

THE SHARED HOLOCAUST by Si Frumkin

My grandfather had good memories of the Germans that occupied Lithuania. They were polite, helpful and appreciated that the Yiddish spoken by the Jews was so similar to German that many Jews were hired as interpreters. The Germans were less anti-Semitic than the Russians and he almost went to Germany to work – there was a shortage of manpower there because of the war.

My grandfather's memories were of the Germans in 1915, during the First World War. The second occupation, in 1941, was much less pleasant. In fact, my grandfather was one of its first victims: he was shot in the Kovno ghetto, in August 1941.

In 1939 Stalin and Hitler signed an agreement on the division of the world between them after the war. As a result, the Baltic countries – including Lithuania – were annexed by the Soviet Union. The new Nazi-Soviet friendship meant that there was a total blackout in the Soviet media of anything critical of Germany. Soviet Jews had no idea of what the Nazis were doing to Jews while in the recently annexed territories there were the pleasant memories of the correct, civilized and cultured Germans of 1915-1918.

This didn't last. Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941 and these Germans were different. Slaughter of Jews began almost at once but, in the Baltics, the German advance was so quick that there was little opportunity to escape.

It was different in Poland. In 1939, Poland was attacked and divided into German and Soviet zones of occupation. As the word of German atrocities spread, thousands of Jews attempted to escape to the Soviet zone. At first the Germans did not interfere; in some areas they even forced Jews to march, under guard, to the border to be handed over to the Soviets. But there was an unexpected problem: the Soviets refused to accept the Jewish refugees; those who managed to cross the border were hunted down and returned to the German side.

On September 20, 1939, the German commander, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, ordered that returning refugees from the Soviet zone not be allowed to

enter the German zone. In a phone call to Berlin, on December 5, 1939, he described the problem: "The transfer of Jews to the Soviet territory is not going as expected. If we chase 1000 Jews across the border in a tranquil forest area, they are stopped within 15 kilometers and brought back by a Soviet officer who demands that we take them back."

Soviets went so far as to officially protest, in January 1940, to Schullenberg, the German Ambassador in Moscow, about the German policy of rejecting returning refugees.

Here is an eyewitness statement by a Polish Jew:

"The (Soviet) frontier guards weren't friendly anymore. The border towns and villages were searched for people who managed to get to the Soviet side. Searches were conducted as far as the railroad station at Chiz, about 100 kilometers beyond the border. Those who were captured were sent back to the German side. The Soviet soldiers fired on those who tried to cross the border. The Germans, in turn, fired on those who tried to get back. The refugees, caught in the crossfire were forced to remain in a no-man's land on the border.

"Meanwhile it got colder and thousands simply froze to death. It was with great difficulty that the Soviets finally allowed the burial of those who died or were killed...Thousands perished in no-man's land. The Germans enjoyed cursing the refugees. They could be heard on both sides of the border. On the other side stood Soviet soldiers, silent, angry, weapons at the ready..."

Once in a while the border would suddenly open, a group of refugees would be admitted and then it would close again. Those who managed to slip in were hunted down, and some would be sent back to the German side or sent to Soviet prisons and camps.

The West learned of the situation in a January 1940 report from Geneva. It described the German attempt to move a large group of Jews to Soviet territory. There were 2000 Jews from Cholm and 850 from Grubishev who were marched to the border. Along the way, those unable to keep up, or those who tried to have a drink of water from a stream, were shot. Only 750 reached the border.

An eyewitness recalls:

“After reaching the bridge on the border they were told that they had 20 minutes to cross – by bridge or swimming – or else they would be shot. Those who crossed had to wait for 3 hours for a decision by the Soviet authorities. Then they were told that they had to go back. The Soviet soldiers then forced them to go back to the German side. At 7:00 in the evening they were told by the Nazis that they had until the morning to cross to the Soviet side – those who didn’t would be shot. Some managed to swim across without being noticed, others were arrested by the Soviets but were not sent back.”

It is impossible to know the true numbers of Polish Jews who managed to escape to Soviet territory from the German areas. Most of them – as well as thousands of Jews who had already lived in the occupied area - were subsequently deported to remote areas of the Soviet Union. Many more were murdered when Germany captured this region after June 1941. Estimates range from a low of about 100,000 to a high of over 500,000.

Those who perished were victims of a somewhat different Holocaust – one that was a joint effort of both the Nazis and the Soviets.