

LITUANUS

THE LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY

VOLUME 71:4 (2025)



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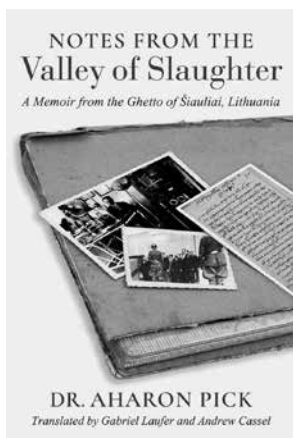
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BOOK REVIEWS



Aharon Pick

Notes from the Valley of Slaughter.
A Memoir from the Ghetto of Šiauliai,
Lithuania

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, a memoir about the Šiauliai ghetto, is a valuable addition to the already available collection of memoirs and diaries from Lithuanian ghettos. It is especially important as it gives a detailed account of life in the Ghetto of Šiauliai, which is far less documented than the larger ghettos of Vilnius and Kaunas.

The author of the memoir, physician Aharon Pick, kept a journal from May 1942 until June 1944, shortly before his death. The name of the book, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter*, is not accidental – this is the title Pick gave to his manuscript in Hebrew. As happens with many Holocaust testimonies, they are either dispersed across several institutions or were written in a couple of versions, and they are being preserved in different institutions or even countries. It appears that Pick originally made notes in Yiddish and later organized them into a fluent narrative in Hebrew. Today, the Yiddish version of Pick's notes is part of the collection of the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History in Vilnius. Three notebooks written in Hebrew, which are the basis of

this English language edition, are preserved in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. The memoir was translated as a joint project by Gabriel Laufer, who prepared the initial translation, and Andrew Cassel, who edited the English text and wrote a detailed introduction about the memoir and the broader historical context in which Aharon Pick grew up and lived.

The translators followed the structure of the text drawn by Pick. He organized it into four large sections. In Part A, Pick details the period before the outbreak of the war in Lithuania and the beginning of it. He writes about relations between Jews and Lithuanians before the war and describes the rise of antisemitism in the 1930s. Pick notes that antisemitism existed long before the war began, but its nature has changed radically. In my opinion, this is a very valuable part of the memoir as it describes the period of Bolshevik occupation. False perceptions that Jews collaborated with the Bolsheviks and therefore were not affected by this occupation are still rather widespread. Therefore, Pick's descriptions contradict such myths, highlighting the traumatic experiences Jews endured during this time. Pick himself was affected by the Bolshevik regime as a Zionist, and in addition the regime suppressed the Hebrew culture that he helped to nurture during the interwar period. Although Pick and his family members also suffered from this regime, he stresses that it is difficult for him to describe that period objectively as he writes from another time, knowing that what came afterwards was far worse (p. 12).

In Part B, Pick describes looting, robberies, edicts in the ghetto, the hardships, and the humiliation Jews suffered. A particularly valuable narrative of this part is the stories of the tragic fate of Jewish communities of towns from the surrounding region. Pick based this part on the testimonies of the eyewitnesses.

The third part of the memoir continues to paint a picture of life in the Šiauliai ghetto. Pick writes about its management and government, nutrition, health, hygiene, etc. It is also interesting to learn how the local population reacted to the establishment of the ghetto. For example, when the German administration

decided to add another area to the territory of the ghetto, its residents protested as they did not want to move out, and the district commissioner canceled the decision (p. 120). The detailed account of everyday life in the ghetto also allows us to see the similarities and differences with other ghettos in Lithuania. For instance, the cultural life in Šiauliai was virtually non-existent; there were no schools or a library. It is a stark contrast to Vilnius¹ and Kaunas Ghettos.²

The last chapter of the book, Part D, is a diary. The first three parts are written by a chronicler to describe events for future generations. Yet reading the diary feels different. It allows one to sense the intensity of emotions that people in the ghetto went through. Such as the cases when Pick reacts to various rumors from the front lines, and his mood and hope for the future change accordingly: “My spirit is crushed today over these events, and I cannot continue writing” (p. 182); “Morale is high. Encouraging news is reaching us from the African frontline” (p. 199).

It seems that Pick’s goal was to chronicle and testify what happened to make sure that those events would not be forgotten: “<...> my notes will be somewhat incomplete, merely an outline of the anguish and distress we encountered. But at least they will provide our descendants with a sketch, albeit a blurry one, of our situation in the Šiauliai ghetto” (p. 117). This might determine the style and tone of the memoir. Pick seems to be a rather objective chronicler. He openly admits that it is hard for him not to view the Bolshevik regime in a more positive way, as he already knew what came after (p. 12). He also maintains his objectivity when writing about people. Although Lithuanians in general and understandably are not depicted in a favorable light, he names and praises individuals who helped him or oth-

¹ For cultural life and education in Vilnius Ghetto, see, for example, Abraham Sutzkever, *From the Vilna Ghetto to Nuremberg: Memoir and Testimony*, ed. and trans. by Justin D. Cammy. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021.

² For creativity in Kaunas Ghetto, see, for example, Giedrė Jankevičiūtė and Nerijus Šepetys, *Art Creation in the Kaunas Ghetto. Issues of the Representation of Reality*. Kaunas: M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, 2025.

ers. For example, he acknowledges the role of Lithuanian Dr. Jasaitis in helping six Jewish doctors to keep their jobs as lab technicians during the Holocaust (pp. 17, 62). He also shares a story about Jew Jaška in Radviliškis, who was so villainous that: “even the Lithuanian sadist was surprised to see how badly he treated his own people” (p. 91). Admitting the bad as well as the good seems to be natural to Pick.

It is no less important to note not only what is being told but also how it is being told. The language can be used as a tool in various ways. One of the translators of the book, Andrew Cassel, notes in the Introduction that Pick’s rich writing style was a challenge for the translators (pp. xv–xvi). However, these feelings do not reach the reader as the text is beautifully translated. The complicated writing style stems from Pick’s yeshiva education in his youth, which is reflected in the numerous quotes from religious texts, including biblical, Talmudic, and various rabbinic writings. In this aspect and even the nicknames taken from the biblical storylines, this diary recalls Zelig Kalmanovich’s diary written in the Vilna Ghetto.³ For instance, they both use the name Haman for Hitler and Amalek to describe Germany (pp. 3, 29).

The language the author chooses to use can often also give additional information or raise new questions. It is rather noticeable that when Pick writes about crimes or negative behavior, he often described the perpetrators by their nationality; however, as he notes positive behavior, or to praise someone’s help, he often chooses to describe such a group of people by their religion: “So Jews hastened to use up their food supplies while arranging with Christian friends to hide their best clothes, linens, and especially jewelry, since silver and gold objects would not be allowed in the ghetto. They also gave the Christians large sums of money – huge fortunes – to hide. The outcomes varied: many

³ Zelig Kalmanovich, *Hope Is Stronger Than Life. Vilna Ghetto Diary*, ed. Stanislovas Stasiulis and Saulė Valiūnaitė, trans. Olga Lempert. Vilnius: Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History, 2021.