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Poster 8: Yom Kippur Service and Poster 9: Prayer Day

Study the posters and note the verses used in the titles. What do these verses mean? Do they gain significance in light of the ghetto reality?

In Vilna, as in every other city in which Jews lived, there was a large religious population. Ghetto conditions created great hardships for religious compliance. For instance, Sabbath observance was impossible due to demand for forced labor seven days a week. In spite of this, attempts were made to observe wherever possible: The ghetto contained three *shetibl* synagogues that filled up on the holidays, and on regular days held elementary school and yeshiva classes. Before Passover, matzahs were baked, on Sukkot a few sukkahs were built, and *hakafot* (circuits) were made on Simchat Torah.

“30 September 1941

Kol Nidre

“This Yom Kippur eve in the ghetto is unique. People cook in a large pot in their homes as if nothing has happened, they launder and clean (as if nothing is happening outside).

“On the ghetto gate, the Germans have hung a sign “Seuchengefahr” (Danger of Plague). Plague: that is, one should flee this place as from lepers. The Germans will not enter here. And if they do not enter, we will find rest.

“Workers returning from the city tell that the Germans released them for Yom Kippur... [The residents who are going to hear “Kol Nidrei,” the opening prayer of Yom Kippur] go to Kol Nidrei. The Kol Nidrei prayer needs to be completed by 6:30pm, by order of the Judenrat. Kol Nidrei is recited here in the dark. The study hall is filled beyond capacity, and people stand on the stairwell, in the entranceway. In the yard, on the street, everyone is sad and harried. Jews come to my library, asking to borrow holiday prayer books.

“At the time of Kol Nidrei, several attacks took place. People fainted. In short: Yom Kippur, with all its details and particularities.

Herman Kruk, The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania. Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-1944 (New Haven: Yale University, 2002), pp (?)

“21 September, Yom Kippur 1942

“A year ago today we were already past the first “clearing out” but had not yet endured the notorious first aktion of Yom Kippur. My nerves still jangle when I am reminded of that Yom Kippur.

“This year, the eve of Yom Kippur was characterized by great celebration [...], now, looking back a year later, I write so much easier. This is my remembrance after a long stretch of aktionen that took place at that time. [...] This year preparations were made for Yom Kippur, but these were influenced by the events of the previous year. In the ghetto, there were many minyanim (prayer quorums). The peak of this was the prayer in the theater hall, organized by the theater workers themselves. This service became a Yom Kippur parade. Here prayed the chazzan [cantor] of the Great Synagogue, [Yosef] Eidelson, accompanied by a special choir. Entrance required tickets.

“[...]The atmosphere was festive. After Kol Nidrei [Dr. Tzemach] Feldstein announced that Mr Gens would speak. Gens said, ‘We will start by saying kaddish [the mourner’s prayer] for those who were and are no more. We have endured a difficult year; let us pray to God that the upcoming year will be easier. We need to be strong, disciplined and hardworking.’ At the start of Gens’ speech, bitter crying was heard: The pain of Ponary.”

Herman Kruk, The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania. Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-1944 (New Haven: Yale University, 2002), pp. 360-361.

On Yom Kippur, October 1, 1941, a surprise *aktion* was conducted in the two ghettos in Vilna. In the afternoon, when the synagogues were packed with worshippers, Germans and Lithuanians entered the smaller ghetto and began to make arrests. The *aktion* surprised the ghetto residents, and the Germans were therefore able easily to round up hundreds of people from synagogues, homes and streets. The *aktion* continued into the evening. Those taken in the *aktion*, some 1,700 people, were sent to the Lokishki prison and from there to Ponary. That same afternoon, an *aktion* in the larger ghetto resulted in 2,200 Jews rounded up and sent to the Lokishki prison and to Ponary.

Jacob Gens (1905-1943): Head of the Vilna ghetto and Head of the ghetto’s Jewish police. Gens was married to a Lithuanian gentile woman and rooted in Lithuanian society, but nonetheless did not attempt to evade the fate of the Jews and entered the ghetto with them, which raised the esteem in which he was held. He had the natural demeanor of a leader – a sense of Jewish identity and an ambition for power. These were put to the test in the realities of the ghetto. Gens valued communication with the residents, and to this end, he published a weekly newspaper in Yiddish entitled *Ghetto News*. Gens advocated developing cultural activities and was the initiator of the ghetto theater and orchestra. In addition to the educational activities he spearheaded, Gens understood that the ghetto needed to be considered productive, and its residents should therefore work for the Germans to buy time until the war’s fortunes reversed. In October 1942, the Germans demanded that the Jewish police participate in an upcoming *aktion* in the nearby ghetto of Oszmiana, in which they were to “liquidate” 1,500 children and non-working women. Rather than comply, he delivered to the Germans 406 chronically ill and elderly people. Gens justified his actions by claiming that if the Germans had performed the selection, they would have taken women and children vital to the perpetuation of the Jewish people. When the ghetto liquidation began, his Lithuanian friends offered to assist him in leaving the ghetto and finding a hiding place, but he refused, even though he knew what awaited him. In September 1943, Gens was murdered by the Gestapo.

Herman Kruk (1897-1944): a leader of the Bund movement in Poland and a chronicler of the Vilna ghetto. His diary provides a detailed description of everyday life in the ghetto. Kruk managed the ghetto library and was forced to work at sorting the stores of Jewish literature that were found in the city's libraries. He and his friends managed to smuggle manuscripts and important books into the ghetto and thereby prevent them being transferred to Germany. Upon the liquidation of the ghetto, he was sent to the Klooja camp in Estonia, where he continued to keep a diary until the day before he was murdered, September 18, 1944, only a few days before liberation.

"Sunday the 20th. Yom Kippur Eve. An aura of sadness pervades the ghetto. It is a sort of festive sadness. Though now, as before the ghetto, I am far from observance, nonetheless this bloodstained and sad yom tov [holiday] is engraved on my heart. This evening was so sad for me! At home, we sit and cry, remembering the past [...] we kiss, bless one another and soak one another with our tears [...]. I escape outside and it's more of the same: Sadness flows in the alleyways, the ghetto is saturated with tears. Hardened ghetto hearts, that in the midst of their worries had no time to break down, burst out this evening with cries of bitterness [...] This was an evening of melancholy, of dark sadness."

*Yitzhak Rudashevski, The Diary of the Vilna Ghetto
(Ghetto Fighters House and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1973), p. 56.*

Yitzhak Rudashevsky (1927-1943): a teenager in the Vilna ghetto who left behind a sensitive description of war events. Rudashevsky, an only child, lived relatively well before the war with parents who were concerned for his continuing education. When the German Army occupied Vilna, he was not yet 14. After the ghetto was liquidated, Rudashevsky went into hiding with his family. After two weeks, however, their hideout was discovered and the family was sent to Ponary, where they were murdered.

- According to the poster and the testimony, what was the intended atmosphere for the Yom Kippur prayers? What happened in practice at the time of the prayers?
- What aspects of Yom Kippur were maintained and what changed in the ghetto?
- Does the poster gain added significance after reading the testimonies?
- Where are the questions/quotes for this poster?