

# THE LAST DAYS OF THE VILNA GHETTO — PAGES FROM A DIARY

NATHAN COHEN

Between January 1942 and March 1943, stability prevailed in the Vilna ghetto, following six months of terror initiated by the German occupation, during which more than half of the city's Jews were murdered.<sup>1</sup> During this period life in the ghetto settled into a routine — to the extent that this was possible under the circumstances. The internal organization of the ghetto was established; cultural and welfare institutions were set up; and the first steps toward the organization of an underground were taken.

On July 17, 1942, the relative quiet was suddenly disturbed for the first time. On that day, the week-long “Elders *Aktion*” began, during which eighty-four elderly and sick Jews were assembled and placed in the ghetto prison. On July 26, these people were removed from the prison, transported on trucks to the death pits in Ponar, and murdered there.<sup>2</sup> A few months later (in October 1942), the head of the Judenrat, Jacob Gens,<sup>3</sup> and the Ghetto

1 The estimate of the victims is based on Yitzhak Arad, *Ghetto in Flames* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1980), pp. 209–217.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 339–341.

3 Jacob Gens (1905–1943) was an officer in the Lithuanian army, an accountant in the Lithuanian Ministry of Justice in Kovno, and, from July 1940, administrative director of the Jewish Hospital in Vilna. Although he was married to a Lithuanian Christian woman, he was active in the Zionist movement, mainly in the Revisionist party. During the ghetto period he was appointed by the Germans as Chief of the Jewish Police and, from then on, was a figure of authority in the ghetto. In July 1942, he was officially appointed as the “representative of the ghetto” to the authorities. For more details on Jacob Gens, see Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, and Mark Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita in Struggle and Death* (Yiddish) (Paris, 1948).

Police carried out an *Aktion* in the Oszmiana ghetto in the Vilna area, at which time 406 Jews were sent to their death.<sup>4</sup> Following these difficult events, the tension among Vilna Jewry mounted, and anything that strayed from the daily routine raised even more tension and fear. Toward the end of March 1943, the tension reached a climax.

Following widespread partisan activity in the area between the district of Vilna and western Belorussia, the Germans took harsh measures, including liquidating four small ghettos in the area, as well as neighboring labor camps (Oszmiana, Święciany, Michaliszki and Soly).<sup>5</sup> On March 21, 1943, the official ghetto publication, *Geto Naves*, announced that the Jews from these communities were to be transferred to labor camps in Vilna and Kovno. A group of police officers from the Vilna ghetto was conscripted in order to accompany the transfers. Between March 26 and April 2, 1943, 1,350 Jews from the area arrived in Vilna, but 3,800 of those intended for transfer to Kovno were sent to Ponar instead and murdered there. The Jews of Vilna were shocked, and, from that point on, the situation quickly deteriorated.<sup>6</sup>

On June 21, 1943, *Reichsfürer-SS* Heinrich Himler ordered that

- 4 For details, see Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, pp. 341–348; idem, “The ‘Final Solution’ in Lithuania in the Light of German Documentation,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, 11 (1976), pp. 243–272; Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, pp. 414–416; Herman Kruk, *Diary of the Vilna Ghetto* (Yiddish) (New York: YIVO, 1961), pp. 381–387; and Alexander (Sanya) Rindzyunski, *The Destruction of Vilna* (Hebrew) (Ghetto Fighters House: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and Ghetto Fighters House, 1987), pp. 100–101. Kruk’s diary was recently published in English: Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the camps, 1939–1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). The citations here are from the original Yiddish.
- 5 For more extensive details, see Shalom Cholawski, *On the Rivers Nieman and Dnieper* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Moreshet and Sifriat Poalim, 1982), pp. 290–298, as well as Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, pp. 417–428.
- 6 For details concerning the atmosphere in the ghetto following these events, see Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, pp. 423–428; Rindzyunski, *Destruction of Vilna*, pp. 109–114.

all the ghettos in areas occupied in the Soviet Union (*Ostland*) were to be liquidated by August 1, 1943.<sup>7</sup> The official in charge of “Jewish Affairs” in the Vilna Sipo, Bruno Kittel,<sup>8</sup> began immediately to liquidate the labor camps in the area (Biala-Waka, Kanea, Bezdán, Wilejka Nowa). Most of the Jews in these camps were murdered, while a few escaped or were transferred to the ghetto.<sup>9</sup>

Concurrently, serious differences of opinion arose between the ghetto leadership and the underground organization FPO (Fareynikte Partisaner Organizatsie; United Partisans Organization). The crisis between the two bodies reached its climax with the Germans’ demand to hand over Yitzhak Wittenberg, the FPO commander — an order which was ultimately carried out and culminated in Wittenberg’s suicide on July 16, 1943.<sup>10</sup>

In August 1943, approximately 2,500 Jews from Vilna were sent to labor camps in Estonia. On September 1, 1943, the ghetto was suddenly surrounded; men were hunted in the streets in order to be sent to Estonia. Gens convinced the Germans to allow the Jewish police to carry out this task; however, when only 600 men were rounded up, the Germans and Estonians returned to the ghetto. To the FPO, this was a sign that the time had come to begin their armed resistance. However, the fall of one of the

7 Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman, Avraham Margalio, eds., *Documents of the*

8 Sent to Vilna in July 1943, Kittel ordered the liquidation of the labor camps in the Vilna area (July 1943) and, two months later, the liquidation of the ghetto itself. During the Wittenberg episode (see below), it was he who demanded that Wittenberg immediately be handed over. On the day of the ghetto’s liquidation, Kittel sat at the gate at a piano and played with pleasure. See Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, pp. 318–319; Avraham Sutzkever, *The Vilna Ghetto* (Yiddish) (Paris: 1946), pp. 139–142.

9 Concerning the liquidation of the camps, see Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, pp. 355–372, as well as Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, pp. 475–476.

10 Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, pp. 387–395; Sutzkever, *Vilna Ghetto*, pp. 178–182; Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, pp. 440–445. For some testimonies concerning the event, see “Der Wittenberg-Tog in Vilner Geto,” *YIVO Bleter*, vol. 30 (1947), pp. 188–213.

commanders, Yechiel Sheynboym, in the initial crossfire with the Germans, and the immediate destruction of the buildings in which the fighters had barricaded themselves, thwarted the revolt.<sup>11</sup> During the following four days, Gens was able to hand over approximately 3,000 men and 2,200 women to the Germans. He promised the remaining 11–12,000 Jews, all workers, that there would be no more deportations.

During those days additional groups and individuals continued to filter out of the ghetto in an unending stream, on their way to join the partisan units in the area.<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that in Vilna, as in other areas, the local population (the Polish majority and the Lithuanian minority) were openly hostile or apathetic toward the Jews, and almost no aid was offered.

Uncertainty continued to grow among the ghetto inhabitants. Various rumors were spread and refuted several times a day. On September 14, it became known that Gens and his deputy, Salek Dessler,<sup>13</sup> were summoned to the Sipo office. Gens was immediately executed, and his deputy was appointed in his place. Four days later, Dessler was ordered to hand over several hundred workers. He ordered a general registration of workers; however, within a few hours, he disappeared, along with a few associates and the Judernrat's funds.<sup>14</sup>

11 Concerning the events of that day and the crossfire between the rebels and the Germans, see Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, pp. 401–416; Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, pp. 459–465; Reizl (Ruzka) Korchak, *Flames in Ash*, (Hebrew) (Merhavia: Moreshet and Sifriat Poalim, 1965), pp. 181–186; and Rindzyunski, *Destruction of Vilna*, pp. 131–133.

12 Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, pp. 422–425; Korchak, *Flames in Ash*, pp. 232–235.

13 Dessler was a former student at the Vilna University and a member of the Revisionist Student Organization. He was also one of the most hated policemen in the ghetto. From July 1942, Dessler was Gens's deputy and chief of Police. When Gens was executed, Dessler was appointed in his place, but four days later he escaped from the ghetto with other senior policemen and their families. He was eventually caught and executed. Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, passim., and Kruk, *Diary of the Vilna Ghetto* passim.

14 Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, pp. 425–429.

Kittel ordered all those on the list to report for deportation, but they had gone into hiding. German forces entered the ghetto to search for them, and the FPO fighters were placed on alert. However, no contact ensued. Until September 23, a tense quiet reigned in the ghetto. Kittel then announced the deportation of all the ghetto's inhabitants to labor camps in Latvia and Estonia. In order to carry out this mission, the Germans placed Estonian and Ukrainian units in the city. (As the Lithuanians became less enamored of the Germans as the occupation continued, as they had despaired of their hopes for independence, the Germans decreasingly employed their aid.)

On September 23, the day of the Vilna ghetto's liquidation, 3,000–3,700 out of the approximately 10,000 Jews who were then in the ghetto were deported to labor camps. Approximately 5,000 Jews were deported to the extermination camps in Poland, and several hundred elderly and sick were murdered in Ponar. Only approximately 2,000 people from the entire Vilna community remained in hiding within the ghetto. Among them were members of the FPO, who continued to filter out to the forest, and an additional 2,300 people (men, women and families) who worked in factories in the city (“Keilis” and “Heeres Kraft Park” — HKP).<sup>15</sup> On March 27, 1944, the “Children’s *Aktion*” was carried out in these factories, and on July 2–3, 1944 — ten days before the liberation — the Germans executed the workers.

All this information can be found in various studies, testimonies and memoirs relating to Vilna during the Holocaust. However, the documentation concerning the last weeks of the Vilna ghetto's existence is scanty, and it does not cover the last

15 The reference is to the living quarters, “blocks” that were built for the laborers who worked outside of the ghetto, mainly for the two big factories. “Keilis” was a factory for the manufacture of furs, which functioned as a labor camp and in which approximately 1,500 Jews lived in conditions similar to those in the ghetto. The other factory, HKP, was a workshop for army vehicles. Approximately 800 Jews worked and lived there after the ghetto's liquidation but under less favorable conditions than in “Keilis.” This camp, too, was destroyed before the liberation.

day of the ghetto's existence. It is true that we do have the informative diary of Grisha Schorr,<sup>16</sup> which also includes the period following the liquidation. However, the diary was written within the walls of the Kailis fur factory and mainly reflects the events there. In the Sutzkever-Kaczerginski Collection in the Yad Vashem Archives, there is a typewritten copy of several pages from a Yiddish diary written by a youth who is identified by the copier, Shmerke Kaczerginski, as Gabik Heller.<sup>17</sup> Gabik was the only son of the teacher and educator Dr. Moshe Heller, the director of the Statistical Department in the central library in the ghetto. Dr. Heller died in the ghetto on November 7, 1942.<sup>18</sup>

Yitzhak Rudashevski, who also wrote a diary,<sup>19</sup> mentions Gabik Heller, his friend and classmate in the ghetto, several times. Heller was apparently slightly younger than Rudashevski, who was born in 1927. In one of the references relating to the death of the teacher Dr. Heller, Rudashevski writes: "Their situation is difficult, I saw their great poverty already in the beginning of the ghetto ... Gabik is very thin ... I especially know that Gabik is almost never satiated."<sup>20</sup>

16 Grisha Schorr, *Notes from the Vilna Ghetto*, Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), JM 2786.

17 YVA, P.18/7, pp. 130–139. The document has been in the archives for many years.

18 Dr. Moshe Heller was born in Zbaraz in 1894, and studied at the Vienna, Lvov and Vilna universities. He taught history in the Real Gymnasium in Vilna and was active in the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO). According to the Germans' demands, within the framework of his job in the ghetto, he wrote statistical works about the Jews of Vilna in 1633–1861; Kruk, *Diary of Vilna Ghetto*, pp. 397–399. According to Dworzecki, this work also included details on the twentieth century, including a notation of the deportations and murders committed.

