

Gens, Jacob

(1905--1943), Chairman of the *Judenrat* in the Vilna Ghetto.

When the Germans occupied Vilna in June 1941, Gens was named director of the Jewish hospital. When the *Judenrat* was set up in September, he was made commander of the ghetto police. The police participated in the *aktionen* that took place in the ghetto between September and December, in which tens of thousands of Jews were killed. Gens tried to help the Jews during the mass slaughters, and became the ghetto's leading personality.

In July 1942 the Germans dissolved the *Judenrat* and made Gens head of the ghetto administration. In that position, Gens initiated his "work for life" plan; he believed that if the Jews could prove themselves to be a productive workforce for the Germans, then the destruction of the ghetto would be delayed. Gens constantly tried to expand the number of Jewish workers—eventually 14,000 out of 20,000 ghetto inhabitants had work. For a time, the ghetto was calm, and Gens established a medical care system and welfare and cultural institutions.

Gens' attitude toward the ghetto's underground was mixed. At first, he cooperated with the United Partisan Organization, Vilna's main resistance group. However, he later decided that their activities endangered the rest of the ghetto population, and gave in to a German demand to turn in the underground commander, Yitzhak Wittenberg.

The Germans began liquidating the Vilna Ghetto in August and September 1943. By that time, the ghetto inhabitants no longer trusted Gens. After the underground attacked the Germans, Gens tried to prevent a German backlash by offering to provide Jews for forced labor in Estonia, if the Germans would leave the ghetto. The Germans agreed, and deported all but 12,000 of the ghetto's inhabitants.

Gens' Lithuanian wife and daughter lived outside the ghetto. Gens received many offers to leave the ghetto and join them, but he refused, in favor of staying and helping the Jews of the ghetto. On September 14 he was summoned to the Gestapo headquarters and shot. The ghetto was completely

liquidated 10 days later. (see also Resistance, Jewish and United Partisan Organization, Vilna.)