikkun*), that the confrontation between good and evil would resolve itself with perfection of goodness (*Siman 48*. In *Da'at Tevunot*). But he could not look aside from the cruel realities of the *Et pekudah*: "The earth is given over unto the hand of the wicked" (Job 9:24) and "fury poured out" (Ezekiel 20:33), and from the harsh judgment (*Din*). He also sought to ease the tension between the terror and his inbred *Bitahon* by affirming that the earthly destroyer (under God) distinguished one individual from another. As Ramhal pointed out while God's providence over other species was collective, for human beings it was both collective and individual (*Behashgahah*. In *Ma'amar Ha'ikarim*, pp. 20–21).<sup>18</sup> For example, when it came to the slaying in Egypt, God distinguished first-born Egyptians from others (Rashi to Numbers 15:41) and had the children of Israel remain at home through the night (Exodus 12:22) lest they be caught outside where human-generated fury made no distinctions (Shabbetai Bass, *ad* Exodus 12:22. In *Siftei Hahamim* p. 7<sup>a</sup>). Bloch also suggested that the pious could be caught up in the troubles because when there was a plague (part of the *Et pekudah*) the angel of death had authority and the innocent became vulnerable – although prayer could help (Psalms 141:2).<sup>19</sup>



Still the tension between *Bitahon* and *Et pekudah* persisted. Bloch, however, did not surrender *Bitahon*. Instead he raised it to a new dimension. The current *Et pekudah*, he concluded, belonged to the onset of the messiah (*Ikvetah dimeshiha*. See Sota 49<sup>b</sup>). The rabbinic sages stated that "When you see the powers fighting each other, look for the feet of the king messiah" (Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 42:8), and this was such a time. Insofar as the messiah was about to come, providing a spark of light in the darkness of exile, the people of Israel might believe that the time had come to act by their own power. To the contrary, only closeness to God and *Bitahon* could bring protection and rescue; the child who held its father's hand in the dark forest and let it go when light came, he allegorised, ran back to him when a wolf suddenly appeared. In the era of *Ikvetah dimeshiha*, human autonomy had to be surrendered. The depth of darkness, the cruelty, the doubt, all disrupted the blending of existential commitment to goodness and objective *Hesed*, and to overcome the disruption, selfhood had to be sacrificed (*Mesirut nefesh*).

In normal times, Bloch explained, *Bitahon* functioned in terms of what the human being defined as good, e.g., reward for *Mitsvot*. In the apocalyptic era of *Ikvetah dimeshihah* it involved *Mesirut nefesh*. For Yonah Gerondi (1200–1263), he continued, this meant accepting everything in love. It meant throwing oneself upon God with the hope that God would protect one and provide a good life as He defined it (Yonah Gerondi, *ad* Proverbs 3:26. In *Peirush Al Mishlei*). Bloch described this as an act of worship (*Avodah*) on the part of unblemished individuals (*Temimut*. See Psalms 38:18).<sup>20</sup> *Bitahon* now meant absolute reliance (*Semihut*) upon God's goodness: "Cast thy burden upon the Lord and He shall sustain thee" (Psalms 55:23). Faith also changed. Instead of producing *Bitahon* as in normal times, faith (united with *Bitahon*) moved from its human source into the realm of the divine. God enabled, affirmed and further instilled *Bitahon* and faith together. Further, uplifted faith coalesced with goodness; absolute faith joined absolute goodness. This was the goodness which was internal to God and which He shared with the world at creation (Hayim Vital, *Sha'ar Hakelalim* 5<sup>a</sup>. In *Ets Hayim*). Such faith-*Bitahon* in God's goodness (*sheboteah betovo*) could only take place with the sacrifice of the autonomous self – an act, a feeling (not an abstract, intellectual concept) of *Mesirut nefesh*.

*Bitahon* presumed immersion in Torah. In this *Ikvetah dimeshihah* era close to redemption, when sufferings were great ("Let the messiah come, but let me not see him." bSanhedrin 98<sup>b</sup>), rescue came from good deeds according to Torah (so Rabbi Elazar told his students when they asked how to be saved from the *Hevlei mashiah*. bSanhedrin 98<sup>b</sup>). The immersion had to be complete, such that God's voice of Torah permeated

all one's actions: "implied passivity." (Psalms 60:11).<sup>21</sup> We return (*Teshuvah*) to us; we will not ride of our hands, Ye are 14:3). Ordered by endeavored to do so *Alef*. In *Mesillat* goodness. Bloch kept for your gener not being engag living, Jeremiah br forefathers earned which nourished th

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How could heretics who sav who slanders ma creation, even I

all one's actions: "Wait on the Lord" (Psalms 55:23). *Bitahon* also implied passivity, the recognition that "vain is the help of man" (Psalms 60:11).<sup>21</sup> When the prophet Hosea called the people to penitent return (*Teshuvah*) he asked them to recognise that "Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses; neither will we say anymore to the work of our hands, Ye are gods: for in The the fatherless findeth mercy" (Hosea 14:3). Ordered by God to earn a living (Genesis 3:19), once having endeavored to do so – and within the bounds of Torah (Ramhal, *Perek Alef*. In *Mesillat Yesharim*) – one had to surrender to God and His goodness. Bloch cited Rashi to Exodus 16:32 ("Fill an omer of it to be kept for your generations"): When Jeremiah reproved the people of Israel for not being engaged in Torah and they responded that they had to earn a living, Jeremiah brought out a container of *manna* and told them that their forefathers earned a living from it – namely from the goodness of God which nourished the world.<sup>22</sup>

Bloch extended the theme of *Bitahon-Mesirut nefesh* in the face of crisis in his lecture "All his saints are in Thy Hands" (*kal Kedoshav Beyadekchah*) following the Russian occupation of the yeshivah building. His point of departure was Deuteronomy 33:3: "Yea He loved the people; all His saints are in Thy hand; and they sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words." There were moments in history when God confronted evil by destruction – as He did with the exodus from Egypt. God's destructiveness also applied when Israel sinned. It was liable to reach a point where the enemy was joyful (bMegillah 10<sup>b</sup> with Rashi and Maharsha commentary) and even became endeared to Him (*Yalkut Shimoni ad Deuteronomy 33:3*). At such moments the destroyer was in charge:

Should somebody whisper to you, "But it is not written, 'Contend not with evil doers, neither be thou envious against them that work unrighteousness' " [Psalms 37:1], then you may tell him, Only he whose conscience smites him says so... R. Isaac said: If you see a wicked man upon whom the hour is smiling, do not attack him. For it is said "His ways prosper at all times" [Psalms 10:5]. (bBerakhot 7<sup>b</sup>)

At these moments God extended authority to the enemy, permitting (*erloybn*) them to act at will.

How could the God of *Hesed* allow this? To the believer, unlike heretics who saw evil as evidence of the absence of divine reality ("One who slanders makes his sin reach into heaven." bArakhin 15<sup>b</sup>), all God's creation, even His destructiveness, was good. As such, Bloch did not

question the apparent contradiction between destruction and *Hesed*. Moreover, the greatness of divine goodness implied evil of equal magnitude – Bloch's implication being that one defined the other. Beyond this, the destruction belonged to a higher plan: "All His saints are in Thy hand" (Deuteronomy 33:3), and the evil would ultimately yield to goodness. Bloch had said in "Wait upon the Lord" that God's absence was for the sake of goodness (Ramhal). Now he stated that even when evil eclipsed all the light and no hope remained, the pious person remained certain that providence, which was good, prevailed.

This commitment to God in defiance of reality, a leap to God who was prior to the human perception of conflict between destruction and goodness, required reduction and surrender of self; the autonomous self could not transcend the chaos (*Hatsadikim yakhniyu veyashpilu et atsmam*). Bloch thought of scholars who went from place to place to learn Torah and did not move from God even when their feet pained them (*Yalkut Shimoni ad Deuteronomy 33:3*). They annulled themselves, cast themselves completely under God's leadership (*bitul atsmo, lehashlikh et atsmo legamrei tahat hanhagat Hashem yitbarakh*). The opposition between good and evil was liable to be sharp: As God's goodness and His Torah were great, so must be His punishment ("As the Lord rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so the Land will rejoice over you to destroy you..." [Deuteronomy 28:63] or "The Lord came from Sinai and rose up from Seir unto them ... and [the beaten scholars] sat down at Thy feet..." [Deuteronomy 33:2–3]). But it would yield to the defeat of the enemy (*Yalkut Shimoni ad Deuteronomy 33:29*) and to an outcome of goodness. In the certainty of God's presence (*Bitahon*) the pious Jew sacrificed himself (*Mesirut nefesh*), surrendering to God. Indeed, the act of self-surrender blended with the goodness of God's universe. Fear, on the other hand, the inability to be certain of divine presence and to surrender, removed God's protection (Isaiah 61:12–13). Bloch continued:

We do not know the ways of God. What we are to do is to lower ourselves (*lehitkonen*) "at Thy feet" [Deuteronomy 33:3]. That is, hold fast to our path and be among those whose souls are rescued through (*al yedei*) the misery and distress. Even within them (*tokho*). That is, in terms of (*im*) the assaults, by accepting the yoke of suffering. No matter what happens, we are to guard against collapse. We must [concentrate solely] on coming closer to God [i.e., becoming increasingly conscious of His presence and goodness, intensifying *Bitahon* – which in turn will bring us even closer]; on serving Him

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Bloch stressed the point: "Essentially, we are being asked to join those 'At Thy feet' (Deuteronomy 33:3), not look around us and think about what will happen to us."