19 At the beginning of the German occupation, Rudashevski hid with his parents, as they did not possess work permits. Later, when the family did obtain papers, Yitzhak began to study in the Gymnasium, which was initiated by Bundist teachers in the ghetto. Parts of his diary were preserved and published, and it relates to Gabik Heller and his family as well. Yitzhak Rudashevski, *The Diary of a Boy From Vilna* (Hebrew) (Ghetto Fighters' House: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and Ghetto Fighters' House, 1968).

20 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

It seems that Gabik stopped his schooling in the ghetto and worked voluntarily in the library administered by Dr. Herman Kruk, a well-known figure in the Jewish cultural life of independent Poland, who had arrived in Vilna as a refugee at the onset of the war.<sup>21</sup> Kruk knew and highly regarded Dr. Heller and, after his death, extended his patronage to Heller's only son. He acted on this along with other colleagues in the library — all of whom were aligned with the Bund — to appoint Gabik as a regular worker, so that he would be able to support his mother.

The pages of the diary in the Sutzkever — Kacerginski Collection bear the dates 4 and 9 February 1943, 25–30 August 1943, and 21–22 September 1943. At the Moreshet Archives in Givat Haviva, there are sixteen pages in manuscript form, in Yiddish, torn from a notebook by an “anonymous” writer, which bear the dates 7–18 September 1943.<sup>22</sup> A careful reading of the two documents shows that they were written by the same person, and that they complement each other. It appears that this is a fragment of a much larger composition, which, unfortunately, was lost; however, the pages that survived are of special significance, because they document the last weeks and days of the ghetto's existence. These pages present to the reader a completely authentic picture of the daily routine, the emotions, the thoughts and, perhaps, hopes, of a youth who had already managed to endure two years of persecution, death, and bereavement.

21 Herman (Hersh-Boruch) Kruk (1897–1944) was in his early years a Communist and later an active Bundist. He served as the head librarian in the Bronislaw Groser Workers' Library in Warsaw and was an outstanding public cultural figure. In the Vilna ghetto, all the Jewish libraries were centralized within the “Einsatzstaab Rosenberg” framework, an organization headed by Alfred Rosenberg, for the collection and preservation of Jewish cultural treasures, in one building (on Straszun Street no. 6), which was administered by Kruk. Concurrently, Kruk continued his party activity and took a stand on every public issue raised. With the ghetto's liquidation, he was sent to the Klooga camp and then to Lagedi, where he was murdered in mid-September 1944. Many fragments of the diary he wrote in the ghetto were published by his brother in New York: *Diary of Vilna Ghetto*; see also Sutzkever, *Vilna Ghetto*, pp.104–105, 108–112.

22 Moreshet Archives (MA), D.2. 369.

In the ghetto, the inhabitants were drawn on a daily and even hourly basis to absorb any shred of information or rumor. The writer and his circle, who, from the start, had reservations about the official leadership of the ghetto and placed little trust in them, struggled to comprehend the reality, to interpret the events, and to evaluate the immediate future. The most crucial question was whether the ghetto would continue to exist. This question bore strongly on other questions: for example, whether to volunteer willingly to be deported to the labor camps in Estonia, or to the industrial factories outside of the ghetto, or to escape to the forest; or to wait and see what would transpire. Each option could seal not only the fate of the individual, but also the fate of his family and even of the larger population in the ghetto.

Yet the diary clearly reflects the existence of a considerable amount of social involvement as well. One cannot but be impressed by the high level of communality, especially within the social surroundings of the diary's author. Included among his circle of young acquaintances, apparently slightly older than him, were members (male and female) of the Youth Club ("Yugnt Klub"). This was primarily composed of the youth in the ghetto's schools. Many had been members in the Bund's Tsukunft youth movement, who continued their organizational activities from the pre-war days and were members of the FPO. From them he learned of the gradual filtering out of individuals and groups to the surrounding forest. He desperately wanted to join them; however, in spite of his endeavors and the connections he attempted to employ — connections that reached Avraham Khvoynik and the Yashunski<sup>23</sup> family, one of the most prominent in the Bund leadership in the ghetto — he was unable to do so.

Gabik Heller, as reflected in the diary, was an intelligent young man with sharp instincts who matured prematurely, as did many other young men in the ghetto. He was the only male left in his

23 Jewish names are transcribed in this article according to rules of transcription from Yiddish, except in those cases where the person's exact spelling of the name in Latin letters is known.



family, and so divided his time between his home (not before he stood in line to receive the allotted amount of food) and the library. At home he had his mother to care for, as she was the only remaining person close to him, and his neighbors (young and old) to socialize with, as he was closely connected to them socially. At the library, which for him was apparently a refuge from his life's oppression, he would encounter friends and acquaintances, meticulously carry out the jobs assigned to him by Kruk, and also momentarily escape the distress by reading books (the diary mentions Byron, Tolstoy, and Emil Ludwig) and newspapers. The attic of the library was also a hiding place in times of danger, although apparently not for long.

It seems that during the final days of August and the first days of September — which were the days of the deportations to Estonia and the tense anticipation of receiving information from those who had been deported — the author attempted to continue his daily routine, and his work in the library filled most of his time. As he was a paternal orphan, it is possible to assume that he was less concerned with the forced seizure of men and could immerse himself in his other activities. His entries are relatively short and mainly descriptive. From the end of the first week in September, one especially senses a change in the author's mood. The entries become increasingly long. The frequency and force of events prevent him from being satisfied with noting only the date, and often he adds the hour.

The library in those days functioned not only as a refuge from the external terror. Although he came to the library several times a day, he was impatient and hurried to leave. He dedicated the majority of his time to visits, meetings and discussions with peers his age and with adults (the majority of whom were from the Bund circles) in order to better comprehend the significance of the events and prepare for the unknown. He collected shreds of information, rumors and evaluations from anyone possible, and reached the definitive conclusion that he must leave the ghetto. But how? When he understood that he could not join the

underground, his frustration mounted, and he increasingly went back and forth between the library and his home. He knew that his days — and possibly hours — in the ghetto were numbered. At the same time, he knew from the newspapers he read and from the reports that reached him that Germany's defeat was near.

The final lines of the diary were written on Wednesday, 22 September 1943. That morning he had already managed to part from his mother and sit for a few hours in the hiding place in the library's attic, where a cache of iron tools was previously prepared: "anything that could be used in the struggle." After he sensed that the tension on the outside had relaxed, Heller managed to be in the library and at home at least twice, to converse with acquaintances and to hear up-to-date evaluations of the situation. It is unclear where Heller intended to spend the night — apparently his last in the ghetto.

#### DIARY<sup>24</sup>

**Thursday 4.2.1943.**<sup>25</sup> Murer<sup>26</sup> came to the ghetto. Of course, as usual the area of Rudnitski [Street]<sup>27</sup> receives a signal from the

24 The diary is filled with names, many of which are only partial (surnames), usually friends of the writer. With regard to these names, I was greatly assisted by the recollections of the late Dina Abramowicz (New York) as well as Sara Kaliwacz, Prof. Dov Levin, Shoshana Bromberg (Stolicki), Hinde Parner and Benjamin Anolik (all in Israel). I thank them all. Other biographical details were principally taken from the above-mentioned sources and studies cited in notes 1, 4, 8, 11, 18, as well as from the lists of Shmerke Kaczerginski, *The Destruction of Vilna* (Yiddish) (New York, 1947), unless stated otherwise.

25 The notation of dates in the diary is inconsistent and are presented here as they appear in the original.

26 Franz Murer was adjutant to Hans Christian Hingst, *Gebietskomissar* of the city of Vilna since July 1941. He was responsible for administrating Reich policy within the population under his jurisdiction and was the director of the Food Department and the Agriculture Section, which meant he supervised prices in the *Gebitskomissariat* Vilna. He also functioned as the Representative of Jewish Matters and later of the ghetto.

27 The additions that appear in square parenthesis are mine. They should serve to clarify the text or to note, by the use of a question mark, an inconsistency that I was unable to solve, including the omission of a word or an illegibility.

gate guard, and as always, the streets become “clean” of Jews — they became empty. But a problem occurred here: with today’s search he went to the chairman of the administration, the engineer Freed,<sup>28</sup> and found there a bottle of cognac, chocolate as well as German cigarettes. Murer then became very upset, arrested Freed, and the next day ordered a search in the ghetto. A Lithuanian-German commission came<sup>29</sup> and they searched. They also arrested Zabludowski the candy manufacturer, and other people whom Freed turned in.

Rumors spread that Gens, Tropido<sup>30</sup> and others were arrested. All the commissioners of the Judenrat ran out like lunatics. However, one does not know how it happened that in the evening they let them all out, and eventually it happened that Freed ceased being the chairman, and was replaced by the chief Gens himself,<sup>31</sup> and Freed became only a head bookkeeper.

On **9.2.[1943]** Murer came to the gate guard and found 75 kopeks on a worker. He ordered that he be given 25 lashes, stood by and observed. It is said that ten more men from Kaplanskis bunch were given lashes.<sup>32</sup> He asked them: “Do you have money?”, they said [“no”], he said: “you are lying” — and ordered they each be given 25 lashes.<sup>33</sup>

28 Engineer Anatol Freed was the head of the first Judenrat in Vilna. He was an assimilated Jew and worked as a bank manager. With the liquidation of the ghetto, he was deported to a labor camp in Estonia and later to Kaiserwald, where he perished.

