

I OFTEN FORGET

ס'לאזט זיך אָפּט פאַרגעסן
CZĘSTO ZAPOMINAM
AŠ DAŽNAI PAMIRŠTU



JONAS KULIKAUSKAS

CURATED BY MIKA CHO
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RONALD H. SILVERMAN

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Jonas Kulikauskas: Unforgetting

“Everything is the way it is because everything was the way it was.”
—Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*

Can a man forget what he never knew? Can a whole population? How long does it take for the multiplying chasms of time, distance, diaspora, and indifference to work their dark magic of erasure and codify history’s blind spots? Two generations? Three? Whose responsibility is it to keep track of what has occurred in the rooms we now occupy? Each of us ourselves? The civic committees who assign commemorative landmarks? The designers of school curriculums? Journalists? Maybe excavating the atrocities of the past is best left to those most adept at navigating paradoxes, consuming sadness, pulling apart fragile layers, and advancing the discourse with empathy. Maybe these matters are best left to artists.

Jonas Kulikauskas was inspired by his Lithuanian heritage and culture—more specifically, the glaring historical omissions in his education—to investigate the savage manifestations of the Holocaust in the once-vibrant city of Vilnius (aka Vilna, aka Wilno), where by 1941 tens of thousands of Jews had been herded into a Nazi-run Ghetto and systematically slaughtered. Never heard about it? Most have not—even those like Kulikauskas who have studied Lithuania. And although his resulting project contains foundational information remediating the historical record, in the end, the broader questions it asks get at a more universal aspect of human nature—our infinite capacity to remember, and our equal ability to forget.

Kulikauskas has chosen a classic pairing of testimonials and photography to create a restorative dossier layering the Vilnius Ghetto of 1941 with its 2021 reality—in an homage to the victims of the Ponary forest massacre, a metaphor-rich account of the archaeological excavation of the Great Vilnius Synagogue, and an exploration of the ghetto’s modern-day incarnation. Juxtaposed with moving, explicit, yet often matter of fact first-hand accounts of the invasion and decimation of the community, are new photographs taken by Kulikauskas, purposefully using black and white film through a WWII-era lens.

What did he expect to find there, when we went with his camera? Ghosts roaming at dusk, plaques to victims and heroes? Congregations in rueful mourning? No? What did he find instead? He found people going about their business—work, weddings, commerce, construction, whatever—do they have awareness of the bloodsoaked ground on which they trod? Did they forget? Or did they, too, never really know about the time the world as we knew it ended right below where they now lay their heads to sleep?

By pairing their ordinary lives with the extraordinary witness accounts of decades ago, Kulikauskas closes the loop of past and present in a way that makes it clear, as Faulkner might say, the past is not dead, it’s not even the past. Will *I Often Forget* help us to remember? Will we remember in time to stop the world from ending again, today, like it has so many times before? If we’re to have a chance, we must first learn the history.

—Shana Nys Dambrot
Los Angeles, 2023

I Often Forget

Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania, was once referred to as the “Jerusalem of the North,” where Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews) thrived for centuries. Before World War II, nearly a third of Vilnius residents were Jewish. During the Holocaust, more than 90% of the Jewish population in Lithuania perished.

My parents were World War II refugees who fled Lithuania and eventually settled in Southern California. Our family spoke Lithuanian at home, and my siblings and I spent every Saturday at a Lithuanian Catholic school. We learned Lithuanian history, language, songs, and folk dances, and we spent our summers at Lithuanian Scout Camp. I embraced my Lithuanian heritage and sent my son Matas to the same places. He had many of the same experiences that I had. Growing up in the American public school system, we learned about the Holocaust, the Final Solution, and concentration camps. At Lithuanian school, Nazi occupation was discussed, but the Holocaust was never mentioned. Looking back, I realize how much this disturbs me. It disturbs Matas too.