In *Kavei el Hashem* Bloch could not hold onto the traditional concept of *Bitahon*. The crisis was too great, and explanations did not bring him peace. Before the great darkness which interrupted the blend between subjective commitment to divine goodness and God's objective *Hesed*, he moved to surrender the self; the way to transcend the dark and chaotic barrier was through *Mesirut nefesh*. By lowering the self, it became possible to reach God and His goodness. By rooting faith within God, it became possible to share in God's good creation. In this subsequent lecture Bloch was overwhelmed by the evil and destruction. But he knew that God was behind it – and that God's goodness for man must ultimately be above it. His normal comprehension could not, however, bear the destroyer's power – even if God-given. He overcame the confusion engendered by commitment to God and His destructiveness by surrendering his human understanding. As with the first lecture, the radical evil of the world moved Bloch closer to God by distancing human presence from God.

The *Bitahon* of *Mesirut nefesh* assumed forms of intensified commitment to Torah, atonement for sin, and appealing to divine *Rahamim* (Psalms 78:38; "It is permissible to fall down upon the face and to ask for *Rahamim* after evening prayer even in public." *Siman* 237:7. In *Tur Orah Hayim*). Bloch also spoke of *Teshuvah*. Even as the destroyer's fury was poised for release, *Teshuvah* could stop it (Psalms 78:38). If *Mitsvot* were performed with proper focus and intention (*Kavanah*), if one reflected on one's deeds with a sense of atonement, the suffering would be diminished – whether empirically or in terms of coalescence with the objective reality of goodness remained undelineated by Bloch.<sup>23</sup>

Bloch had explicated on the need for *Teshuvah* in the sinful environment he observed on 28 October 1938. In a statement closely resembling that of Elhanan Wasserman of Baranowitch on 9 April 1937, he wrote that current hatred and persecution of Jews in Germany was unprecedented in Jewish history. While there was war against Israel since the nation began (See bShabbat 89<sup>b</sup>), the current attacks against the respective Jewish minorities were central to the politics of great nations. Austria, Italy and Germany declared war against the "scattered sheep" of Israel (Jeremiah 50:17) – while Israel had no military power. As

unprecedented, the attacks transcended human understanding and led to trans-human sources. Bloch observed the coincidence between assimilationist Jewish communities (where Jews sought to eliminate the "Jewish image") and nationalistic outbursts against "enemy" Jews who had to be totally annihilated (*Hisul gamur*), and concluded that the coincidence was a matter of divine, measure-for-measure punishment. The punishment was set in place by the nineteenth century, but was, for some reason, not activated until later. The delay did not neutralise the therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Ecclesiastes 8:11). Bloch identified Nazi theory as an explicit response to the Jews' attempt to sever connections with the religion of Israel, reduce Judaism to ethnic origin (*Geza umotsa*), and remove the barrier between Israel and other citizens. With all its barbarism and inhumanity, Nazi theory was measure (assimilation)-for-measure (assault). If Israel sought to be as the nations, God would let out His fury on Israel ("As I live, saith the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with outpoured wrath, will I rule over you." Ezekiel 20:33). Divine punishment, however, contained *Hesed* (graceful love), and now when no refuge remained for Israel God was calling out: "Return unto Me, and I will return unto you" (*Lamentations* 5:21), opening the path for *Teshuvah*. If Jews accepted divine providence over the tragedy and were impelled to *Teshuvah*, the suffering would cease. Indeed, there would be redemption. Precisely when troubles were overwhelming and there was seemingly no possibility for salvation (bSanhedrin 97<sup>b</sup>), redemption came speedily.<sup>24</sup>

But by 1940 Bloch was convinced that such attempts to explain the crisis, even from revealed sources, must recede. In the era of *Ikvetah dimeshihah*, autonomy had to be given up. In order to share in the stream of goodness flowing within empirical reality, the Jew needed higher faith, *Bitahon*, and to perform *Mesirt nefesh*. In his October 1938 statement Bloch had brought forward a common theme of measure (punishment) for measure (assimilation), offering his metahistorical interpretation of the crisis. In September 1939 he spoke of the crucial importance of *Mitsvot* when crisis loomed. In his lecture some months later he moved from explicating and blending the subjective (human) and objective (divine) dynamics of goodness and surrendered human measurement in the unfolding of goodness in God's world. The basis and definition of goodness resided with God. Bloch carried the motif of *Mesirt nefesh* into his lecture following the takeover of the yeshivah building. Instead of elucidating the potential confluence between existential conviction of God's good presence and objective expression of God's goodness he let

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### 3. Labour Camp and Death: Summer 1941<sup>25</sup>

When the yeshivah students left Telšiai for traditional home visits during Passover 1941, the Soviets declared it illegal for non-Telšiai residents to rent rooms making it impossible for most students to return. Telšiai students who were residents studied under Avraham Yitshak Bloch, while the others (in Ylakai, Siluva, Tryskiai and Papilyš) received instruction from *Menahel Ruhani* Zalman Bloch and *Rosh Yeshivah* Yisrael Ordman.

When the Russians evacuated Telšiai and the Germans entered (23–25 June) Avraham Yitshak Bloch decided not to leave with his family for Russia but to emulate his father who had remained with his students when the yeshivah closed down during World War I. According to his daughter Hayah he may have shared the sentiment that it was better to be forced to surrender the body to Germans than the soul to Russians. Pleas by his wife Rasya to Telšiai Bishop Justinas Staugaitis and by Yisrael Ordman's wife Hasyah Bloch (Zalman Bloch's daughter) to local police were in vain. On Friday, 27 June, Sabbath preparations at their home on Navarana Street were interrupted and the family was taken, along with some 2,500 other Jews, via the Lukniker Way, to Lake Mastis – from where they would be taken to Rainiai labour camp (six kilometers from Telšiai) to join the 200 other Telšiai Jews taken there on 26 June.<sup>26</sup> Beaten and mocked by Lithuanians as they moved, at a certain point (the home of yeshivah secretary Efrayim Halpan or of a certain Shalom Talpiot) they were stopped and accused of shooting at German soldiers. Avraham Yitshak Bloch led a collective oath of denial in response. On the way and at the lake, according to his daughters, Bloch led the community in the recitation of Psalms. At the lake Bloch was told that all would be drowned or murdered, and he pleaded successfully for the women and children to be sent home. He declined the option he was offered to leave.

Bloch was interned with others in the horse stables at Rainiai, forced to work and tortured.<sup>27</sup> In the "devil's dance" male inmates had to move about on their knees with hands in the air or run in circles, fall down and get up on command. Women and children, who came back from Telšiai on 28 June, watched.<sup>28</sup> Bloch was on the inmates' representative committee – along with Zalman Bloch, the engineer Ginsburg and 24 year old Iska Bloch, a Telšiai yeshivah graduate and "Betar" Revisionist who wrote for *Der Moment*. He continued Torah study with Azriel

Rabinowitch. On 12 July he observed the Sabbath and he kept the 17 Tammuz (13 July) fast day in commemoration of the breaching of Jerusalem's walls by Nebuchadnezzar and Titus (Hayah Bloch). He declined an opportunity to move to the less harsh Dusetos labour camp, lest he abandon his community.<sup>29</sup>

The mass murders at Rainiai began on 15 July, following a devil's dance where men were beaten with planks. They went back to the stables with heads split, teeth knocked out and eyes swollen. Then they were removed in groups of twenty-five into the forest, forced to dig pits, undressed to their underwear, and shot. In his 23 January 1945 testimony in Telšiai against Lithuanian guard Kazys Sulcas, Adam Desyatnik of Telšiai described how Sulcas beat those who couldn't run, get up and down quickly enough during the devil's dance; and how the Germans gave Sulcas gold and silver valuables taken from the prisoners. He reported that a heavy rain called the killing to a halt. The Jews were led back to the stables for some hours before being taken back and killed – Desyatnik was allowed to stay behind because of his youth.<sup>30</sup> According to Hannah Peltz's testimony of 1946, Avraham Yitshak Bloch was taken to his death on 16 July – along with Azriel Rabinowitch, Zalman Bloch and a certain Pinhas Eلفand of the yeshivah.<sup>31</sup> At the pits, their beards were ripped off with pieces of flesh. Peltz said there was a storm that day. The undressed men were ordered to dress again and return to the stables. She continued:

They no longer looked human; their faces were gray and half-wild. The pious Jews thought heaven had intervened [by having it rain]. They sat like pieces of clay, stones, frozen statues. The rain, thunder and lightning continued for another three hours. They moaned and tore out their hair. The guards stood outside, preventing them from running. They were exhausted and their bones were broken. The sky cleared. The killers took the Jews back to the pits and shot them. Some escaped and reported what happened.