29 This is surprising, as in this period there was little cooperation between the Germans and the Lithuanians.

30 Haim Tropido was a Zionist public activist in Kovno and later in Vilna. He was the director of the Food Department of the Judenrat.

31 Gens actually received the appointment on July 11, 1942. Echoes of what is recounted here can be found in Kruk, *Diary of Vilna*, pp. 455–456.

32 Dovid Kaplan-Kaplanski (1899–1940), a public figure, was chairman of the Friends of YIVO in Vilna. In the ghetto he functioned as the head of “Council of Brigadiers,” the representatives of the laborers working in the different labor locations in the ghetto, before the Germans and before Gens.

33 Heller’s diary is the sole testimony to these events.

**[beginning of March 1943]** [...] after him the liaison Broyde spoke.<sup>34</sup> He said that the war affected everyone, however, while they die as a result of defending their fatherland, with a gun in hand, as free people, we the Jews are being killed without reason, like slaves jailed in the ghetto, in captivity. He wishes that the flow of blood will end as quickly as possible, and that the youth that learn in such a time and strengthen their confidence — this is a great thing, although he himself is far from this [feeling secure]. He also related an anecdote from the war in Spain: a brother fought a brother, and it happened that they met up, one facing the other with their guns drawn. They began to account for why they were fighting each other, and they indeed discovered that there was no reason. A third interrupted [them] and said that the Jews are guilty. They said: “What do you mean — there haven’t been Jews in Spain for hundreds of years and even when they were invited back, they did not want to come. He [the third] said, “But if the Jews were here, we would fight them and not each other.”

Afterward Kalmanovitsh<sup>35</sup> gave a nice speech and said that we live at the grace of God, and recalled that fifty years ago he studied [the Talmud tractate] *Kiddushin* and afterward went to study [in the university].

**25 August Wednesday [1943].** In the morning, took the news-

34 Until 1939, Munye Broyde functioned as a clerk in the Lithuanian Diplomatic Corps. In the ghetto he was the liaison between the Jews and the German *Arbeitsamt*.

35 Zelig Kalmanovitsh (1885–1943?) — was a linguist and literary researcher. A Hebrew and Yiddish teacher in Minsk, Kovno and Riga, from 1928, he played an active role in YIVO and edited the institution’s journal *YIVO Bleter*. In the ghetto he worked together with Kruk in the library. He was among the founders of the Writers’ Union in the ghetto and greatly participated in its cultural activities. He was known for his defensive approach toward Gens and severely attacked the underground movement. In September 1943, he was sent to the Vaivara Camp and to Narva, where he died of exhaustion. He left a diary and notes which were published by his son: Zelig Kalmanovitsh, *A Diary From the Ghetto in the Nazi Vilna* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Moreshet and Sifriat Poalim, 1977).

papers. Berlin was heavily bombarded. I inspected the new cemetery for Kruk.<sup>36</sup> I copied a little Byron. Later, I was at the doctor. In the evening Kruk gave me a few files to carry home. I opened a notebook of memoirs about Oszmiana. There, worse things happened than here. From the start: a Judenrat, confiscations, seizure by force for labor. Everyday the Judenrat must submit that which the commander desires. On a clear day youths are kidnapped. They are lined up and any of the Poles who hold a grudge says that this one is a Bolshevik. The next day more denunciations, and all the betrayed are sent away somewhere. Once the Judenrat is ordered to submit a list of the Jewish inhabitants. While they struggle to understand why [they want a list], all the men are taken away — young and old, including the Judenrat as well. They assemble them at the marketplace — lying with their heads facing downward, and when the market is full they send them away and they shoot them next to “Bartle — Bartelo” [?]. The peasants recount when they were shot. The regime does not want it known. It sends police to the peasants. The next day the peasants who saw the shooting recount what they saw — how they [the Jews] were packed into wagons and sent to work.<sup>37</sup>

She who writes these lines [the memoirs from Oszmiana] organizes [those] going to work. She decides who must go, on which day (some women still remained and a few men who hid themselves.) Rumors are spread about a ghetto. Very soon indeed it is announced that one must move into the ghetto. One is allowed to take everything. They take more cart [“drivers”] who help transfer the belongings. The ghetto is sealed. For everything the Jews must pay money. A Jewish police force is established etc, etc. Later some wild German commander arrives and controls every little issue. When the new Judenrat (as it is called) is summoned to him, upon their departure he screams “Raus!” When children play

36 Following the closure of the “old” cemetery, people were still buried in the so-called “new” Jewish cemetery from the first half of the nineteenth century.

37 Concerning this execution, carried out on July 26, 1941, see *Sefer Oszmiana*, (Tel Aviv: Organization of Oszmiana Immigrants in Israel, 1969), pp. 299, 335.

with pink pieces of paper, he says that these are [official] placards, and only via a miracle they succeed in avoiding victims. Of course for this he receives payment — this time in gold.

**Thursday the 26<sup>th</sup> [of August, 1943].** In the morning I completed the work for Kruk. Later he gave me the same work to number [paginate] using the typewriter. At two o'clock I sat at the loan section of the adults. Later I installed a nail to make the stamps. Was at Dr. Shenker.<sup>38</sup> While I was at the doctor the commission was in the library. They came to see the library and the reading room. Asked who is Sholem Aleichem, Gens told them and they left. Incidentally, in other places they photographed — by us [here] they did not. In the evening I walked around, spoke to Musik about mathematics.

**Friday the 27<sup>th</sup> [of August 1943].** In the morning I was in the library. I filed a pointed tool out of steel wire in order to make stamps. Later in the reading room prepared a report for ten months, etc. These days I have seen [unclear name] in the reading room, and the not nice swarthy boy who I saw being led [away] on Lida Street. The boy says that they detained him, because of his high number [on the list] (and due to his provincial looks), however Levas<sup>39</sup> inspected the list of who they [were supposed to] seize there, and he [his number] not being one of them who appeared [on the list] — was freed.

In the evening I went out for a walk. Met Rudashevski and Tkotsh.<sup>40</sup>

38 Apparently Dr. Brakha Shenkar, an eye doctor. She was a member of the Executive Committee of the Jewish Doctors Organization and director of the Nurses' School of TOZ (the Jewish Health Organization in Poland).

39 Moyshe Levas, born in Kovno, was a member of Betar and the commander of the gate guard in the ghetto. He was infamous for his cruelty toward smugglers and an object of hate in the ghetto. See, for example, details about him in Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, p. 408; Kruk, *Diary of Vilna Ghetto*, pp. 158, 227, 296, 446, 525, 565, and ff.

40 The reference is apparently to Reyzl Tkotsh, a student in the Real Gymnasium in Vilna and a friend of Rudashevski and Heller.

Incidentally, yesterday the newspapers told about a change of ministers. The governor of Czechoslovakia Neurath<sup>41</sup> is being retired. In his place will be the incumbent interior minister Frick.<sup>42</sup> Replacing Frick — Himmler. The head of public labor — Hierl<sup>43</sup> and De Gierteng [?] — Frank's<sup>44</sup> secretary in the Protectorate are being promoted to the rank of minister. Frick, as well as von Neurath, will remain ministers.

On the front [the situation] is good. According to Laban (last night I was at his house) they [the Soviets] are thirty kilometers from Poltava, and approximately 130 km from Kharkov. The battles are taking place at Voroshilovgrad.

In the evening I went for a walk. Met Yoshke<sup>45</sup> and later Avreymele.<sup>46</sup> He pulled me over and said that one must see something. Heard news from Laven.

**Saturday the 28<sup>th</sup> [of August 1943]** In the morning I washed up,

41 Konstantin Freiherr von Neurath (1873–1956) was German foreign minister until February 1938. In March 1939, he was appointed *Reichsproktor* of Bohemia and Moravia and functioned in this capacity until August 25, 1943.

42 Wilhelm Frick (1877–1946) was German interior minister from 1933 until August 25, 1943, and then replaced von Neurath. He was tried at the Nuremberg Trials and condemned to death.

43 Konstantin Hierl was responsible for the Volunteers' Department in the German Ministry of Labor. On August 25, 1943, he was appointed minister.

44 Karl-Herman Frank was a German leader from the Sudeten Region. In March 1939, following the German occupation, he was police chief in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. He succeeded Heydrich (1942) as *Reichsproktor* and, from August 1943, was a Reich Minister for Bohemian and Moravian Affairs.

45 Yoshke Pogoralski was one of Heller's friends. He is only referred to by his family name from this point on.

46 Avreymele-Avreymel Zheleznikov was the son of the Bundist activist Yankl Zheleznikov who was exiled to the Soviet Union in 1939, where he met his death. Avreymel was active among the Bundist youth in the ghetto, and he, too, worked in the library administered by Kruk. He was a member of the FPO and organized a cache of weapons in the youth club of the party. In September 1943, he escaped to the forests. He survived and eventually reached Australia. See also Shmerke Kaczerginski, *Partisans Go* (Yiddish) (Buenos Aires: Tsentral Farband fun Poynlishe Yidn in Argentina, 1947), p. 69; Avreymel Zheleznikov, "Bundistn in Vidershtand fun Vilner Geto," in *Undzer Tsayt*, vol. 4–5 (1949), pp. 21–25.

later cut my hair. I sat in the library for a long while because [Mrs.] Man<sup>47</sup> had to print [something] on the machine, a list from Masha Efron's<sup>48</sup> workshop, in order to give them supplementary [ration] cards. Kruk saw me on the street and told me to take the key to the school department and to go with Masha.

I wandered around in the square. Walked with Lipkon.<sup>49</sup> Later in the reading room made "Sept" stamps, and two "September" stamps. The newspaper today explains the ministerial changes as being due to the health status and age of the retirees, and it mentions Himmler's youth and stamina. It notes the invasion of Izyum [a small town in the Ukraine] which has failed.

I later pasted the book *Lilavati*.<sup>50</sup> Made another stamp "September". While walking back I hear that Kittel apparently said to Gens: "If you carry out all the 'Aktionen' well, I will leave you and your police [alone], and I will transfer you to Kovno," and also that from the first of October, the ghetto will be sealed — some say liquidated. Both sides agree that the blocks will remain.

I was at Laban. No special news. An advancement on Poltava. Tyevsk was conquered. The German government is being transferred to Krakow and Poznan due to the bombing.

**Sunday the 29<sup>th</sup> [of August 1943].** In the morning I showed the stamps — they were liked. Later I became involved with the matter

47 Khana Pishsthatser-Man was a Bundist, teacher and educator. Active in the education system in the ghetto and in the underground movement, she was murdered in Majdanek.

48 Masha Efron was a Hebrew teacher.

49 I was unable to clarify details concerning this individual, who is mentioned time and again; however, from his connection with Avreym Zheleznikov, it is possible to assume that he was an active member of the underground movement.

