Vilna

(in Lithuanian, Vilnius; in Polish, Wilno). Capital of Lithuania. Prior to World War 11, Vilna was a major center of Jewish scholarship and culture. Under Polish rule from 1920-1939, Vilna had a population of 200,000, including 55,000 Jews. On September 19, 1939, the Soviets entered Lithuania. About 15,000 Jewish refugees from Poland fled to Vilna soon after. A few weeks later, the Soviets delivered Vilna to the Lithuanians. In July 1940 Vilna, along with the rest of Lithuania, was annexed to the Soviet Union. From September 1939 to June 1941, 6,500 Jewish refugees left Vilna for the United States, Palestine, the Far East, and elsewhere.

On June 24, 1941, the Germans occupied Vilna as part of their invasion of the Soviet Union. A few days later, the German and Lithuanian authorities began implementing anti-Jewish measures. On July 4, the Germans ordered that a *Judenrat* be established. During July, 5,000 Jewish men were arrested by *Einsatzgruppen* and Lithuanian collaborators, and subsequently shot in the Ponary Forest on the outskirts of Vilna. At the beginning of September, two ghettos were established with two *Judenrat* and a Jewish police. Over the next few months, thousands of Jews were executed at Ponary, in a series of *aktionen* (forced deportations). By the end of 1941, the smaller ghetto had been liquidated and 33,500 Jews had been murdered. A further 3,500 had fled or hidden outside the ghetto.

For most of 1942, there were no further *aktionen,* and the Jews in the ghetto were able to develop a rich communal life. They established schools, a health-care system, cultural activities, and social-aid institutions. The *Judenrat* was chaired by Jacob Gens, who believed that if the ghetto were to remain economically worthwhile for the Germans, they would not destroy it. Thus, the council provided jobs for as many Jews in the ghetto as possible. The United Partisan Organization (*Fareynegte Partizaner Organizatsye,* FPO) was also established during the quiet of 1942.

The situation deteriorated in the spring of 1943. Nearby small ghettos and labor camps were liquidated, and the mass killings commenced again. The

FPO and the *Judenrat* had several major clashes, because Gens believed that the FPO's underground activities were endangering the rest of the ghetto. In July, the Germans demanded the arrest of FPO leader, Yitzhak Wittenberg, under the threat that the entire ghetto would be destroyed. Wittenberg turned himself in, hoping to avoid further bloodshed. However, the ghetto was destined for destruction.

Mass deportations took place in August and September 1943 thousands of men, women and children were sent to concentration camps in Estonia. During these deportations, the FPO called on the inhabitants of the ghetto to revolt. However, the Jews did not heed the call. The FPO began attacking German troops themselves. Gens, believing that armed revolt would simply lead to the total destruction of the ghetto, offered to hand over the required number of Jews for deportation. This ended the clashes. Gens himself was shot by the Gestapo on September 14.

The final liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto took place on September 23-24, 1943. Over 4,000 children, women, and old men were deported to Sobibor; 3,700 Jews were sent to camps in Estonia and Latvia; and hundreds of women, children, and old men were again shot at Ponary. About 2,500 Jews were left in labor camps in Vilna. Approximately 1,000 Jews had gone into hiding inside the ghetto but most were caught over the next few months. A few hundred FPO members joined the Partisans. Eighty Jews were kept in Ponary in order to open the mass graves and burn the bodies to destroy the evidence of mass killings. Ten days before Vilna was liberated, the Jews in the local labor camps were killed in Ponary. 150-200 managed to escape.

Vilna was liberated on July 13, 1944. Only 2,000-3,000 of the city's original Jewish population survived.