In subsequent years, Ya'akov Rabinowitz received reports that the victims were forced to lie down in the pits, face upwards and be shot; they were covered by another layer of victims.<sup>32</sup> Other Jews were forced to cover the pits with sand, with some in them still alive.<sup>33</sup>

Further details about the days of murder when Bloch was killed come from the killers' testimonies. In January 1944 and January 1945 the farm worker Kazys Sulcas (born 1903 in Seda) stated:

I and other members of the (TDA) came to Rainiai. I remained in my post for about somebody else. I was told to Rainiai concentration camp escorted for two days and took part in the killing site group. .... The arrested Jews escorted in escorting two groups with and 2.5 meters depth. saw 3. The killing took place in the pits. The Jews were brought from five meters away, and lie face down underclothes, and the dead bodies into the pits. small place. When the pit was the killings the Jews had to cut the beards of the Jews ordered Jews to run in circles too weak to run fast enough. Jews were shot.

In January 1944 the police (Telšiai) stated:

On 26 June 1941 I joined to guard the arrested Jews 1941. ... During my service guarded arrested Jews with about 3,000. The [Lithuanian occupying Germans] soldiers were present. The and into the daytime when besides supplying food [the Jews. I took their rain and other clothing from men were killed there in exact day. I took part children were transferred kilometers outside T.

I and other members of the Defence of National Labour Battalion (TDA) came to Rainiai. I was told to guard the arrested Jews. I remained in my post for about twelve hours and then replaced by somebody else. I was told to guard stolen Jewish property. I stayed in this post for two days and nights. / ... All the arrested Jews from Rainiai concentration camp were shot in July 1941. They were escorted to the killing site in groups of 20–30 people. I personally took part in escorting two groups. I killed three Jews from the second group. / ... The arrested Jews dug pits of 6–8 meters length, 2 meters width and 2.5 meters depth. How many pits they dug, I don't know. I saw 3. The killing took place in a small area about ten meters from the pit. The Jews were brought in groups, forced to undress to their underclothes, and lie face down on the ground. Then they were shot from five meters away. When the new group came, they had to throw the dead bodies into the pit and lie down on top of them in the same small place. When the pit was full it was covered by sand. / ... Before the killings the Jews had to line up in rows in Rainiai camp and the Germans took their [gold and silver] valuables away. The Germans cut the beards of the Jews and did so in brutal ways. After that they ordered Jews to run in circles and lie down. They beat those who were too weak to run fast enough. It lasted for two hours. After that the Jews were shot.

In January 1944 the policeman Kazys Idzelevicius (born 1920 in Telšiai) stated:

On 26 June 1941 I joined Telšiai police [partisan squad]. My duty was to guard the arrested Jews, and I served in this capacity till September 1941. / ... During my service from June 1941 to January 1942 I guarded arrested Jews who were imprisoned in the Rainiai estates, about 3,000. The [Lithuanian] "partisans" [who armed themselves early in the war, pursued the retreating Red Army and supported the occupying Germans] squad consisted of 50–60 people... German soldiers were present. The shootings were carried out during nighttime and into the daytime when needed... Working in the Rainiai camp, besides supplying food [for the camp guards], I took part in robbing the Jews. I took their rings and watches. The "partisans" took suits and other clothing from persons doomed to death. / ... About 1,000 men were killed there in [two days] July 1941 – I don't remember the exact day. I took part in the killings. [About 2,000] women and children were transferred [by myself and others] to Geruliai [10 kilometers outside Telšiai] and shot there [except for 500 young



Jewish women brought to Telšiai for labour]... / ... The killing of men in Rainiai was carried out in this way: One day at 5 p.m. on July (I don't remember the day) eight Germans arrived on a truck in the Jewish camp. They gathered all the Jewish men in the yard, lined and lie down every time they whistled. Those who did not run fast enough or did not lie down in a proper way were beaten with switches. This violation continued for one hour. After that the German evening of the same day several dozen men were singled out, given shovels and escorted to prepare the pits for the Jews. We partisans, together with the Germans, organised a drinking party. Early in the morning a watchman reported that the pits were ready. We lined up in a line, checked our guns and marched to the killing site. About 30 Jews doomed to be killed were there. [There was a special platform built at the edge of the pit.] We ordered them to undress and lie down in one row. The Jews lay down, we approached them and started shooting. When we finished with this group another one, of 30-40 Jews, was brought over and ordered to undress. They were told to put the bodies of Jews just killed into the pit and to lie down on top of them. The killings proceeded. We shot the Jews, who arrived successively in groups of 30-40 people. It continued all day and night. All in all we killed about 1,000 Jewish men. / ... In total, during the both times [i.e., in Rainiai and Geruliai], I killed approximately 50 people, Jewish citizens... During my service in the partisan squad from 26 June 1941 to October 1941 I worked in the Jewish camps of Rainiai and Geruliai. The partisans, I, the soldiers of the TDA and the Germans killed 3,000 Jewish residents, men, women and children altogether. / ... During the killings I was drunk. [Before the murders we were always offered alcohol.] That is why I was brave enough to commit that bloody crime. When the intoxication left me, usually after the murder of ten-twelve groups consisting of thirty-forty people each, I felt like I wanted to vomit. I had to leave the lines of the killers. / ... I received nothing from the Germans as a reward for the killings - other than what I stole from the Germans: Eight golden rings and two metal watches. I cannot give you a clear answer why I took part in the killings of the Jewish people. The Germans gave me an order and I shot them... There were some Germans among the perpetrators, all from the S.S. and lower ranking officers. A few were present through the killings. Others would try to shoot once and leave the site... One S.S. officer brutally beat fourteen Jewish men, who [we were told] were Communists ... then led them to other Germans who shot them.

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In August 1948 the chimney sweeper Kazys Zavalyis (born 1901 in Libava, Latvia) stated:

I joined the partisans on the second day of the German occupation ... My duty was to guard the arrested people who were held in the basement of the partisans' headquarters. At the beginning of July 1941 I was one of those guarding the arrested Jews. They were gathered in the Telšiai market square. I was also in the Rainiai camp, where Soviet citizens of the Jewish nation were kept. They were there, the partisans killed about 80 from the Jewish nation. While I was shoot anyone. But I did bring six-eight people to the pits... I did not twenty-five *Reichmark* for the entire period of service to the Germans. At the end of June or beginning of July 1941 I escorted two groups of Jews, six to seven people each from the barracks in Rainiai camp [of the killing site]. Later I was a guard at the killing site for about two days. My job was to stop those to be shot from fleeing... All the people imprisoned in the Rainiai camp had to be killed, because they were Jewish... I carried a German gun.<sup>34</sup>

After the two-three day massacre the women went to the pits, where they found brain matter, bodies, clothing and pictures. Lime had been poured over the earth (Rahel Fulda and Hannah Peltz-Saks). Women and children were taken to Geruliai.<sup>35</sup>

Nothing in writing by Bloch remains from Rainiai. But there are testimonies about his words and actions, hagiographic in character, which point to his mindset. On the way to the lake and at it, after he somehow learned of the magnitude of the danger, he declared that *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah* (prayer) and *Tsedakah* (charity) had to be carried out, for they were the only way to remove the evil decree (Hayah and Miriam Bloch). His commitment to *Teshuvah* was expressed in his 28 October 1938 statement and in *Kol Kedoshav Beyadekchah*. In an earlier lecture he cited Rambam's point that it was a positive commandment to cry out to God when trouble came (*Perek 1, Halakhah 1. In Hilkhoh Ta'aniyot*) and stated that the only hope for rescue was prayer; had the Jews not already been praying the troubles would be worse than they were. Even the smallest amount of prayer (e.g., *Ana Hashem hoshiyah na*) would elicit God's *Rahamim*.<sup>36</sup>

Bloch expressed the *Bitahon* identified with Psalms 91. He recited the text as bombs fell on 22 June and when the Germans came on 25 June and as Sabbath fell at Lake Mastis. On 13 July he told his family that reciting Psalms 91 ten times with *Kavanah* would elicit God's (good) will

(Hayah and Miriam Bloch, and Elitsur-Rituv). In his *Tefillah* lecture he had identified Psalms 91 as a psalm of affliction to be recited amidst special troubles. It spoke of man's dwelling in God's secret place, under His shadow (Psalms 91:1). It expressed *Bitahon* that God would protect the worshiper with His *Hesed* ("He is my refuge." Psalms 91:2), that His *Hesed* would increase at moments of affliction ("I will answer him and be with him in trouble." Psalms 91:15) and rescue the worshiper from evil ("Surely He will deliver me from the snare.... Because he hath set his love upon Me, therefore will I deliver him." Psalms 91:3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 14). Even the greatest *Tsadik* who already lived with *Bitahon* and was under God's protection, Bloch added, must pray to God in moments of trouble to elicit *Hesed*.<sup>37</sup> In *Kavei el Hashem* he cited Rambam's reference to Psalms 91 in his discussion of *Bitahon* (Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim*, Chapter 51).