50 It is possible that the reference is to a twelfth-century mathematics and geometry textbook, which was originally written in Sanskrit by Bhascaracharya.



of Lernman's card (the loan slip was lost). It was loaned by Hana.<sup>51</sup>

I was in the reading room. Gens spoke, [about] what I do not know, but the audience was calmed. They say that Gens said that the police will not go to Kovno (a rumor was spread that Gens is going to Kovno).

Serlis was over requesting a map for a friend. I found it for him. At the same time he asked for a piece of steel for a knife. Incidentally, those who wish to leave [to the forest], are let through the gate freely<sup>52</sup> if they hand over their numbers and passes, so that they won't be recognized as being from the Vilna ghetto. During the day, they said that it was because there must be 13,000 people in the ghetto. Incidentally, the transport is apparently postponed until the 15th [of September].<sup>53</sup>

In the evening was at Dina. She was not at home.

**Monday the 30<sup>th</sup> [of August 1943].** On Friday, Abramowicz<sup>54</sup> asked me to prepare a ten-month report, to count the number of books in the library, etc. Today I began to count [the books]. In the morning I walked around. Four synagogue benches, which were brought into the ghetto, were supposed to be brought to the library ... I wasted time. I took extra bread ration cards. Afterward I spent time in the reading room. Things have calmed down today.

51 Hana Abramowicz was a teacher and principal active in the care of abandoned children. She continued her educational activity in the ghetto. The mother of Dina Abramowicz, she was murdered in Majdanek.

52 Whereas he is speaking about the few remaining days before the hermetic closing of the ghetto (September 1), other sources do not confirm Heller's description.

53 Heller's evaluation concerning the delay of the final deportation turned out not to be true.

54 Moshe Abramowicz was a librarian in the "Mefitsey Haskala" Library before the war and, during the ghetto period, was a librarian in the General Library. He was not related to Hana or Dina mentioned earlier.

**[Beginning of September 1943]** — I ran around for bread, was at the guys<sup>55</sup> — did not meet up with anyone.

Took the axe [!].

Was at Kruk. Went by the library, the door was sealed with boards.

Was at Aronowicz,<sup>56</sup> left the axe there. Told him to come to Kruk. He let me eat in the Children's Home.

Spoke with Lipkon about going [to the above-mentioned guys?].

**Monday [6 September 1943]** — Took rationed products. Took the axe from Aronowicz. Spoke with Lipkon about going. Registered with the construction [department] and later at the Sanitation Police,<sup>57</sup> as a professional (bookbinder). Kruk advised me to register. So did Mrs. Lifshitz.<sup>58</sup>

It is possible that they will leave [who?]. I would also like to. They won't take [me?] faster than anyone else.

I asked mother to prepare a package for me.

In the ghetto — hunger.

In the evening took suppers. There was a large line.

The ghetto is sealed. According to yesterday's announcement,

55 The written word in the manuscript is “*yain*” [guys, fellows, gang], and in its context one may understand that it refers to his friends, maybe those organized in the underground movement.

56 Misha Aronowicz was the son of the Bund activist Yosef Aronowicz, a library worker in the ghetto. He was deported to Estonia in September 1943, where he perished.

57 The unit was responsible for the fight against contagious diseases and the cleanliness of the streets, buildings and courtyards. As an arm of the police, it was within its authority to administer citations and reports and mete out punishments. Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, pp. 200–201; Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, pp. 315–318.

58 Mrs. Lifshitz appears several times in the diary and, apparently, the reference is to Yelena Lifshitz, an English teacher and director of the reading room in the ghetto library.

the deportation “*Aktion*” is finished. Workshops will be created. It is possible that it will be quiet for a short while.<sup>59</sup>

I wish that I could leave!

The entire day there were visits by Germans. Who knows?

**Tuesday, [September] 7, [1943]** — In the morning — sharpened the axe. Later on, exchanged the lunch [ration] cards at the social welfare department, was late to the kitchen.

Was at Lipkon, went with him to Avreyml, we talked: to leave [to Estonia] is impossible, whether to join [the underground or the group leaving for the forest] he will discuss later. In the afternoon he gave no news, he must speak further with Nyetshunski.<sup>60</sup>

In the evening I was at Mira.<sup>61</sup> She also wants to go, but they won’t take her. She thinks that they won’t take me, either.

There was some good news from those who went to Estonia. Of the 28 women who went with their husbands [at the end of August], one wrote from the rail car: every day they are in the meantime given a loaf of bread, a little piece of fat, a bowl of soup.

59 On September 5, 1943, Gens published an announcement concerning the end of the deportations to Estonia, increasing the number of workers from among the ghetto inhabitants, and concerning the restriction of leaving for work outside the ghetto. Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, p. 420.

60 Apparently the reference is to Izho Yitzhak Nyetshunski, a young man approximately twenty years old who worked in the coal mines outside the ghetto. His family members freed him from this work and returned him to the ghetto, where he became active in the FPO. Nyetshunski left the ghetto during the liquidation period and left no trace since then.

61 Apparently Mira Bernshtein (1908–1943) was a teacher and principal in the Real Gymnasium in Vilna (in which Heller and his friends had studied). She was active in the Committee for Social Welfare in the ghetto and in the organization of the educational system and theater. She was close to the underground circles; however, due to her medical condition, she was unable to join those who escaped to the forests. She was deported to an extermination camp in Poland. Her activity was eternalized in a poem by Avraham Sutzkever, “Di Lererin Mire” (May 10, 1943); see Avraham Sutzkever, *Poetic Works* (Yiddish) (Tel Aviv, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 307–309.

They disembarked in Riga. The conditions — exceptional, the rail cars — open.<sup>62</sup>

Yesterday I took rationed products. Today I was in the kitchen. In the evening I went through a window (there was a line). I took meat for Zheleznikov and Tarukinski.

**Wednesday, [8.9.1943]** — Yesterday they announced the registration of women [for deportation to Estonia?]. Today — the last day. I stood in line for bread, for vegetables — and didn't receive [it]. I just took some peas.

I bought a newspaper, read *The Golden Key* [by Tolstoy].

I bumped into Lipkon, spoke with him. Avreyml still has no answer (he simply didn't speak).

Today there was a line at the Labor Office of those who want to work in the HKP, among them Bloch (the fellow from YIVO).

Was at Aronowicz. He says that I won't be taken, and it makes me sad because after them no one will be able to get out, [because] they will guard more diligently. According to Genkind the library will be opened tomorrow (Kruk told him so).

News: the English are advancing in Italy. They are bombing not badly, ours [the Soviets] are moving ahead on the front, and the Americans are showing their strength against the Japanese.

In the evening I was at Mira. She says that the plan to leave is not actual, because it is impossible to get through. With the [ration] cards I took some meat.

**Thursday the 9<sup>th</sup> of September** — In the morning I was in the reading room. One can still not enter the library. Maybe in the upcoming days. Later I was at Stolovitski at the cardboard workshop (Genkind told me that he will make a stamp for the workshop). He told me to come tomorrow.

62 Concerning the well wishes sent from Estonia and the hopes built around the deportations there, see Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, pp 454–455.

I later sat in the reading room (until seven o'clock), finished the "books inventory."<sup>63</sup> Later I took some soup in the kitchen. I took some bread at the School Department for mother (1/4 kg.). Incidentally, we too, in the library, received a quarter of a kilogram of bread.

I was at Mrs. Yofe.<sup>64</sup> She loaned me Emile Ludwig's *Napolean*. Mira says that the rumor that last night people left is true. Ten to twenty people left with money or profits. Among them: Peysakhovitsh (Dr.)<sup>65</sup> and Basok.

News: it is said that Italy capitulated. It turns out to be true. In the ghetto rumors are being spread about an attack in France. In today's newspaper it is written that Stalina (previously Yuzovka) was captured by the Soviets.<sup>66</sup>

It is said that more [people] will be taken to Estonia, this time: women. The HKP block will probably open on Monday. It is thought that until then it will be quiet. "Shlisman's" [?] boys are also going into the block. [When] people are missing, new ones are taken. Borke Groysdorf says that his father is also going. Avreyml Klok is definitely going (his father works in the HKP).

I was at Mrs. Lifshitz. She says that nothing is known (concerning the deportation to Estonia). She says that until the HKP [workers] go into the block, it will be quiet. Incidentally, all the rumors originated because of the intensified patrols in the city and around the ghetto. Others say however, that there will be an "Aktion" against the Poles. Nobody knows for sure.

Avreyml says: Nyetshunski refused because it doesn't make any sense...

63 Much statistical work was done in the ghetto library. Gabik seems to be relating to such a project.

64 This could refer to Esther Yofe, a Revisionist Zionist and FPO activist. She left the ghetto with Aryan papers, and there are differing opinions regarding her fate. See Kruk, *Diary of the Vilna Ghetto*, p.100, n.134.

65 Dr. Peysakhovitsh left the ghetto in September 1943, and became a partisan in the forests of Lithuania and Belorussia.

66 Stalino or Donetsk, a town in the Ukraine that was called Yuzovka until 1924.

**Friday the 10<sup>th</sup> [of September 1943]** — Today the newspaper is full of the Italy story: that Badoglio<sup>67</sup> had already betrayed [the Germans] on September 3, and only on the 9th did it disclose that Mussolini's overthrow was treason,<sup>68</sup> that a fascist regime was established on the border, that Italy was only a burden [to the Germans], and now, with the annulling of all its [Germany's] obligations to her, it is much better for Germany: she will not have to continue to defend a foreign country in which they consistently sabotage etc.

This is excellent. It is said that Hungary and the Balkan States, which are only allied with Italy and not with Germany, will do the same stunt.

What will be with the seizures of men [to Estonia?], no one knows exactly.

In the evening I was at Frieda: they maintain that as long as the HKP has not been transferred to the block, it will be quiet.

I saw Nyetshunski: he says that the principle is not to take any new [people]. I understand him.

Today in the evening Dora Rodkovitsh entered panicked: people are going to hide. I go out onto the stairs and indeed see: Marmut and his wife and child are packed up, wearing coats and are going down the stairs. I go down: the policeman Bernshtein,<sup>69</sup> is standing by the gate, next to the bathhouse and shines [his flashlight?] on me. I go by. There are two young people standing, and although it is after nine-thirty, he asks them "What are you doing here?" They respond that they live here. Then he asks them to show him their passes.

67 On July 25, 1943, Mussolini was arrested as he left a meeting with the Italian king, and Marshal Pietro Badoglio was appointed in his place as prime minister.