In January 2021, I arrived in Vilnius on a Fulbright scholarship to study the remaining Litvak community. Fastening a World War II-era lens to a newly constructed 8x10” camera, I set out with black and white film to explore the streets of what used to be the Vilna Ghetto. Informed by historical diaries and testimonies, I walked the same cobblestone streets and passageways where more than 40,000 Jews were trapped before being systematically killed between 1941 and 1943. Much has changed. Today, their voices and stories are nearly lost, buried beneath layers of renovated facades, charming cafes, affluent boutiques, and buzzing tourist spots.

Upon my return to the U.S. in October of 2021, I reconnected with some of my American Lithuanian friends who could relate to my project. Their interest was inspired by the same lack of knowledge about the Holocaust in Lithuania. My sister Rima told me that, to her embarrassment, she first learned of it from a Jewish friend in her college days. Pondering it further, I visited my school library and found my Lithuanian twelfth-grade history textbook entitled, *History of the Lithuanian Nation, Volume IV* (Lithuanian Educational Council, Inc. in 1977.). World War II is described over seventeen pages. The word “Žydai,” or Jews, is nowhere to be found. My brother Andrius pointed out that, in fact, *Volume III* includes information on Litvaks. A chapter simply entitled “Jews” contains only one sentence about the Holocaust.

—Jonas Kulikauskas



VILNA (VILNIUS) GHETTO

On September 6, 1941, the German and Lithuanian police began the roundup of the Jews of Vilnius into two quarters separated by Vokiečių Street. In October 1941, the Nazis and their collaborators closed the smaller ghetto, massacred most of its inhabitants, and transferred others to the larger quarter. The noted chronicler of the Vilna Ghetto, Herman Kruk, estimated that at one point in the fall of 1941, 29,000 Jews who were forced into the Vilna Ghetto occupied a space that before ghettoization had accommodated between 3,750 and 4,000 people.

Following the onslaught of the summer and fall of 1941, the persecution of the Jews entered a period during which the Germans pressed the ghetto inmates into service for the Reich's war industry. Although large-scale mass shootings abated, killings continued in the form of periodic reductions of populations seen as unfit for labor. Dissent and evasion of the rules were severely punished. Despair and isolation, vividly described by the survivors, inflicted severe strains on the mental and social life of the people. In the end, for most of the ghettoized Jews, hopes for survival proved illusory. As a temporary reprieve from annihilation, life for most of the Jewish inmates amounted to bare subsistence. And yet, the historical record left behind by the survivors reveals that many Jews trapped in the ghettos fought tenaciously to preserve meaningful communal life, to sustain a sense of dignity in the face of daily humiliation, and to organize passive and active resistance not only to fight back against their oppressors but also to provide hope to future generations.

—Saulius Sužiedelis, Professor of History, Emeritus

Author Unknown

Main entrance to the Vilna Ghetto,
1941,

Photograph

From the Collections of the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History

PONARY (PONAR)

Ponary (Ponarec) became one of the notorious killing fields of the Holocaust, where most of those imprisoned at the Vilnius ghettos were killed and buried. Located on a major east-west road near the Vilnius-Grodno railway, the grounds around Ponary had once been a favorite escape route for city residents. In early 1941 the Germans began the construction here of an underground fuel storage complex. The design of this reinforced concrete provided a grimly ideal site for the killing operations. In his diary, the Polish journalist Kazimierz Sadowski (1919-1942), who lived on the edge of the Ponary woods and observed the shootings from his vantage point, estimated that nearly 5,000 people were shot during the month of July 1941, mostly Jews, along with a smaller number of alleged Communists and Polish activists. Sadowski kept watch and wrote: "By the second day, July 12, a Saturday, we already knew what was going on, because at about 3 P.M. a large group of Jews was taken to the forest, about 300 people, mostly intelligentsia with suitcases, beautifully dressed... An hour later the victims began to appear in great numbers."