The witnesses speak of Bloch's ongoing commitment to Torah study, as described in *Kavei el Hashem* – during the 25 June German incursion; in the night before he was taken from Telšiai (in Torah discussions with a daughter), and during Rainiai internment with *Hiddushim* (interpretations of Scripture and rabbinic texts). In anticipation of the end, Bloch enunciated the need for *Mitsvot*. When a weapons search took place at the lake, he declared that the only way to survive was by observing the *Mitsvot* of Sabbath, *Kashrut* and *Taharat Mishpahah* (family purity). Presumably, given the near impossibility of performing them, Bloch's intention was to bring them to consciousness and in this sense realise them (Miriam Bloch).

There were expressions of *Bitahon* as *Mesirut nefesh* – from self-surrender and throwing oneself upon God and His terms of goodness to actual martyrdom. After a 14 July devil's dance Bloch returned to the stable, held his hands high and declared "Sovereign of the world, You are righteous and Your deeds are righteous" (Shoshanah). When he was beaten on the head with a hammer at the pits "to knock out his God" (*az er muz zayn Got im aroysshlogn fun Kop*) he declared "God is for everyone" (Rabinowitch). When the yeshivah building was taken over, in his *Kol Kedoshav Beyadekchah* address, Bloch's form of *Bitahon* joined with *Mesirut nefesh* as self-surrender – but he resisted the reality of acts of martyrdom:

The fear that everyone has because of everything happening around us is ungrounded. Surely we need to be ready for *Mesirut nefesh* [as physical martyrdom]. But we must also recognise that the situation is not all that bad [that we need to anticipate death]. The exaggeration of fear over the situation is also badly advised. We should look more

#### 4. *Bitahon* and

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deeply with our eyes and discern that even in the midst of evil itself, God will set a path for us.

In time this changed. After a devil's dance Bloch asked a daughter to recite the *Hilkhot Kiddush Hashem* (presumably from bSanhedrin 74<sup>a</sup>; bAvodah Zarah 27<sup>b</sup> and Rambam, *Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah* 5 *Halakhah* 1 and *Halakhah* 4). According to the *Hilkhot*, *Mitsvot* may be violated to avoid death except in cases of worship of other gods, forbidden sexual relations and murder (Leviticus 18:5). To choose to be killed and resist the three violations, and do so in the presence of ten Jews, constituted an act of *Kiddush Hashem* in the tradition of Rabbi Akiva and the spirit of Psalms 50:5 ("Gather unto Me My pious ones, those who have made a covenant with Me by slaughter").<sup>38</sup> The essence of *Mesirut nefesh al Kiddush Hashem* (submission of the soul and self-sacrifice as sanctification of God's name), piety and commitment to God, permeated the last moments of his life. When he, Zalman Bloch and Yisrael Urdman walked to their deaths they did so as the act of worship (*Avodah*) in the form of *Mesirut nefesh al Kiddush Hashem*. Bloch's self-surrender to God at and in death is also indicated by reports of his reciting the confession of sin before death (*Vidui*), acknowledging that if God determined death it should be accepted with love (see *Siman* 338:1. In *Shulhan Arukh Yore Deah*), on the Lukniker Way; and of his asking for water to purify himself for the *Vidui* when he was taken to the pits. At the pit, escapee Shmuel Landau reported to Luba Bloch, he cried out the *Shema* and his pure soul left him with the declaration of God's oneness (*Ehad*). (See bBerakhot 61<sup>b</sup>) (Hayah Bloch).<sup>39</sup>

#### 4. *Bitahon* and Torah for Eliyahu Meir Bloch<sup>40</sup>

A. Telšiai

Amidst the clouds gathering in Europe in 1936, Eliyahu Meir spoke of *Bitahon* in face of the troubles. He assured that God's providence prevailed over His people and that the people would be led by God to fulfill their role as a light to the nations. The very rebuke by God which the troubles manifested would lead to intensified love for Israel: "The Lord taketh my part with them that help me: Therefore shall I see my desire upon them that hate me" (Psalms 118:7). He observed that a person of balanced mind rooted the intellect in healthy intuition, the source for which was the wisdom of the soul. In turn, that wisdom was rooted in the divine soul and the entire soul of creation (*Nishmato ha'elokit ubenishmat haberiyah kula*), in the collective will of creation and creature to exist and

flower (*Poteah et yadekha umasbia-lekhal hai ratson*. Psalms 145:15). Faith in the ultimate *Tikkun* of the world and *Bitahon* that the future would be good were ultimately derived from roots in the divine soul of creation. This faith and *Bitahon* enabled one "to see that death would not advance, and to yearn for life even amidst conditions of suffering and troubles – and even when it seemed that the moment of despair over the good had arrived."<sup>41</sup>

In an April 1939 article in the Agudat Yisrael newspaper *Dos Yidishe Lebn*, Elyahu Meir Bloch brought forward his older brother's October 1938 measure-for-measure interpretation of metahistory. As the earthly representative of heavenly ideas, Israel inevitably suffered because of the opposition to earthly power and physical brutality they involved. In modern times, a despair over the world's accepting the heavenly ideas set in, and some Jews assimilated in an attempt to grab whatever crumbs the nations of the world might leave for them. The reaction was an explosion of terror. It belonged to a higher drama, a cosmic battle between light (the good, moral and humane) and the dark (evil); assimilation fell into the latter camp. Through it all, God's *Shekhinah* remained with Israel (*Shekhinta begaluta*. bArakhin 29<sup>a</sup>), assuring the ultimate restoration of heavenly ideas in the world. From within, Israel would retreat from assimilation; ideas of Torah, purified by fire, would be realised. From without, after Jewish blood would be poured, the people of Israel humiliated and their sanctuaries profaned, the heavenly role of Israel with its dimensions of truth and justice would be discerned. Indeed, the longed-for redemption of Israel would arrive.<sup>42</sup>

In mid-August 1940, after the Russians occupied the yeshivah building, Bloch delivered a lecture on suffering's dimension of love. The soul which was complete praised God's *Hesed* as well as His *Din* (punitive judgment), knowing that out of His *Hesed* God enacted *Din* to enhance the soul ("God punished to teach him the law." Psalms 94:12). It was a sign of light ("Like the sun when it goeth forth in his night." Judges 5:31) for a person to rejoice in the chastisements (bGittin 36b), having recognised the divine love they expressed. Even when troubles could not be attributed to trespasses of Torah, such a soul was sure that they came from God's love and were intended to perfect a person ("For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth." Proverbs 3:12) (bBerakhot 5a). Specifically, God sometimes inflicted pain to provide opportunity to praise Him despite the suffering and to affirm His comprehensive power in the world He created (Psalms 150:1–2). The declaration of God's power, irrespective of discernible sins, filled the parts of the soul empty of God-recognition. When he was in New York fifteen months later, Bloch spoke of responding to sufferings which could not be explained in terms of sin,

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not with shock but with Torah and prayer. They brought the entire soul into line with God's will: "When Israel fulfills the will of the omnipotent, the left hand becomes the right" (Rashi *ad* Exodus 15:6).<sup>43</sup>

In the *Kavei el Hashem* statement of the same period, Avraham Yitshak Bloch described the potential coalescence of existential recognition of God's good omnipresence and the objective reality thereof for the devoted Jew. Eliyahu Meir Bloch probed the existential dynamic, speaking of filling the soul with recognition of that omnipresence – which, he implied, would evoke the objective unfolding of the goodness of God for such a soul. On 14 January 1945, after Bloch heard of the murder of his family, he applied Kabbalistic terms. Ordinarily, God's *Hesed* provided the soul with a narrow path, bounded by materiality, to His light. Suffering expanded the path by shattering the material bounds – which, using the terminology of the sixteenth century Kabbalist Yitshak Luria, were shattered pieces of materiality attached to light (*Kelippot*). The suffering could ultimately assume a messianic dimension, as the *Hevlei mashiah* (messianic suffering) which precluded the coming of redemption. God's power (*Gevurah*) served His *Hesed*, destroying the materialistic bounds to the completion of the soul and its coalescence with God's light and omnipresent goodness: "Thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy" (Exodus 15:6) (Rashi and *Yalkut Shimoni ad* Exodus 15:6).<sup>44</sup>

Avraham Yitshak Bloch was interested in the blending of existential and objective dimensions to goodness. When the blending was obstructed by the darkness of the age, or when the tension between destructive evil and *a priori* commitment to God's *Hesed* became too great, he reduced the role of man and human terms and spoke of a leap of faith. Ultimately, this meant martyrdom as *Mesirut nefesh*. Eliyahu Meir Bloch spoke of God's *Din* as an opportunity to enhance the soul through its absolute commitment to God's *Hesed*, and of *Din* as a shattering of material boundaries of the soul on its path to God's light. For both, the suffering belonged to a higher relationship with God. While Avraham Yitshak Bloch focused on the soul's surrender to God, Eliyahu Meir focused on the completion of the soul as it came to God. And while the former focused on the responsibilities of the soul in terms of higher faith and *Mesirut nefesh*, the latter focused on God's enabling the soul to come to Him by shattering materiality through the sufferings wrought by His *Din*.