68 On September 8, 1943, a ceasefire was signed by Badoglio and the Allies. Concurrently, Germany took over the country's central and northern regions.

69 A high-ranking policeman who had participated in the liquidation of the small ghettos in the Vilna area in March 1943.

In the meantime I go to Mrs. Lifshitz to ask what this can mean. She says that she has heard nothing. I run away to Aronowicz — he is also calm. I come home and the young Mrs. Bloch says that the gate is being guarded so that no one will go out at night.

Incidentally, when I went by I saw the on-duty policeman at the gate. I went into Mrs. Lifshitz to tell her and [then] lay down. In the middle of the night: banging on the gate. Jewish policemen had just locked it. I do not know what happened.

At four o'clock, when Klara came into the reading room, I went out into the street. I was in a bad mood. I spoke with some friends about the HKP block.

**Saturday the 11th [of September 1943]** — In the morning I read a little *Napolean* and went to the reading room. I took down the newspapers. The English stormed Salerno. I sat in the reading room, read H. K.'s History of V.G. [History of the Vilna Ghetto by Herman Kruk]. Later during the day, at four o'clock, I left and again walked around in the streets, spoke with friends. Meyer Mirski isn't going [to Estonia?]. He cannot, and furthermore, if he does — it is only without his mother. [Yoshke] Pogorelski told me already a few days ago that his mother may possibly be able to go, he does not yet know for sure how. He doesn't really want to go. Today he says: his mother will remain here, she is already working in the laundry. She is not going because it is not possible.

I was at home, ate, later brought a board from the "gutter," sawed it into pieces, and again went to the reading room.

Read the "history" and went home. Ate supper, went to the bathhouse and lay down to sleep.

**Sunday the 12<sup>th</sup> [of September 1941]** — This morning I found out that they succeeded in obtaining places for three teachers [and their families] in the HKP block. Whoever wants should apply. Mother says that she does not think that they will take us (there are others before us), however she wants to decide "yes"

or “no” before she applies, because later there’s no backing out.<sup>70</sup>

Mrs. Lifshitz says, (I was at her [home]) that everyone wants to go “like bees to honey.” She cannot advise to go. In material terms it will be worse for us there.

I asked Pogorelski what he did. He says that he asked his mother to make an effort. It did not succeed. If one asks him, i.e., if it were up to him he would go, however, unwillingly. He also says that the men and the women there will be separated, due to a lack of space. True, but only until they renovate.

I ask Kruk, and he asks me: “What will you do there?” I say: “I do not yet know exactly.” He says: “I do not know why you should go.” I say: “Security... in terms of Estonia.” He answers: “I don’t yet know about the security there.” (This is approximately how he answered. I don’t remember exactly).

I also asked Bernshtein.<sup>71</sup> He does not know what to advise. Mrs. Yabrov<sup>72</sup> too does not know what to advise. She is going because she must.

I am very confused.

During the day, when Klara came, I had gone out again. Walked around in the street. Later went back to the reading room. Mother came to me in the evening. She said: It appears that we are not going. The candidates were gathered in the School Department... They had all decided to send first those whose relatives had already been taken. They are first in the line of

70 At the same time, the Germans deported laborers to Estonia. After the ghetto inhabitants had received regards from those deported, they understood that the situation in Estonia was not so horrible, and many requested to be sent there. The Germans did not refuse as long as the Jews went willingly.

71 According to the context, one can assume that the reference is to Dr. Leo Bernstein (1914–1943), a Zionist activist and, from April 1943, director of the Cultural Department in the ghetto; a teacher and head of a youth club, member of the FPO (“Yechiel’s group”).

72 He is possibly referring to Dr. Tamara Yabrov, a gynecologist. She worked with her son, a doctor, for the HKP camp, and perished there during its liquidation in July 1944.



danger. Two teachers have already been chosen: Luski and Rudashevski. Apparently we won't be among the third [chosen].

I was by Frieda. It is said that Gens supposedly said that it will probably be quiet already (the same appeared in today's *Ghetto Naves*), that as long as people are going, and fewer remain — it is better for us. It will be a small ghetto. Everyone will be employed. At Frieda they all maintain that as long as the HKP won't be transferred, it will be quiet.

Incidentally, those who leave, this is what Mira's friend says, are clothed at the expense of the ghetto.

Incidentally, my position on whether to go to the HKP is I want it as much as I fear it.

What delays me is first of all the hope of leaving [to the forest]; second — the material conditions in which we will live there [in Estonia?]; third — the fact that women are separated from the men; and fourth — there one can easily be seized, and over there there is nowhere to hide.

Today there were some letters from Estonia. Very good ones. Tarkinski, Shapiro, Toybman, Epshtein, Yashunski, received [letters]. Moshe Vayn's mother did not receive a letter. She asked me to ask Adam Frucht to check where they sort the letters.

**Monday the 13<sup>th</sup> [of September 1943]** — In the morning I cut my hair. Stood in a line next to "Ruta" [shop]. The mood in the store is: they will take more [people] to Estonia, probably only women. I heard that very many people are leaving [escaping]: [Bribed] Lithuanians wait and lead them away, as if under guard. However, this requires money and connections.

I spoke with Aronowicz's brother-in-law. He really wants to go to the HKP. I ask him: "And to the forest?" He says: "inertia won't let me," (if he really wanted to, he could go), "and rather than sit in the ghetto, I would rather be in the block [HKP]." I say to him that I want to. He suggests to me that I join a youth group. They do not want to leave, however in time, who knows? But how does one get to them?

Was at Mrs. Lifshitz. She thinks that the ghetto (or at least blocks of the ghetto industry) will continue to exist. She is determined to go to Estonia. It's easy for her to say.

I must try with all my might to get to the [youth] group.

Yesterday Hitler continued to speak about Italy's betrayal. He says, among other things: "What happened in Italy will never happen to us." The equivalent of "the pot calling the kettle black"; (On the head of a thief burns the hat.) "We can retreat from certain places, but collapse — this no... We saw the example of Yugoslavia, even before Italy betrayed [us], and it provided us with experience."

The library is not active. People are leaving "en masse," if one can express oneself this way. People are sewing themselves new clothing, apparently at the expense of the party, or the ghetto, and are gradually disappearing. There were few people in the reading room today.

A commission [came] during the daytime. There are rumors that Straszun Street [and] Lida Street are going to be cut off from the ghetto. Windows are being sealed from Zawolna Street.<sup>73</sup>

There are rumors that the Second Lithuanian [police] Precinct went into the forest.

I spoke with Yoshke and Gabik:<sup>74</sup> they (i.e. the youth group) are making an effort so that they could join them. They are not hopeful.

From the reading room I go to the kitchen, and from there — home. Later, more coffee, ate and went out. Returned Rabbi [Avraham Zvi] Listovski's bread [ration] card. Was at Mira, later at Mrs. Lifshitz, and [then] lay down to sleep.

73 Straszun Street was a central street in the ghetto, which included the educational and welfare institutions, as well the bunkers of the FPO units. Crossfire with the Germans on September 1, 1943, took place on this street. Lida Street was the northwestern border of the ghetto, and Zawolna Street the southwestern border (on which the Jewish Hospital was located).

74 Apparently the reference is to Gabik Sedlis, the son of Dr. Eliyahu Sedlis, who headed the hospital in the ghetto. Gabik became a partisan, was an expert in map reading, survived the war, and settled in New York.

I heard Gets speak in the kitchen: the Soviets have reached the Dnieper.

The commission that visited today was very satisfied. The ghetto is allegedly being transferred to the Wehrmacht. In any case, the mood in the ghetto is better. (The last point is a lie, according to Mrs. Lifshitz.) Mrs. Lifshitz says that it is true that the commission was satisfied.

As a joke I started talking with Klara, and it ended with her promising me to speak with Khvoynik and Yashunski<sup>75</sup> about taking me with them. At Mira I found out that they don't want to take her (one must have more [grease]). They go at night, through the marshes. During the day they sleep. It's in the area of Sorok-Tatar, around Swir.<sup>76</sup> They are all going to Glazman's group.<sup>77</sup>

75 The reference is to known names of the representatives of the older Bundist leadership. Avrom Khvoynik (1907–1943) was certified in law at the University of Vilna. He was an active member in the Bund and its youth movement “Tsukunft.” He had succeeded in avoiding the purges carried out during the Soviet period and became one of the foremost leaders of the party in the underground movement and its liaison with the other parties. Active in the FPO, he was captured with three other members on September 23, 1943; they had shot and killed a German and were hanged by Kittel in Rosa Square (the square in which those intended for deportation were gathered) in front of the Jews who were concentrated there. The identification of Yashunski is not definite; it is possible that the reference is to Grishe Yashunski, a lawyer and member of the Bund. At the end of 1939, he had arrived in Vilna as a refugee from Warsaw. He functioned as director of the Food Department and later headed the Culture Department in the Judenrat. With the passing of time, the relationship between him and Gens worsened, and he had to resign from his position in April 1943, when he transferred to work outside of the ghetto. It is more reasonable to assume that Heller here refers to Yashunski's wife, Leah, who was also active in party circles until the liquidation of the ghetto.

76 The escape route from the ghetto is described by Korczak, *Flames in Ash*, pp. 233–234.

77 Following the Witenberg episode, the first group of FPO members left to the Narocz Forests (July 4, 1943). This was “Leon's Group” under the command of Yosef Glazman, Gens's former deputy. The group numbered twenty-one people. During the escape it encountered a German ambush, and in the clash nine members were killed. This group was the Jewish nucleus within the framework of Fyodor Markov's partisan unit. Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, pp. 449–454; Korczak, *Flames in Ash*, pp. 225–235.

Incidentally, I heard in the line — Jewesses already know — that Ring<sup>78</sup> is leaving tomorrow...

I was at Frucht about Wein's letter. He promised...

**Tuesday the 14<sup>th</sup> [of September 1943]** — In the morning I went to Stolovitski about the stamp. He does not yet know the design. Went through "Rutas" [shops] and finally gave Yudis the [ration] card. She took bread. Was at Mrs. Lifshitz. She does not know of any news. I was at Klara. She says that she will speak [to ?] already today. (Incidentally, I am certain that it will not help.) Incidentally, according to what she says, Yashunski and his wife received a position [job], and as it turns out that they will remain.

I spoke with Reuze<sup>79</sup> about leaving [to Estonia?]. She says — it's [already] decided. She herself is not going. About taking [me with] however: when it will be quieter, [when] they will finish "the journey" [to the woods] then, if they will, in principle, take along new people — I will also be taken along.

