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Notes from the valley of slaughter: a memoir from the ghetto of Šiauliai, Lithuania, by Aharon Pick, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2023, 320 pp., \$85.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-253-06557-5 (hbk); \$36.00 (pbk and ebook), 978-0-253-06558-2 (pbk), 978-0-253-06560-5 (ebook)

Notes from the Valley of Slaughter is a moving, detailed account of life in the Šiauliai ghetto, as well as events before its creation in 1941. While the lives in the ghettos located in Vilnius and Kaunas have been the focus of books and exhibitions in Lithuania and abroad, the Šiauliai ghetto has received much less attention from those who study the Holocaust in Lithuania and related topics, such as Lithuanian-Jewish relations. In 2002, the Vilnius Gaon Museum of Jewish History (*Vilniaus Gaono žydų istorijos muziejus*) in Lithuania published a list, based on the May 1942 census of the general population, of approximately 4,500 prisoners who were kept in this ghetto. According to the Yad Vashem website, 'Here Their Stories Will Be Told,' this ghetto, which was no more than 8,000 square meters in area, held approximately 5,500 Jews. The difference in the number of Jews who were held in the ghetto can be explained by the fact that the list based on the 1942 census does not include those murdered in 1941. As explained by Andrew Cassel (one of the translators of *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter*) in the introduction, everyday details of life in the ghetto are known from the diary of Eliezer Yerushalmi, a teacher at the Hebrew gymnasium and later the ghetto's secretary, as well as other sources, such as the 1949 memoir by the Holocaust survivor Levi Shalit.

Aharon Pick's memoir not only enriches these previous accounts and historical documents about everyday life in the ghetto, but it also covers the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1940–41 and presents detailed accounts of the invasion of Soviet Lithuania by Nazi Germany and the Soviet retreat in June 1941. This is why this primary source will be very valuable to those who study Lithuanian-Jewish relations during this period, which is still a very sensitive topic in Lithuania and beyond its borders. Although the so-called 'double genocide' perspective (falsely asserting that support for the Soviet Union among Lithuania's Jews and their participation in the repression of ethnic Lithuanians was the main reason why so many ethnic Lithuanians collaborated with the Germans and actively participated in the killing of Jews) has been criticized and



discredited many times by scholars, it still sometimes emerges in the public sphere in Lithuania and in its diasporic communities. Pick's diary includes an honest assessment of what he calls 'the Bolshevik revolutionary strategy, which aspires to uproot the capitalistic order at one stroke, in such haste that it unleashes pandemonium and disorder' (13). He depicts the suffering of Jewish culture in Lithuania during the first Soviet occupation, as the Jewish library was dismantled and, in the words of Pick, there was the 'destruction of a Jewish soul' (14) by the Soviets. Pick describes the confiscation of Jewish property during the Soviet occupation 'as punishment for their past lives of comfort' (19), as the occupying force needed space to live for themselves and their families.

Undoubtedly, Lithuania's Jewish communities, including the community in Šiauliai, suffered greatly during the first Soviet occupation. Pick regretted that 'under the malicious influence of the modern Haman' (a name used by Pick for Hitler) the Lithuanians started blaming Jews for 'global disasters' and linking them to the Bolsheviks (3). Unsurprisingly, the diary entries written during different times – in 1940 and later – portray the Soviet military as a potential 'savior' from death associated with the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators. At the same time, in multiple diary entries, the first Soviet occupation is presented as the beginning of 'calamities,' such as deportations to Siberia, the separation of the Jewish families as they tried to flee the German invasion, and the subsequent German occupation that meant total destruction and death for Lithuanian Jews (see, for instance, 142).

In my eyes, one of the most interesting aspects of the diary is Pick's description of Lithuanian-Jewish relations during World War II. As Lithuanian society and the Lithuanian diaspora today try to come to terms with the difficult past associated with the Holocaust, there is a temptation to focus on those Lithuanians who saved Jews during the Holocaust (such as Ona Šimaitė), obscuring the widespread collaboration and participation in the Holocaust. This is part of the broader development of memory politics in the region, described as the 'rescue turn' by Natalia Aleksiu and others in the forthcoming book *The Rescue Turn and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (Wayne University Press, 2024).

Instead of depicting rescue, Pick's diary documents multiple crimes committed by the Lithuanians in Šiauliai, including looting and killing, and which sometime went beyond the orders and expectations of the occupying Germans. In the words of Pick, 'they [Lithuanian partisans who hoped for an independent Lithuania but collaborated with the Germans in 1941] behaved not like thieves or burglars who attack in the dark of night but robbed and looted openly in broad daylight. They strolled the streets, often with German soldiers, broke into Jewish homes and acted like they owned them' (57). To Pick, the land of Lithuania 'has become our valley of slaughter, our gallows, its sons our executioners' (85). The documentation of multiple crimes committed by Lithuanians during the Holocaust in Pick's diary should be a motivation for Lithuania, as well as Lithuanians living abroad, to critically examine this part of Lithuania's past, resisting the temptation of the 'rescue turn.'

Some of the most moving parts of the diary are the descriptions of the suffering experienced by Aharon Pick and his wife Devora as well as many others in the Šiauliai ghetto due to illness – both physical and mental. Pick openly discusses the mental torment constantly experienced by those living in the ghetto: the 'bereavement and loss that have struck nearly every family and individual' (142) are the worst experiences. Some of the final entries in Pick's diary are about his physical ailments. In May 1944, he



writes, 'if conditions do not change soon, the thread of my life will be severed' (141). Unfortunately, he died from illness a month later, and his diary is a powerful incentive to remember the victims of the Holocaust who died of disease. In the case of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, most often it is depicted as the 'the Holocaust by Bullets' (Patrick Desbois' term depicting killings in public spaces), and the deaths of those who died from illness are often forgotten.

In sum, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter* is an important primary document which will be very useful to anyone who studies the Holocaust in Lithuania and the broader region. Given its coverage of Lithuanian-Jewish relations and the first Soviet occupation, this is a crucial source for the study of Lithuanian-Jewish reconciliation and historical justice in Lithuania. Beautifully translated, this book will be useful not only for scholars, but also for undergraduate students and the general public.

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