## B. America

In early fall 1940 Eliyahu Meir Bloch, along with Hayim Mondelkhai Katz, left Telšiai and journeyed through Vilnius, Moscow, Vladivostok and Japan for America to gather funds for the yeshivah. They arrived in November 1940. By October 1941, in the face of the deteriorating condition in Lithuania, they established a yeshivah in the Cleveland area.<sup>45</sup> The act fulfilled Bloch's 31 July 1940 prayer. Holding the Torah from the occupied yeshivah building, he declared: "Twice You decreed that we take the Torah scroll from the holy ark and bring it forth from the house of God – during the great Telšiai fire [of 1907] and during World War I. May it be Thy will that I merit seeing the rebuilding of the Telšiai yeshivah."<sup>46</sup> But the loss of the yeshivah in Telšiai was not mitigated. In summer 1945 he said that it was indescribable: "What thing shall I like to thee, O daughter of Zion? What shall I equal to thee, that I may comfort thee virgin daughter of Zion? (Lamentations 2:13). The yeshivah was the expression of *Shleimut* (completion) and *Temimut* (wholeness). *Shleimut* because all the yeshivah's aspects of thought and action were in harmony (Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 79:5), and *Temimut* because it was unblemished, perfect (Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 58:1), whole hearted in relationship to God (Rashi to Deuteronomy 18:13). All this was lost: "The paradigm of *Shleimut* and *Temimut* has been destroyed. The daughter of my nation has been broken, and this breaking has broken us – as the sea itself is broken. Who can heal us?"<sup>47</sup>

In early 1941 he spoke of asserting Torah in the face of suffering, bringing his August 1940 statement about filling the soul with recognition of God forward. God's providence remained with Torah sanctuaries in the present, as it did with the initial exile ("Whenever the people of Israel were exiled, the *Shekhinah* was exiled with them" Midrash Eykhab Rabbah 1:20). Israel was called upon to respond by actively learning and implementing Torah, explicating the divine presence. Even when God's voice was silent (I Kings 19:12) and displaced by voices of lament, the people of Israel still had to raise Torah out of the realm of blood and fire. Having spoken earlier of shattering the material world and expanding light; and of suffering as an opportunity to blend the individual soul with divine omnipresence, now he spoke of dwelling on Torah and not on the material affliction. Bloch urged Jews to draw from the vitality of Torah and burst forth from the suffering in terms of Torah and thereby coalesce with God's good presence. Israel was the army of God ("Some trust in chariots, and some in horses. But we will remember the name of the Lord our God," Psalms 20:7), and Torah was its weapon. He looked upon American Jewry for refuge from the trouble and for support in following Torah ("They are brought down and fallen; but we are risen, and stand

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upright." Psalms 20:9), but warned against the dangers of assimilation in the land of the yeshivah's refuge.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, he added in October 1944, the Jews of America must assume the historical role of dominant centre for diaspora Judaism.<sup>49</sup>

Bloch carried the theme of Torah assertion in the face of suffering, of Torah's divine source and of Torah as affirmation of divine presence into his 22 August 1941 address to the Agudat Yisrael convention in Baltimore. The great yeshivah institutions of Poland and Lithuania were falling to the enemy. How, he asked, could the very bastions secured by God be destroyed? His answer was that considered essentially, they were not being destroyed. The Torah was God's co-creator and therefore indestructible. Esau could destroy the body, but not the spirit (Torah) of Jacob (Midrash Eykha Rabbah: Proem 2:1). Mordekhai successfully responded to Haman's decree of destruction with his timely study of flour offerings. While a philosopher like Socrates approached death indifferently and others met it zealously, in the course of Israel's history the body burned to death but the soul ascended to the highest beautiful note (*romans-Akod*). For the *Shema* was recited. That is, the soul loved God with *Kavanah* even as the soul was taken by God (bBerakhot 61b). It surrendered itself with love and the Jew died with the angel's spiritual kiss of death. This *Mesirut nefesh* affirmed the reality of Torah, and of Torah learning as identified with divine thought. Rather than reacting to the enemy physically, which amounted to being co-opted by it, the Jew asserted Torah. The endurance of Torah (and its implicit affirmation of divine presence) continued into the present. The grounding of Torah was being expressed primarily by great yeshivah personalities and the students (as distinct from the physical structures themselves), as it always was. As long as they continued to sound the voice of Torah, Esau's hands would not rule.<sup>50</sup> When (in May 1944) Bloch heard that his family had been killed, he continued writing *Hiddushei Torah*. It was impossible for him to relate as before to his surroundings, he explained, and his very being was upset. The only source of strength and calm was Torah: It was "the sacred duty of the lamenting survivor to take Torah in hand. The labour of Torah must be the first response to the terrible calamity."<sup>51</sup>

In 1943 and 1944 Bloch spoke of the enduring, underlying presence of God in the world and its history, providing grounding for the soul to affirm God and blend with His goodness. After affliction came relief. Thus, Jacob's son was called Benyamin and not child of the affliction of the mother Rachel (Genesis 35:18) and Akiva died with the *Shema* on his lips (bShabbat 130a) when Rome decreed his execution. Now too descent would be followed by light.<sup>52</sup> When a new yeshivah building was inaugurated in May 1944 Bloch recalled how his father had revived the



yeshivah in Telsiai after World War I and he observed that Israel's calendar (i.e., history) was lunar, following the moon's ongoing ascent and descent. Thus the messiah was born after the Temple was destroyed (yBerakhot 2); the death of Akiva gave rise to a new generation of students. Bloch was convinced that Israel's eternity (I Samuel 15:29) would prevail, and that the present *Hurban* would yield to light.<sup>53</sup>

In April 1943 he observed that when God created the world He seeded the earth and provided for rain, but that man first had to pray in order for the rain to come. God's glory was present, but man had to overcome the distance between potential and actual. He initiated the process by performing *Teshuvah* – specifically for the last one hundred and fifty years of sinful assimilation. The subjective act of *Teshuvah* would align the Jew with the objective reality of divine presence. Suffering would end and even bring redemption: "I said unto thee when thou wept: In thy blood, live" (Ezekiel 16:6-8). *Teshuvah* and prayer could displace the thick clouds with healing rain.<sup>54</sup> In April 1944 Bloch returned to the idea of God's *Shekhinah* being with Israel in exile (bArakhin 29<sup>a</sup>); God remained present, calling to the soul of the Jew (Song of Songs 5:2). When Jews assimilated, the *Shekhinah* moved into the distance. That is, God punished Israel, leaving the Jews to drown in their blood, pained and humiliated – "Is this not an exact description of our situation today?" There were those who unlocked the handles (Song of Songs 5:5) of the door to God with acts of *Mesirat nefesh al Kiddush Hashem*, but Israel as a whole lay wounded, with neither present nor future. Yet:

Even in the valley of death one can sing of the sickness of divine love [Song of Songs 2:5]. [One can declare] "I will sing of *Hesed* and *Mishpat*: Unto Thee, O Lord, will I sing" [Psalms 101:1]. Whether God is with us with *Hesed* or *Mishpat*, the Song of Songs endures. The call of God persists through all events of life. It does not forget the mission of Israel. Indeed it becomes ever stronger, ever more demanding. Has the time not come, for the Jewish nation to hearken well [to the call] and to respond with proper *Teshuvah*?<sup>55</sup>

In America Eliyahu Meir Bloch understood the completion of the soul through suffering (*Din*) in terms of Torah. The human soul was rooted in the divine soul, which permeated creation through the Torah. The Torah could shatter the suffering, perfect the soul and bring it to God. The yeshivah's personalities and students were its bearers. There were those who performed *Mesirt nefesh al kiddush Hashem* and blended with God through the *Shema*. Now it remained for the survivors to come to God

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through the Torah. The process would bring Jewish history out of its descent and into ascent. That is, individually and collectively the Torah would blend Israel with God. God awaited Israel, His goodness anticipated man's access. By man's affirming God's *Hesed* (which included *Din*) and through acts of *Teshuvah* manifest in the life of Torah, this meeting would take place.

### Concluding Statement

The words of Avraham Yitshak Bloch in 1939 and 1940 revealed his religious path to martyrdom. His life was of *Bitahon*, and ultimately this *Bitahon* meant a total surrender to God and His goodness, independent of and transcending the darkness of the era. His final act of *Mesirat nefesh* affirmed and completed the *Bitahon* of the era of *Ikveta dimeshiha*. His younger brother carried his effort further – not in the face of death but before the threshold of new life. Having reconciled himself to the place of suffering in the process of completing the soul and reaching God in Telsiai, once in America he applied it to the future. In America, rooted in Torah, Israel could shatter the darkness and burst forth towards God's goodness which awaited it. Avraham Yitshak Bloch's *Bitahon* was overshadowed by a cloud of dark confusion. But he did not despair of *Bitahon* – as indicated for example by his plea for God's mercy (*Rahamim*). Instead he prepared himself for martyrdom. As it turned out, his preparation anticipated the reality to come. Eliyahu Meir Bloch viewed the dark confusion as God's *Din* which provided an opportunity to enhance the soul. The very incomprehensibility of the suffering allowed the path of light to God to expand – if commitment to God endured. As it turned out, and he faced not murder at Rainiai but possibility in America, his preparation also anticipated the reality to come. Committed to *Bitahon*, the brothers together led their people into death, and into life in history, blending existential commitment to the goodness of God and the creation which shared it with the metaphysical reality of *Hesed* – through *Mesirut nefesh* for one, and through Torah for the other. As if speaking with one another across time and space, the brothers together led a way of *Musar* through the Holocaust.