Mrs Zheleznikov is sewing a windbreaker [coat] for Avreyml. Today he came to rush her. I saw there a hidden box of saccharine — apparently for him. I asked him: if the youth are going can I go too (the same question as I asked Reuze). He says that first of all they are not going, secondly it depends on Nyetshunski.

Lunski<sup>80</sup> became ill this morning in the reading room. He lay down on a bench and later I took him home.

78 Natan Ring was an officer in the Ghetto Police and one of the commanders of the liquidation of the area's ghettos in March 1943. In the summer of 1942, he joined "Yecheiel's fighting unit" with some additional policemen. In September 1943, he left for the Rudniki Forests and was a member of Yecheiel Sheynboym's partisan unit. A short time later he was executed with three other policemen, having been condemned for being informers and collaborating with the Germans. *The Jewish Partisans' Book* (Hebrew) (Merhaviva: Sifriat Hapoalim, 1958), pp. 114–133; Rindzyunski, *Destruction of Vilna*, pp. 156–157.

79 Apparently this is Reyzel Stolitski, a student in the Real Gymnasium. She was older than Heller and the secretary of the Bundist youth club in the ghetto.

80 Khaykl Lunski (1881–1943) was a writer and librarian at the Straszyn Library in Vilna for at least forty-five years. In the ghetto he continued his activities and was known for his modesty and severe suffering. Regarding his history in the ghetto, see Kruk, *Diary of Vilna Ghetto*, pp. 178–179.

At four o'clock Kruk sent [someone to] call for me. I went to see him at home. He gave me a small suitcase. Inside were some manuscripts. I carried it away with him to the tin workshop, and we welded it there.

In the evening Klara wrote a note to Khvoynik, asking when she could see him. With great difficulty I received an answer that he was just leaving. When he left I called Klara. She came down into the courtyard and spoke with him. During the time that I was waiting for Khvoynik they closed the reading room, and that is why, while going back, I only closed the windows and went off for home. I reached Rudnitsky Street — the street was full of people, not like usual. Crowds of people were standing and speaking. At first I didn't pay any attention to it, until I heard the words: "no one knows what is happening here..." I ask around, and am answered that it is not quiet, but no one knows what and when. I run home — the same mood. People are standing fully clothed, running here and there — a real panic. Mother was not at home and so I grabbed my coat, the sweaters, put a piece of bread in my pocket and — (I went to Mrs. Lifshitz even before I went into the house, she knows nothing) — told Mrs Zheleznikov that I am going to the Sports Field, and that she should tell mother, that if something happens, she should save herself. She [Mrs. Zheleznikov] yelled at me: why am I creating such a panic, etc.

I went out to the street and found out, that Gens went out into the city and was arrested. The people are very nervous. At the sports field people are walking around, among them some acquaintances: Leyzerovitsh, Gagozhinski, Nyetshunski, Salek, Leshanski. I walk around and sit down. In the meantime it is said that Segal<sup>81</sup> from the Labor Office said that his [Gens's] arrest was due to a personal crime that he committed. People should be calm and tomorrow come at six o'clock in the morning to work in

81 Osher Segal, public figure and merchant, was the last director of the Labor Department in the Judenrat.

the workshops, both shifts, because a commission is supposed to come.

I bumped into Rudenski<sup>82</sup> and Galpern and ask them if something was supposed to happen. They say that there will be no defense. I waited for a while and then went off for home. I ate and went to Mrs. Lifshitz — she does not know anything, [there is] no news. Then I went off to Aronowicz to ask him to let me into the library. He promised to give me the key to the reading room, and if in the morning things will not be quiet, I will be able to be inside. (I thought — who can tell, maybe it is related to Estonia?).

I went home, and was also at Klara. Khvoynik's response: we must have a [?] without which — it cannot be done. Even relatives are left behind. Went home. Took a pillow, and already after the whistle [curfew] went back [out to the street]. People were not arrested on the streets, in general, the police were agitated, they even released the prisoners from Lida Street. I went in to Aronowicz, took the key of the reading room, went inside, spread out the coat (it was stuffed full with the bread that mother had given me). At the head of the small table, were two books, a curtain and the pillow. At first I simply lay down, after a while I fell asleep, however I woke up every so often. At dawn, at five thirty I woke up and wandered around until 8 o'clock, and then went back home.

So we are already [on]: **Wednesday the 15<sup>th</sup> [of September 1943]** — In the morning I ate, cleaned and helped mother make a fire. Later I took the newspapers and was at Genkind. One is not permitted to walk on all the streets, Germans are here. Incidentally, Genkind ordered a sign from me — “religious kitchen” for Horwitz.<sup>83</sup> I made it later in the reading room.

82 It is possible that he was referring to Mera Rudenski, a member of the FPO who worked in the train station outside of the ghetto and transmitted information to her friends in the underground movement. She escaped to the Narocz forests and was murdered there by local farmers.

83 Hersh Horowitz was Kruk's brother in law, a refugee from Warsaw who was responsible for Agudat Israel's public kosher kitchen in the ghetto. He was deported to Estonia in September 1943, and perished there.

Then, in the reading room I found out that Gens was shot. Why? Rumors are spreading. It is said: because he was a Lithuanian officer and because he belonged to an illegal officers' organization, and because he tolerated ammunition, etc.<sup>84</sup> Later, it was said that Kittel spoke at a cafe in front of all the policemen — about what, I do not know.

I was at Kruk a couple of times (he wanted to weld another suitcase), however he told me to come [back] tomorrow. Later I was at home, ate. Incidentally, I received a supplemental ration<sup>85</sup> at the infirmary in the school, and tomorrow I will go back for vitamins. At night while walking back I saw a list of all those who are going with their luggage to the block where they will receive permits to go. Incidentally, Aronowicz's brother-in-law is not included: in general, even those who work at the HKP itself — not all of them were taken. One had to have money and connections.

In the evening I took some soup, [and] was at Frieda.

It is said that there will be a commissar, that the ghetto will become a labor camp, the passes will be exchanged, and instead of bread [ration] cards, give bread booklets. The devil knows if things will be worse or better.

**Thursday the 16<sup>th</sup> [of September 1943]** — In the morning I lay down. I was still extremely tired from the previous night. Secondly, my stomach hurt. Later I was at Gabik and found out many interesting things about the Fighters' Organization. Incidentally, yesterday Genkind told me that during the commotion [following Gens's death] Bernshtein, Ring and

84 Concerning the turn of events that preceded Gens's execution, and the interpretations of these events in the ghetto, see Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, pp. 425–429.

85 A supplement of food that was given to some of the workers by the Judenrat. The source of the supplement was the acquisitions from outside the ghetto or from the confiscation of smuggled food.

Gruner<sup>86</sup> boarded a truck together with Lithuanian Criminal Police and their chief and went there [to the forest]. It cost however good money.

I was at Mrs. Lifshitz. She heard that the ghetto apparently will be taken over from Monday, by the SS, and that it is possible that things will be better. The commissar will sit in the headquarters, and no Gestapo will be allowed into the ghetto.

From Anya I found out what Kittel's motivation was concerning [wanting] Gens's death: Neugebauer<sup>87</sup> shot him himself, firstly — due to personal reasons, secondly — for not fulfilling orders, thirdly — for letting people out with ammunition.

Interestingly, a few days ago it was said (it is true) that Kittel was beaten up by his colleagues. Dr. Tyuzki bandaged him.

[News] from the front tells of the capture of Briansk. This is not mentioned in the newspaper.

I received some celluloid from Margolis, I cleaned it and it became transparent. In the evening I took the sign and the celluloid to Horowitz. I told him to show it to Kruk so that Kurk will evaluate how much money I should get. Later I was at Frieda. On the street I saw Mushkat<sup>88</sup> with a line of people: I heard him say “HKP shmekape, wszystko jedno” [Polish; translation, “it’s

86 Hugo Gruner, an engineer by profession, was an officer in the Ghetto Police. Following the discovery of a large amount of goods in his home (in February 1943), he was suspended from his position and was sent to work at the train station. Kruk writes about him: “There were times when Gruner allowed himself to hit and beat, not like an engineer but like one of the basest of the base.” Kruk, *Diary of Vilna Ghetto*, p. 461.

87 *Obersturmführer* Neugebauer was the commander of the SD unit in Vilna from the beginning of 1942 until 1943.

88 Yosef Mushkat, a lawyer from Warsaw, was a member of the Revisionist party. He arrived in Vilna as a refugee in 1939, functioned as Gens's deputy in the ghetto and was responsible for the cleanliness inspections. He administered the “Children's Brigade,” which offered an organizational framework for abandoned children. He who worked in the cleaning as well as the reporting of crimes — which was sometimes interpreted as an opening for more severe informer activity. In September 1943, he was deported to Estonia and apparently died there.



all the same”]. Wherever it is fated — there I shall die. I will not go to the block! A boy who was standing close by told me what Mushkat had said before this, that the ghetto was in danger, [that] in the evening the high-ranking police officers were gathered and waited for news, and that just then Neugebauer telephoned Dessler [and said] that the ghetto will remain. “You can go to sleep quietly,” said Mushkat at the end of his “speech.”

The entire day all were getting ready to go to the HKP I was with Kruk at the tin shop, where he welded his suitcase, and so I saw the entire commotion of everyone getting ready: next to every truck stands a policeman commanding how to pack the things. Just then I saw Rosentahl,<sup>89</sup> how he screamed when they would pack things not according to his liking — “[If] you want to live with me good [in peace]” — he says to those who are going — “so obey what I am saying to you”...

**Friday the 17<sup>th</sup> [of September 1943]** — In the morning I was at Mrs. Lifshitz, and by Klara. I do not exactly remember everything [that was said] (I am writing this on Sunday). Later I was in the reading room. I “studied” the previous days’ newspapers, looked for points on the map. Later I was at home, ate something, went to Izke Levin, the boy whose father has an atlas of the Soviet Union. I found Kirov and Krasnoarmieiskaia. It was difficult to go back because a high commission was in the ghetto: Hingst himself, it is said, before entering the ghetto asked: “Is it quiet ?” If, God forbid, it could happen that he would be shot...

During the day I saw Reyze. She said with a smile, that in a couple of days she will have news for me.

In the evening I went to the kitchen. During the day Horowitz said that I should come at night. He did not show Kruk the sign (incidentally, it is already hanging). I want to settle with

89 A member of the police who was attached to the Judenrat Labor Department. He was later in the HKP and perished there during the liquidation of the camp.

Trumpianski.<sup>90</sup> He, incidentally, has more work for me. Early in the evening neither was around. I just took supper and went away.

Later I was at Gabik. He was not there and so we [I] spoke with his mother and Mrs. Tarkinski about real issues, about people being taken away. Later was at Frieda, we also spoke about whether it will be quiet or not. Incidentally, I heard a nice story today: on the day that they took Gens away, he was warned two times (he indeed did have Lithuanian friends and acquaintances) that there was a death sentence out on him and that he should flee. He [Gens] asked: “And what will happen to the ghetto?” The other one [the Lithuanian] answered: “That, I do not know,” and so he stayed.<sup>91</sup> I was impressed by this. That same day, in the morning, I saw him riding in a vehicle. Of course I had no idea.

Mira said that she has no hope of going. Last year she harshly criticized the desire to defend [ourselves]. She was answered that those like her are not needed, and that she will not be taken (she said that it was a mistake).

**Saturday the 18<sup>th</sup> [of September 1943]** — Today I woke up, ate peas in bed. Mother had just come from the line, brought the cheap supplementary ration card from the Judenrat: two kilograms bread, 20 decagrams butter, 1.4 kg peas and some fat [shortening]. She went for coffee, came back, and even before she poured me the coffee, I heard a faint noise on the stairs. Lately (after the Gens story) I have been very frightened, and I instinctively jump at every rustle. I get up “Sh, sh, sh, let me hear.” Just then Mrs. Toybman accosted me: “Why are you so frightened — don’t take every little thing to heart.” Just then they

90 He was apparently referring to Yankl Trupianski (and not "Trumpianski" as is written in the manuscript), a graduate of the Jewish Teachers' Seminary in Vilna and a teacher at the Medem Sanatorium in Otwock. He arrived in Vilna as a refugee and was responsible for the public kitchens in the ghetto. He was eventually sent to the camps in Estonia, where he perished.

91 See Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, pp. 425–429.

came to tell us that it was not quiet [outside]. I was getting dressed when Osne, Shula's relative, barges in. She says that it is not quiet, the ghetto is under guard, no one knows anything, and people are running. Hava comes in and says that all the women have left the workshops. They simply smashed the windows. Such a panic erupted. In the meantime I began to get ready. Mother was putting bread into my coat when Avreyml Zheleznikov came in (he had just eaten when they came to tell him, and then went down to the street to see what was happening) and said that the panic was uncalled for. Kittel came in with two Estonians through a maline [bunker].<sup>92</sup> It all started from this. I became calm and began to eat, when we hear steps under the window. Shula bends down, and says that it is some Estonians. The panic in the street decreased in the meantime, but people are still going into the bunkers. And so when the ghetto is essentially under guard, I decide to go. We take Avreyml and go to the library. In the court between both gardens I see the police lined up. Applboym, the block commander, is standing at the gate and does not allow anyone to pass. However, we were walking quickly, almost running, and he did not even stop us. On the way we saw how the "strong ones"<sup>93</sup> were assembling. When I got to Straszun Street I began to walk around. There were other acquaintances there. I asked Aronowicz — if anything happens will I be able to go into the library. He says yes. The time was already eleven (the commotion began at 9:30). All of a sudden there is a stampede. I want to enter the library, not a chance, they do not let. I go to Aronowicz, so that he should let me in, he says that he cannot. The stampede this time was in vain. In any case I think that [I] have to see if the attic is open on Aronowicz's side.

92 "Maline" — bunker. There were dozens of "malines" in the Vilna ghetto that were intended to hide individuals and groups. These were first used during the early murder operations, between August and December 1941. With the liquidation of the ghetto, the "malines" again began to play a major role in the lives of the survivors of the ghetto.

93 "*Di Shtarke*" [the strong ones] was a term for the bullies in the ghetto. In those days many of them were enlisted as aides to the police.

I go up to Straszun Street 8, the attic in [number 6] is open. I take a look where one can get up to the roof, standing [there] is Leybke, Aronowicz's brother-in-law, looking at the library's attic. I ask him if he is going to climb. He answers yes, and that he is waiting for the people underneath to disperse. In a little while he begins to climb. When he gets there he winks at me that I should climb. Just then a young man walks by, and he approaches me. I make like nothing [is happening]. He asks me something, I answer. When he leaves, I begin to climb. When I get there, I see that I am being followed. We both enter, and it turns out that it is Leybke's friend and neighbor. We sit, all three, in the attic and talk about the "kidnapper,"<sup>94</sup> memories. In the meantime I make laces out of Tefillin [phylacteries] straps for my shoes. Just then someone crawls underneath. It turns out that it is Aronowicz. He tells us to sit. A little later Aronowicz's wife and neighbor come up. We crowded into a corner, hidden by a basket. We were a little alarmed, because a pair of boys came up and looked inside. We thought that they were informers (incidentally, while we were crawling up to the attic the janitor, it seems, yelled something to me. In any case I thought that he noticed us). Later, the cover leading to the library opened, and someone from the staff asked: not including Aronowicz's wife and neighbor, is anyone else here? It turns out that they were constantly hearing footsteps, and so from then on we sat really quietly. Then Aronowicz comes in and says that they are demanding 150 tradesmen and their families, for the HKP, but of course no one wants to go. Later he comes in again with a grave look<sup>95</sup> and says: Levas, Nusbaum<sup>96</sup> and others

94 "*Khapunes*" meant the Polish collaborators, who, in the initial days of the German occupation, served in the capture and handing over of the Jews to the Germans for forced labor and destruction.

95 "*Grabowy wyraz twarzy*"; in the original, it was written in Yiddish transliteration.

96 The reference is apparently to Nusbaum-Olczewski, the chief prosecutor of the Ghetto Police. In September 1943, he was transferred to the HKP and killed before the liberation.

went over to the block of the HPK and they will probably liquidate here [the ghetto]. Later he came up again: craftsmen are being registered. They must have a thousand craftsmen (excluding those who work in the shops). Kittel is walking through the street and speaks with each person really pleasantly. Markus<sup>97</sup> approaches him and asks: “Should I go?”, and Kittel answers: “Do not go.” To another he says “Yes, go.” It is tragically comical: our good friend Kittel gives us advice.

We, in the attic, begin to hypothesize: they want to save 1000 people and then later really send them to the HKP, because the chief himself, Ploge, and Kolish<sup>98</sup> say this too. On the other hand, we are already familiar with such stunts. During the four days [1–4 September] the German HKP men took some families of workers on trucks. They really intended to send them to the work places, but Gestapo men took over the vehicle and led the Jews away to the train bound for Estonia. Besides this, it is possible that precisely as in the first story of [the deportation to] Estonia, when they included the Todt<sup>99</sup> people, now too, in this stunt, they are including the HKP people.

Nevertheless, it remains that Leybke should register himself (for HKP or Estonia). He went, lingered a while, and came back. He recounted that people are being registered next to the cafe on the street. Family names are recorded as well as the address. He says that the mood on the street is better. Others hope that it is only a “Judenpays”<sup>100</sup> on Kittel’s part. We get up to go home and

97 Apparently the reference is to the engineer Shimon Marcus, responsible for the large workshops in the ghetto.

98 Nyonic Kolish, a member of the police, was the brigadier responsible for the residential block of 300 families working in the HKP

99 Todt was the enterprise for construction work, paving roads and train tracks established by Minister of Ordinance Dr. Fritz Todt, which employed more than one million forced laborers, including Jews. Concerning the presence of “Todt” people in the ghetto following the deportations at the beginning of September, notwithstanding the deportations as Heller understood them, see Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, p. 420.

100 On the scale of “*Judenrein*,” meaning to cause pain, or abuse.

see, but since it is already five o'clock, and because I thought that according to his words (they were so nervous, that I could hardly recognize them: I wanted to ask Leybke something, and instead of speaking to the point, he answered ten times, that he won't respond) that at 5 o'clock something is supposed to happen. In the meantime, Zelig, the neighbor's husband, came up, and relating to the same news as Aronovitsh, painted a different picture altogether. He says that there is no proof that everything is finished, and that it is possible that it will end with nothing [happening]. If so, why are they maintaining the guard for so long? In a word, he calmed us down a little. A little later they came up to tell us that men are being seized.

As we were lying we heard yelling from the courtyard: "All the men are being seized!" Finally, it turns out that they were yelling: "All the men are being freed."

Zelig came up and said " Friends! The Estonians have gone and they have freed the captured [people] from the trucks!" For us, who were already prepared for anything, like the ghetto being bombed, this was great news.

The women went down and I, together with Leybke, stayed (the young man had already left during the day). Leybl was already completely changed: he recounted what had happened during the four days [the first four days of September] (he also lay here then). He said that Izke Korobtshinski<sup>101</sup> would earn lots of money and give it over to the organization. During the "*Aktion*" he became a leader of a children's group [carrying] a revolver. They barricaded themselves, and just then Ganionska<sup>102</sup> came and brought them armbands and sent them to Straszun Street 6.<sup>103</sup>

101 One of the first leaders in the FPO who was a close friend of Yosef Glazman.

102 Apparently Mira Ganyonska, born in Kovno, a member of Betar and the FPO. She worked in the Jewish Police, supplied information to the underground movement, and participated in its activities. She escaped with other members to the Narocz Forests in September 1943, and was murdered there in the winter of 1944.

103 As mentioned earlier, the first regiment and the post of the FPO was located in the house on Straszun Street, number six.

With an inspector's armband he [Leybke] went home. His mother did not let him go back again, and he remained. On the next day he was taken. In another place, on Szpitalna Street 6,<sup>104</sup> they were already ready to shoot when Solomon Gens<sup>105</sup> and Neugebauer came. All of a sudden they [?]. Since they didn't receive an order to shoot, everybody escaped.

When it became dark, Aronowicz came up and told us to come down. I went down and off for home. I was later at Mrs. Lifshitz. She says that it will surely be quiet. A new leadership is being chosen. (Dessler indeed ran away). Kittel is supposed to have said that if Dessler will come back, it will only be without a head.

I was at Kruk, he did not tell me anything. He does not know anything, he says. Later was at Gabik, and Pogoralski. They say that the aid groups were dissolved, and only the older people shut themselves up in the library. I was by Frieda and heard there (not only from her) the different hypotheses relating to the Kittel story. Some say that the same was done elsewhere (in Lida, Baranowicze), and that only afterward was the ghetto liquidated. Others say that it is only "Judenpayn" and that in "Kailis" they also lined up everyone with [their] packages in the middle of the night, held them [there] until the morning, and then ordered them to go back. It is said that in the HKP block they also pulled such a stunt, on the second day: the tradesmen were separated from the non-tradesmen, and the non-tradesmen were supposed to be sent into the ghetto. We had already heard this in the bunker, and the women interpreted it [as follows]: they are searching for tradesmen to be sent there [to Estonia]; non-tradesmen — [will remain] here. This caused panic. They simply prepared to die. I too was not much better, but somehow I held

104 The location of the second regiment of the FPO, close to the organization's weapons warehouse. On September 1, the location was revealed by informers; Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, p. 410.