## Notes

\* The essay is dedicated to the memory of Pearl Silver of Cincinnati, who supported her husband Rabbi Eliezer Silver's work in rescuing and rebuilding the Telšiai Yeshivah and enabled the donation of their library to the yeshivah; and in whose name a scholarship at the yeshivah in Cleveland was established by the family of her late sister Lillian Berkson Greenberg of Brooklyn. Research was conducted as a fellow at the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, 2001. The participants in the Telšiai conference in which this paper was originally presented, especially John Klier, provided valuable insights into the historical context.

1. Abel was the author of *Beit Shlomoh: Hoshen Mishpat*, Atlas became the rabbi of Šiauliai, and Oppenheim the rabbi of Kelme. The *Musar* literature included works by Bahyah Ibn Pakudah, Yonah Gerondi, Ya'akov ben Sheshet Gerondi, Moshe Hayim Luzzato (*Ramhal*) and Hayim of Volozhin. On *Musar* and its relationship to the Holocaust see Greenberg, 1977, 101–138. See also Isser Zalman Meltzer, 1944/45, i; 1940/41, i; and 1946/47, i (I thank Hayim Basok for this reference).

2. On the history of the Telšiai Yeshivah see Carlebach, 1931/32, 293–394; Goren, 1984, 288–290; Rabiner, 1964/65; Shoshanah, 1975, 263–293; Gifter, 1956, 169–188; Shtampfer, 1995, 252–292; Katz, D., 1945/46, 17–109; Katz, H. M., 1945, 4–8; Katz, H.M., 1951, i–ii; Sorotskin 1963/64, i–ii; Harkavi, 1965; Bloch, E. M., 1951, 623; Katz, D., 1959, 226–241. See Editor, *Beit Ya'akov*, 1961 as cited by Shoshanah; Burak and Shehr, 1940, 3.

3. Bloch, A. Y., 1954, 276.

4. Editor, 1940a, 2.

5. Sužiedėlis, 1998, 128–146; and 1999, 177–208.

6. Editor, 1940b, 3.

7. The September 1940 issue of *Peri Ets Hayim*, the last published in Europe, included Halakhic studies by Yehudah Layb Bloch and Hayim Ozer Grodzinsky (both posthumously); Elhanan Bunim Wasserman (*Rosh Yeshivah* and *Menahel Ruhani* (spiritual director) of Ohel Torah Yeshivah in Baranowitch); Azriel Rabinowitch; Shraga Gavron (*Av Beit Din*, Kėdainiai); Yitshak Yaffė (*Av Beit Din*, Upynas); Zalman Sharai; Abba Shor (*Av Beit Din*, Vainiai); and Telšiai Yeshivah students Nissan Graz and Ya'akov Druck. Lara Lempertiene of the Hebraica division at the Vilnius National Library provided this issue.

8. On Avraham Yitshak Bloch see Bloch, H. (daughter of Eliyahu Meir Bloch), 1958, 235–236; Bloch, A. Y., 1975, 233–238; Ausband, 1993/94, i–vi; Burak, 1945, 8–11; and Shtayn and Ausband, 2000/01, i.

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See also Bloch, A. Y., 1951, 281–300; and 2000/01c; and 1993/94. Rebbetsin Avraham David Goldberg and Hayah Bloch-Ausbund provided a copy of *Shiurei Da'at*, vol. 1.

9. Bloch, A. Y., 2000/01b, 173–177. Hayim of Volozhin, 1997; *Sha'ar 1, Perek 7* as cited by Bloch. The editor cited Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, Editor, 1964/65, 353; and Ha'Gra, *Peirush Lemishlei ad Proverbs 6:33 and 19:2*. These and other references from the *Musar* literature for Bloch's lectures, unless stated otherwise, are drawn from the notes provided by the editor Yitshak Finkel.

10. Bloch, A. Y., *Kavei El Hashem* (1939/40), forthcoming b. *Habitahon*. In *Hovot Hatevavot*. He notes that *bateah* and *kavei* were used synonymously in the Psalms: Werblowsky, 1964, 95–139.

11. On *Devekut* see for example Maharal of Prague: "The person of faith ... leaves the material world and adheres to the higher world. Because faith means to hand oneself over to God and have trust (*boteah*) in Him, and not turn aside at any time from His blessed name. Because faith means to adhere to God totally (*shedibek bo yitbarakh legamrei*)." Maharal of Prague, 1982, 488–502 (Werblowsky).

12. Hayim of Volozhin praised those for whom God filled the universe and whose thoughts adhered completely to God. For them, God removed all other powers from the universe. Hayim of Volozhin, 1997, *Sha'ar 3, Perek 12*, 200–202.

13. For Yonah Gerondi: "Insofar as all activities depend upon God (*Proverbs 3:6*) and all success upon God's *Hesed*, man must be mindful of God in all his actions. Should one not be mindful, and directed towards God, worship is diminished." (Yonah Gerondi, 1910, 15). See also Hayim of Volozhin, 1997, *Sha'ar 2, Perek 15*. Bloch, A. Y., 2000/01a, 158–172.

14. According to *Siman 581:4*. In *Tur Orah Hayim*, when the year ended and the future remained in doubt, one still had to dress and eat well out of certainty (*betuhin*) that God would bring righteousness. (Finkel).

The theme of ontological goodness *vis a vis Mesirut nefesh* may be compared to the response to the catastrophe by Eliyahu Dessler of the Kelme School of *Musar*. For Dessler the objectively real universe was imbued with God and morality, and the people of Israel belonged to this realm as long as they were engaged in *Teshuvah*. Once they abandoned *Teshuvah* and turned to the nations, objective being was lost and a void (of the Holocaust) opened up. When *Teshuvah* became collective, the void would be filled, suffering would become a purification and the subjective world (of history and of evil) would blend into objective reality (morality and God). At that point Israel could recite *Hatov vehemetiv* (that God is good and bestows goodness, see *Pesahim 50<sup>a</sup>*) instead of



sacrificing themselves to God so that He would do good by them." Shelomoh ben Hayim Haikel, Elyashov, 1994, 113–115.

21. Bloch cited Bahyah Ibn Pakuda's anecdote about a *Parush* (abstemious Jew) who went to another community in search of income. After he asked a gentile worshipping the stars to whom his worship was directed, the gentile asked him and the *Parush* responded that he worshiped the creator of the world who provided for the needs of all. The gentile then asked: If you believe this why did you have to leave your own land and come here? He returned home and became an absolute *Parush* (Bahyah Ibn Pakuda, 1989/90, 283–383). The historian of *Musar* Dov Katz relates that a poor workman once asked Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant (1810–1883) to save him and his family from despair and Rabbi Yisrael promised that in due course God would give him enormous riches if he trusted totally in God. The workman did so – and he stopped working, whereupon his misery increased. When he returned, Rabbi Yisrael offered five thousand rubles for the riches God would give him. The workman accepted, and Rabbi Yisrael reproved him: "If you sincerely believed that God will give you a fortune, you would not throw it away for five thousand rubles!" Katz, D., 1945/46, 320–21.

22. Bloch, A. Y., *Kavei El Hashem* (1939/40), forthcoming b. Yitshak Finkel provided pre-published pages of this volume.

23. Bloch, A. Y., *Kal Kedoshav Beyadekhah* (Finkel dates it as after the Russian occupation of the yeshivah building), forthcoming a.

24. Bloch, A. Y., 2000, 25–30, translated by Finkel. Wasserman, 1937, 7. Wasserman, a graduate of the Telsiai Yeshivah, was the son-in-law of Meir Atlas. His son Naftali, a member of the yeshivah's *Kollel*, was married to Miriam Rabinowitch of Telsiai. She gave birth to daughter named Mikhal, named after her mother-in-law, in the Telsiai ghetto in fall 1941 and died some days later from giving birth, and he was killed in Kovno, 30 October 1941. Schwartz, 1984, 369–378. On assimilation and disaster see Emden, 1747, 75–79; Soloveichik, 1973, 37; Berlin, 1894, 115–138; and Meir Simhah Hakohen of Dvinsk, 1945, 771–773. A survey of the literature may be found in Vainfeld, 2001, 47–58.

25. The account of Bloch's imprisonment and murder is drawn from testimonies by Hannah Peltz-Saks (1946, Vilnius and Lodz), edited by Layb Kalakhowsky. *Yad Vashem Archives* (AYV) 0–71; Bloch-Ausbund, 1984, 326–329. Bloch-Klayner, 1984, 400–408; (both based in part on the eyewitness testimony of Mosheh Yaffeh [?]); Rabinowitch, 1984, 448–460. (Based on eyewitness accounts); Rahel Fulda and Hannah Peltz-Saks, AYV 0.3/8515 – 0330/393. Elitsur-Rituv, 1984, 346–349 and Peltz-Rituv, 1985/86, 235–238; and Shoshanah, 1975, 263–293.

On the destruction of the Jewish community of Telšiai see also Girsh-Bod, 1984, 330–337; Holer-Verias, 1984, 338–345; Bat Ami, 1984, 355–361; Zinger-Tayts, 1984, 363–366; Shavel, 1984, 393–399; Kagan-Hurvits, 1994, 491–493; Shohat-Schif, 1984, 408–419; Levin, D. (ed.), 1996, 305–313; and testimonies of Minah Karshat-Yudelevitch, AYV 140/1573; Tsevi Brik, AYV 03/6139; Hayim Layb-Aryeh Shavel, AYV 03/6528.

26. Justinas Staugaitis (1866–1943), a graduate of Seinai Theological Seminary, was consecrated as Bishop of Telšiai in 1926. Editor, 1972, 299. On Rainiai see Kibelka, R., 1999, 91–97.

27. Peltz reported that some Lithuanian guards wore German S.S. uniforms. The Jews recognised them and spoke with them in Lithuanian. She identified: Commander Benediktas Platakis (Telšiai); Guards Juozas Platakis (born 1903 in Telšiai); Kazys Idzelevicius, Juozas Idzelevicius (both of Telšiai); and Jonas Cepauskas (born 1912 in Telšiai district). In his 23 January 1945 testimony Desyatnik identified [?] Sutkus, Kazys Idzelevicius, Juozas Petkus, Antanas Andrijauskas, Juozas Andrijauskas, and Kazys Sulcas; and on 16 April 1948 he described how Jonas Cepauskas tortured inmates. The perpetrator Kazys Sulcas identified Benediktas Platakis, Juozas Milasius and Kazys Idzelevicius as participants in the Rainiai killings. In his 22 January 1944 testimony Kazys Idzelevicius identified Juozas Gecius (Varniai, 30 years old); and Pranas Kazdailis (Varniai area, 29–30 years old), Zigmas Sidlauskas (23 years old), Juozas Petkus (32 years old, Telšiai), Stepas Vilimavicius (40 years old), Sutkus, Edvardas [?] Ceniauskas, Jonas Burskus (28 years old), [?] Gurcenas (28 years old), Juozas Andrijauskas, Antanas Andrijauskas, Kazys Sulcas, Jonas Cepauskas, [?] Vaiculis, [?] Juknevičius (Telšiai), [?] Mickus (Telšiai), Adomas Palauskas (27 years old), Stasys Petrauskas (27 years old), Anicetus Skuridas (30 years old), Antanas Rupeika (28 years old), [?], Baskandis, [?] Storpersis. At the end of his Soviet trial, Kazys Idzelevicius stated: "Pity that the Jewish children remained alive." Rahel Fulda (who was at his 22 January 1944 field trial) and Hanna Peltz-Saks testimony.

28. The women recited *Kiddush*, washed their hands and blessed the Sabbath when they returned to Telšiai on Friday night (Miriam Klayner-Bloch). They recited a prayer as they were led to Rainiai the next day.

"Look from heaven, and see the condition of the holy city of Telšiai. Look at how we are mocked and cursed by nations which are out to destroy, kill, abandon, hit and disgrace us. Look at how they rejoice in our distress, how they treat us cruelly. Is this what happens to the holy nation? The nation You chose from among all the nations, to exalt the light of Torah and to carry Your holy name in its mouth forever? To the

nations which the king of  
 glory came (Psalms 121:1-2)

29. The testimonies  
 of Shmuel (killed 26 July  
 1941) and Hersh Levin (killed  
 1941) buried the yeshiva  
 near Avner Akiliansky.

30. The testimonies  
 of Avner Halpan (68 years  
 old) and yeshiva staffer  
 Yehoshua-law, 79 years old.

31. The testimonies  
 of Kazys Idzelevicius, and  
 KGB files and transla-  
 tions of the Vilna  
 Gaon's testimony. ("Citizen of  
 Gymnasium graduate.  
 Criminal case no. 9387  
 Major Chvanov; and 2  
 vol. 1, 64-66. Avraham  
 Bloch's wife Ra-  
 chel, son Yosef Yehu-  
 and Peninah on 2 Jan-  
 Miriam (later Klayner-  
 Bloch-Ausband heads  
 32. The murder of  
 Wechsler (as recorded  
 Bloch (mistakenly ca-  
 "You will spray the t-  
 river" before they cho-  
 Kaplan [Rahel Wech-  
 [Miriam] Bloch." Testi-  
 M-1/E-2411/2482. I  
 flowers with our blo-  
 before he was cut into  
 33. Hayah Bloch  
 students Shmuel Lar-  
 Liba Bloch urged th-  
 toward his teachers,  
 Klayner-Bloch recal-  
 yeshivah's Yosefov

nations which the king of kings dearly desired? ... From whence will our help come (Psalms 121:1)?" (Elitsur-Rituv, 1986, 346-349)

29. The testimonies recall that Telšiai Yeshivah student Dov Ber Nahamkin (killed 26 July, 25 years old) refused to work on the Sabbath; Tsevi Hirsh Levin (killed that summer, 19 years old) destroyed his watch rather than surrender it, Avraham Bloch's son Eliezer (killed August 1941) buried the yeshiva's money which had been held by Zalman Bloch and Avner Akliansky; the devil's dance killed yeshivah staffer Eliyahu Hayim Halpan (68 years old), and that Zalman Bloch (killed that summer) carried yeshivah staffer Avraham Mosheh Kaplan (Eliyahu Meir Bloch's father-in-law, 79 years old) through the dance.

30. The testimonies by Desyatnik, by perpetrators Kazys Sulcas, Kazys Idzelevicius, and Kazys Zavalys were made available from the KGB files and translated from the Russian and Lithuanian by Rūta Puišytė of the Vilna Gaon Jewish Museum in Vilnius. Desyatnik testimony, ["Citizen of the USSR. Not a (Communist) party member. Gymnasium graduate. Single. From the labour class." (Date? Telšiai?). Criminal case no. 9387/3. vol. 1, 62, 63. Authenticated by KGB official Major Chvanov; and 23 July 1945 (Telšiai). Criminal case no. 3398/3. vol. 1, 64-66. Avraham Yitshak.

31. Bloch's wife Rasya was killed 2 January 1942, son Eliezer 15 July 1942, son Yosef Yehudah Layb on 15 July 1942, and daughters Hasyah and Peninah on 2 January 1942. His daughters Hayah (later Ausband), Miriam (later Klayner) and Rahel (later Sorotskin) survived. Hayah Bloch-Ausband heads the Yavneh High School for women in Cleveland.

32. The murder of Iska Bloch in particular was recalled in 1947. Rahel Wechsler (as recorded by R. Kaplan on 11 July 1947) described how Iska Bloch (mistakenly called Yitshak) declared to the Lithuanian killers, "You will spray the trees with our blood, and your blood will wash the river" before they chopped him apart and his blood sprayed the trees. R. Kaplan [Rahel Wechsler], "Di letste Verter fun [Avraham] Yitshak [Ayzik] Bloch." Testimony (11 July 1947, Munich) AYV 19-1-1/2482 or M-1/E-2411/2482. Peltz quoted him as saying "You will spray the flowers with our blood. In revenge, your blood will wash the ground" before he was cut into pieces.

33. Hayah Bloch recalls that on 15 (presumably 16) July, yeshivah students Shmuel Landau and Shraga Rituv escaped back to the stables. Luba Bloch urged them to run. Landau said he was unable, having just buried his teachers, but Rituv did – and was killed near Luoke. Miriam Klayner-Bloch recalls that Avraham Krenitch of the *Kollel* and the yeshivah's Yoselovsky brothers of Klaipėda (Meir and Bentsiyon)



disguised themselves and escaped – but the brothers were caught and killed in Geruliai.

34. Kazys Sulcas, 9 January 1944 and 16 January 1945 (Field trials?), Criminal case no. 3398/3. Vol. 1, 51–59. Kazys Idzelevicius, 22 January 1944 (Field trial). Criminal case no. 3398/3. Vol. 1, 15–19. Kazys Zavalys, 30 August 1948 (Telšiai). Criminal case no. 12400/3. Vol. 1, 19–21, 27–33; Criminal case no. 12409/3.

35. Kazys Idzelevicius testified that: “The killing of women and children took place in Geruliai in August 1941. A pit of 150 meters in length, 3 meters in depth and 3 meters wide, was dug. We herded the women and children there and started shooting them. We shot them in groups of 30–40 people throughout the day. We killed ultimately about 2,000 people. During the killings some women could not stand the horror and collapsed into the pit alive.... There were women with small children or babies in their arms. All the Jewish women and children were shot in one day. The killing started at six o’clock in the morning and ended between eleven and twelve o’clock in the afternoon.... All Jewish belongings were brought for storage in Telšiai.”