105 Jacob Gens's brother, a policeman who joined the new leadership of the ghetto, following his brother's execution.

on. No one knows what he [Kittel] meant by this stunt. Others even say that it's a rehearsal.<sup>106</sup>

**[Monday, the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, 1943]** — ... In yesterday's "Goniec"<sup>107</sup> appeared [as follows]: a police commander in the prison was shot. Being that this was the second case, and that it was done by a Polish terrorist organization, they took one hundred hostages from among the Polish intelligentsia. Ten of them have already been shot. Their list is posted, with [people] from a laborer to a director, an engineer, doctor, military person — all in all, as stated, ten.

Incidentally, among those who ran away on Saturday [18.9] are: Dessler and his wife (his parents were taken in to the HKP), Nusbaum, Levas. It is said that Kittel said about Dessler: "What a dog."<sup>108</sup>

I was at Dina<sup>109</sup> and reminded her that in two days time she should have [?] and the two days are over. She answered — when things will calm down, and we will be able to see how and what. Spoke to Gabik. He says that now they are not going, because Neugebauer and all the Gestapo conducted a "manhunt" (the people think that they went to liquidate a few villages of their civilian population, and bring back some booty). Once they begin, however, he thinks that they will also take the youth.

106 The manuscript found in the Moreshet Archives is cut off here, and its continuation begins from September 20, according to Kaczerginski's transcription.

107 *Goniec Codzienny* was a German newspaper in the Polish language that appeared in Vilna.

108 According to Kaczerginski the continuation of the text — more than one page — is illegible.

109 Dina Abramowicz was a librarian at the YIVO library and later in the ghetto library. She worked as an aide to the director of the Children's Library, survived the war and moved to the United States where she continued her work at the YIVO Institute. See her memoirs: "Vilna Ghetto Library," in Mendl Sudarski et al., eds, *Lite*, vol. 1 (Yiddish) (New York: Kultur Gezelshaft fun Poylishe Yidn, 1951), pp. 1671–1678.



Rubinov<sup>110</sup> came to Abramowicz for the key to the library (why the hell he needs it, I do not know). He was told that those inside have the key, and that he should go to them. I had in the meantime a little [errand] to run: to Kruk and later to the work group [Kommando]. In the morning I went into the library: the books [were] scattered, a few pillows were on the bench, on the barrier. I took a few books for Dina.

Kruk yesterday gave me a note for the “Yeladim,”<sup>111</sup> for a cart. The books must be brought from Gens’s office into the reading room. However, each time we [tried, we] were chased from the streets, so we could not take them. In the evening before closing I read K’s “History,” however, because Lunski returned to him the old pages, I was left with a big gap.

**Tuesday the 21<sup>st</sup> [of September 1943]** — Last night I was at Pogorelski. Suddenly someone barged in with news: Lithuanians broke in through a courtyard to Lida Street... A dead man was found ... We went down to see what was happening. It turns out that there was no danger. I learned the following details: today a Jew entered the ghetto through a bunker from outside the ghetto (or he exited through it) on Lida Street 9. A Lithuanian followed him and shot into the air, and a panic erupted that Lithuanians are in the ghetto. Secondly, independent of this, a dead man was found on Szpitalna Street — one of the underworld. It is likely that he could not divide his earnings with his partner (they both smuggled flour and potatoes), and the other “dealt with him.” A meager loss, it seems that yesterday Kittel was in the ghetto at night in connection to this [incident], (yesterday at night we were not allowed to walk in the street).

110 Perhaps the reference is to the lawyer Rubinov, director of the Civil Court, who also worked for a period of time in the ghetto archives.

111 An organization for orphaned children, regularly employed in transferring items on two-wheeled wagons; see Mark Dworzecki, *The Fight for Health in the Vilna Ghetto* (Yiddish) (Paris and Geneva: 1946), pp. 52–53.

This morning I went to the reading room, walked around a little, and later went to the “Yeladim” for a cart. I waited there a long while and received it. We came to Rudnitski Street 6 precisely when Kittel was there (with a cart the police let you through, without it — not). Hana and Dina [Abramowicz] were supposed to wait there, but it turns out that they already left. I went to inquire as to where the books are. Turns out they are at Oberhart.<sup>112</sup> We waited until Oberhart came, and then he showed us where the books are (in his room, when you enter into the Judenrat, right to the left). We were packing the books, precisely when Kittel was walking by. I was then in the room, when the fellows from “Yeladim” say that he had gone past. I took a look and continued going. We later packed up all the books, among which was an album with a nice hardcover, and brought it into the reading room. Later I ate, and was in the reading room. Suddenly Kruk jumped in: the sign on the street must be taken down (because some commission, or even Kittel, was in the ghetto). I immediately took it down.

Among the material that we brought were some prized works of the Writers’ Union:<sup>113</sup> Sutzkever’s<sup>114</sup> poems (I read them), Kalmanovitsh’s works. Among Sutzkever’s poems: “Tsu Di Letste” and “A Nem Ton Dos Ayzen.” There was another parcel with birthday cards for Gens; an invitation from the ghetto theater actors to a gathering in honor of Gens: an ode in his

112 A former officer in the Ghetto Police, he was known in the ghetto as an informer and as maintaining connections with the Germans. In mid-1942, he was suspended from the police force; however, following Gens’s death and Dessler’s disappearance, he was appointed chief of police.

113 According to Kruk’s notes, a union of writers and artists was established on January 20, 1942; *Diary of Vilna Ghetto*, p. 139. Concerning the organization, events that took place under its auspices, including the contests noted in the diary, see also Dworzecki, *Yerushalayim DeLita*, pp. 238–241.

114 Avraham Sutzkever (b. 1913) was one of the most important Yiddish poets in the twentieth century. A resident of Vilna and a member of the writers’ group “Yung Vilne” in the 1930s, he continued to write in the ghetto and was one of the FPO members. The poems mentioned can be found in his book, Sutzkever, *Poetic Works* (Yiddish) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1963), pp. 293, 299.

honor by someone called Haim Maltianski, an ode to him by a male and female worker from Keilylis' second block; a greeting for his fortieth birthday from the policeman Marek Shapiro; a poem written in Mr. Gens's waiting room by a hospital worker who worked sawing wood, and who wanted Gens to revoke his dismissal; a story by Bliakher<sup>115</sup> about the death of his mother — dedicated to Gens; a photograph from the Cooperative's Album, which was published on the occasion of the anniversary of the Police Cooperative; a nicely bound book of Bernshtein's translation into German of Sutzkever's "Dray Royzn", etc...

Today there is a decree that for smoking, not darkening the windows, and reading newspapers — the death penalty.

Yesterday a proclamation was posted that all brochures [publications] and books, that contain pictures of communist leaders — Lenin, Stalin, must be destroyed.

In today's newspaper it says that the Germans left Sardinia. In the Lithuanian press: because there have been sabotage of railway lines, in the future those held responsible will be the inhabitants of the district in which it occurs. They will be sent somewhere, and their houses burned down. They should thus guard their own and the public's property.

In the evening I read Sutzkever's poems which were found among the papers from Gens's office. In the evening I was at Frieda, and we spoke a little. Later I went home and lay down to sleep. Before I fell asleep, I heard soldiers walking outside. I got nervous at the many figures walking single file on the sidewalk, so different one from the other. I was a little frightened, but when they had already walked by, I lay down to sleep.

**Wednesday the 22<sup>nd</sup> [of September 1943]** — Today I slept badly (lately I have been sleeping badly, every rustle wakes me from

115 Shabtay Bliakher (1904–1944?), an author and Vilna actor, was a member of the Writers and Artists Union in the ghetto. He was deported to the camps in Estonia, and perished there.

sleep). At daybreak, at five-thirty, I wake up and I hear “men are being seized.” I immediately began to get dressed and even before mother came with an answer (she went out to see what was happening), I was already ready. According to Yudis, it was as follows: the Jewish police was on its feet already from 12 o’clock, apparently men will be kidnapped. In the meantime I went in to Mrs. Lifshitz. She says: “Who knows what Kittel will do here? Men will probably be seized” ...I got dressed and went with mother along Straszun Street (the streets were empty — yet at the Ruta there was a line). I part from mother and go through the library into the attic. I called to Aronowicz, and he led me through. There I met Leybke and Shloyme Kovarski’s father. I lay there like last time. It turns out that in the meantime, iron tools were brought in: axes, pliers, chisels, in a word — anything that can be put to use in a battle. With great difficulty I shoved some of it to the side, so that I would be able to lie down. I lay until nine o’clock. Then, together with Leybke, I crawled out and sat down to talk with Kovarski. I made new laces for my shoes. Later, we made checkers out of a board and began to play. We played three rounds when Aronovitsh came in and said that we could go down. So we went down. I was exhausted and really hungry. I ran an errand for Aronowicz (brought Frieda writing material), and wanted to go home. I was not permitted, so I went into the reading room, took off my coat and [later] went home, ate a little snack and came back. Later in the evening I went again. I ate and came back at approximately five-thirty. Gens’s stamp (in German and Lithuanian) was brought to the archive.

Yesterday Mrs Toyberman recounted that Stolovitski told her, that Mrs. Daninov said: highly placed Lithuanians told her, that the ghetto will remain. Mira Kanishtshiker also heard that the ghetto is approved, and that a meeting is scheduled to take place between the Wehrmacht, SS and Gestapo — as to in whose hands it will remain.

Today Mrs. Mazin (the older one) told mother that Kittel is no longer to be head of the ghetto because the ghetto will apparently

be transferred to the SS (or to another affliction), and [then] we will have a new boss over us. She is distressed over this, because Kittel has already been slightly forgiven and suddenly now a new boss will come.

Furthermore: people say that [for] Riga 2,000 men [for deportation] were demanded, and so Kittel sent them to Kovno. No one was submitted from Kovno, and so Kittel was again approached. Some say that 1,000 men are being demanded from Kittel, and that he only wants to give 300. Others say they demand 300 and Kittel doesn't want to give any. Anyways, Kittel is our guardian.

Some weird gossip is being told: it seems a German said that Jews were going to the forest and want us [the Germans] to liquidate the ghetto so that Moscow could say "Jews are being killed by us." But they won't succeed. The Jews will work and live. How does that seem to you?

They say the Soviets conquered Vitebsk from Smolensk and are advancing. Besides that they say that the Americans conquered Sardinia and put a unit in Corsica.