According to Shoshanah, some yeshivah students were taken to Geruliai. Miriam Bloch writes that Zalman Bloch’s son Mosheh was killed there while wearing his *Tefillin*. Sixteen members of the yeshivah escaped into Russia, eight of whom died from hunger. Hayim Shtayn, Ayzik Ausband, Meir Seligman and Natan Tsevi Baron made it to America. Shoshanah, 1975, 263–293.

Some of those killed (June–September 1941) have been identified: Akliansky, Avner; Baye, Shimon Yehudah (25 years old); Berman, Yehudah (28); Blakhman, Moshhe (61); Blekhmer, Gershon (30); Bloch, Avraham Yitshak; Bloch, Zalman; Brunznik, Moshhe Yosef (19); Cohen, Yitshak (29); Cohen, Ze’ev (38); Davidov, Eliezer Mordekhai (41); Dunash, Shmuel Hayim (b. 1889); Druk, Ya’akov (29); Elyashev, Shmuel (19); Epel, Mordekhai (19); Epelman, Reuven Mosheh (17); Fin, Eliezer (49); Fin, Mosheh Shimon (20); Gershtavitch, Aryeh Layb (53) (*Kollef*); Gershtavitch, Ezra (21); Gershtavitch, Ovadiah (18); Gershtavitch, Yonah (27); Goldman, Yosef Pessah (33); Gradnik, Yosef Layb (26); Halpan, Efrayim (b. 1902); Halpan, Eliyahu Hayim (68); Halpan, Pinhas (b. 1898); Hess, Yosef (14); Kamenetsky, Yitshak Shlomoh (24); Kaplan, Tsevi (45); Kaplan, Avraham Mosheh; Kaplan, Meir Eliyahu (20); KatsenelInboyn, Menahem Mendel (21); KatsenelInboyn, Shalom Tuvyah (43); Kimhi, David (38); Krakh, Aryeh (42); Krenitch, Avraham (50); Krakh, Aryeh (42); Landau, Shmuel David (20); Levin, David Zalman (28); Levin, Mordekhai (55); Levin, Tsevi Hirsch (19); Levinsohn, Shmuel (43); Luria, Mosheh Betsalel (26); Merkin, Meir (15);

Merkin, Reuven  
Noyk, Yosef (17);  
Polyevnik, M.  
Segal, Raphael  
Hayim (25); S.  
(35); Talman,  
Ordman, Shlo  
Verbilav, Ah  
Mordekhai; Y  
Reuven (23)  
(18); Yosef  
1963/64, 1–2  
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Merkin, Reuven (16); Merkin, Tsevi Hirsch; Nahamkin, Dovber (25); Noyk, Yosef (18); Mayzel, David (50); Paklibak, Eliezer (22); Pazeretz, Ya'akov (17); Pet, Mosheh Aharon (38); Polyevnik, Aryeh Layb (48); Polyevnik, Mosheh (46); Porplaner, Yitshak (16); Ritov, Shraga (?); Segal, Raphael (18); Segal, Pinhas (18); Sherl, Mendel (63); Shlamovitch, Hayim (25); Shtaynbakh, Meir (30); Rabinowitch, Azriel; Reznik, Zundel (35); Talman, Yehiel (35); Taytz, Yitshak (40); Tsal, Tanhum (22); Ordman, Shlomoh (18); Ordman, Yisrael; Vaserman, Aryeh Layb (26); Verbilav, Aharon Yosef (29); Verbilav, Pinhas (22); Vesler, Avraham Mordekhai; Yaffe, Dovber (26); Yankelevitch, Elia (23); Yaffe, Shmuel Reuven (23); Yoselovsky, Bentsiyon (in Geruliai); Yoselovsky, Meir (18); Yoselovsky, Shmuel (51); Ziv, David (55); Ziv, Fayvel. Sorotskin, 1963/64, 1-20.

A letter written on the stationery of Avner Aklanski of the *Mekhinah* and dated 30 December 1941 was sent by Leah Tayts to her brother I. Poplak in Cape Town, South Africa, and provided this description. Held by the Vilna Gaon Jewish Museum in Vilnius, translated from the Yiddish by the Museum staff and provided by Rūta Puišytė:

"I and my two babies are the only people still alive of all our family. Today, the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1941, my children and I are to be killed. They have murdered all Lithuanian Jews here and nobody can stay alive. I managed to escape several times – a Lithuanian Jucius P. from the village of Stulpenai [?] helped me. So, if the world survives, please give him some of my things. Because that Lithuanian tried to hide me, but he did not succeed. When you are to say *Kaddish* for us I do not know either. My husband [Yitshak?] was shot on the fifteenth day of Tammuz [10 July 1941]. / From my heart I wish you all the best. It is from the depths of despair that your doomed sister and her two babies are writing to you. My regards to all my dear people abroad. Make sure that our innocent blood is avenged."

36. Bloch, A. Y. 2000/01a, 158-172.

37. Bloch, A. Y. 2000/01a, 158-172.

38. On the *Halakhah* of martyrdom during the Holocaust see Rabinovits, 1996, 193-216.

39. See also Katz, H.M., 1993/94, i-ii.

40. On Eliyahu Meir Bloch see Editor, 1955, 13-45; Silver, 1955, 121; Gifter, 1955, 16-17; Editor, 1964, 26; Mozes, 1975. See also Bloch, E.M., 1947, 1; 1949, 2,5; 1971/72a, 134-138; 1975, 243-245; and 1983a, 349-353.

41. Bloch, E. M., 1936, 2 and 3.

42. Bloch, E. M., 1939, 3.

43. Bloch, E. M., 1971/72b, 121-127 and 1941b, i-ii.

44. Bloch, E. M., 1971/72b, 122n. Bloch may have drawn from Mosheh Cordovero's *Tomer Devorah*. See Bland, 1975, 103–129. For an interpretation from within the Telšiai Yeshivah tradition see Cordovero M., 1999.

45. Hayim Mordekhai Katz and Eliyahu Meir Bloch arrived at Pennsylvania Station in New York from Chicago: "Two famous rabbis, children of the great Gaon R. Yosef Layb [Bloch] and the grandchildren of Hagaon R. Eliezer Telzer [Gordon] have arrived from the Telšiai Yeshivah where they were *Roshei yeshivah*. They are beloved by hundreds and thousands of students, many of whom were now in America. After great difficulties and sacrifice they made it through Moscow and Siberia to Japan, where they discovered that their temporary visas were invalid. Thanks to the help of Rabbi Dr. Dov Revel, Mr. Shmuel Layb Zar, and Rabbi Holtsmann, they were rescued from being sent back and received permission to come to America. / Among those who welcomed the important guests were delegations from the Agudat Harabanim, the Histadrut of Telšiai Students of the Telšiai Yeshivah, Ladies Auxiliary of Yeshivah Yitshak Elhanan, and the Telšiai Yeshivah Banquet Committee."

Editor, 1940c, 1–2. The right wing Lithuanian dictator Antanas Smetona (1926–1940) came to Cleveland in 1943; it is not known if Bloch and Smetona had any contact.

Eliyahu Meir Bloch's wife Rivka (daughter of Mosheh Kaplan) was killed 30 August 1941; his son Eliezer 30 August 1941; his daughter Ruhamah Brayna 30 August 1941; Hani at the end of summer 1944; and Miriam at an unknown date. See Hayah Bloch, 1958, 235–236. The wife of his brother Zalman, Luba, and their children Eliezer, Mosheh, Yosef and Peninah were killed 1941–42; Hasyah Bloch-Ordman perished as well. Katz (Eliyahu Meir Bloch's brother-in-law) studied at the Telšiai Yeshivah, the Yeshivat Keneset Beit Yitshak in Slobodka and in Volozhin. His wife and ten children remained in Telšiai. A daughter was killed at the end of winter 1944/45 in a German concentration camp. See Katz, H. M., 1975, 246–250 and 1967, 24–25; Katz, Y. Z., 1988/89, 5–20. Sherer, 1964, 3–4.

46. Sorotskin, 1963/64, i–ii. Barukh (who married Rahel Bloch) and Eliezer Sorotskin were the sons of Zalman Sorotskin of Lutzk and grandsons of Eliezer Gordon (Rabinowitch, 1984), 448–460.

47. Bloch, E. M., 1945, 3–4.

48. Bloch, E. M., 1941a, 12–13.

49. Bloch, E. M., 1944a, 26. I was unable to access Eliyahu Meir Bloch and Natan Tsevi Baron, *Sefer Peninei Da'at: Al Hatorah: Iyunim*

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50. Bloch, E. M.  
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54. Bloch, E. M.  
55. Bloch, E. M.

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50. Bloch, E. M., 1942, 11 and 1–2.
51. Bloch, E. M. [On hearing of the death of his family]. In *Hiddushei Torah* as cited in Gifter, 1955, 16–17.
52. Bloch, E. M., 1943a, 3.
53. Bloch, E. M., 1983b, 268–271.
54. Bloch, E. M., 1943b, 11–13.
55. Bloch, E. M., 1944b.

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