To carry out the mass shootings of the victims, the German SD founded a special unit composed of mostly Lithuanian volunteers, known in German as the Selbstschützer in Lithuania, "Self-protectors" known locally as "Tarybiniai Šauliai". The detailed accounts of their activities in postwar trials suggest that those who remained came to see their job as routine and, further, as an opportunity for greater Germans were present at most of the killing operations and oversee the murders.

The majority of the Ponary victims were Jews from the Vilnius Ghettos, although the dead also included at least several thousand Jews from other Lithuanian cities. Thousands of Poles and Soviet POWs, and a smaller number of Lithuanians, were also killed here. In 1944 Soviet authorities destroyed an official estimate of 28,000 Ponary victims. Today's historians put the number of Ponary victims at between 70,000 (USHMM) and a lower estimate of nearly 50,000 by historians working in Vilnius.

Saulius Sudavickas, Professor of History, Emory

VILNA (VILNIUS) GHETTO

On September 1, 1941, the German and Lithuanian police began the roundup of the Jews of Vilnius into two quarters separated by Vileišky Street. In October 1941, the Vilnius ghetto was further subdivided into the smaller ghettos, surrounded most of its inhabitants, and transferred them to the larger ghettos. The final destruction of the Vilna Ghetto, however, took place at one point in the fall of 1941. 28,000 Jews who were forced into the Vilna Ghetto remained a space that before ghettoization had accommodated between 1,700 and 4,000 people.

Following the roundup of the summer and fall of 1941, the persecution of the Jews entered a period during which the Germans pressed the ghetto inmates into service for the Reich's war industry. Although large-scale mass shootings ceased, killings continued in the form of periodic reductions of populations sent to cells for labor. Street and houses of the Jews were severely searched. Despite and because, mostly described by the survivors, suffered severe deprivations on the ground and social life of the people. In the end, for most of the ghettoized Jews, hope for survival proved illusory. As a temporary measure, Jews established the Vilna Ghetto Library as a temporary measure to maintain life. The far most of the ghetto inmates, according to some estimates, died in the Holocaust. The Vilna Ghetto was the last to be liquidated, and by various means and some resistance hope to have generations.

Saulius Sudavickas, Professor of History, Emory

VILNA (VILNIUS) GHETTO 1941-43

SEPTEMBER 1, 1941
Liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto. 1,000 Jews (1,000 people) were killed.

OCTOBER 4-10, 1941
In a series of mass shootings, the Nazis destroyed Ghetto 1. It is a series of mass shootings, the Nazis destroyed Ghetto 1.

NOVEMBER 1, 1941
The Nazis began the liquidation of Ghetto 2. In a series of mass shootings, the Nazis destroyed Ghetto 2.

DECEMBER 1, 1941
The Nazis began the liquidation of Ghetto 3. In a series of mass shootings, the Nazis destroyed Ghetto 3.

NOVEMBER 13, 1942
The Nazis began the liquidation of Ghetto 4. In a series of mass shootings, the Nazis destroyed Ghetto 4.

NOVEMBER 1942
The Nazis began the liquidation of Ghetto 5. In a series of mass shootings, the Nazis destroyed Ghetto 5.

JULY 1943
The Nazis began the liquidation of Ghetto 6. In a series of mass shootings, the Nazis destroyed Ghetto 6.





“Time runs by so quickly and there is so much work to be done, lectures, social gatherings. I often forget I am in the ghetto.”

–Yitzhak Rudashevski (1927–1943)

Ordinance of the Commissioner of the Vilnius District Region for Jews, 1942, Announcement (20.4 in. x 27.95 in.)
Photograph by Paulius Račiūnas
From the Collections of the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History

Jonas Kulikauskas
Infant No. 1
2023,
Installation
Potato sack, rope



"We were forced to move into the Ghetto to share one room with eleven people."

- Leo Kliot (1929-), Vilna Ghetto Survivor

Jonas Kulikauskas

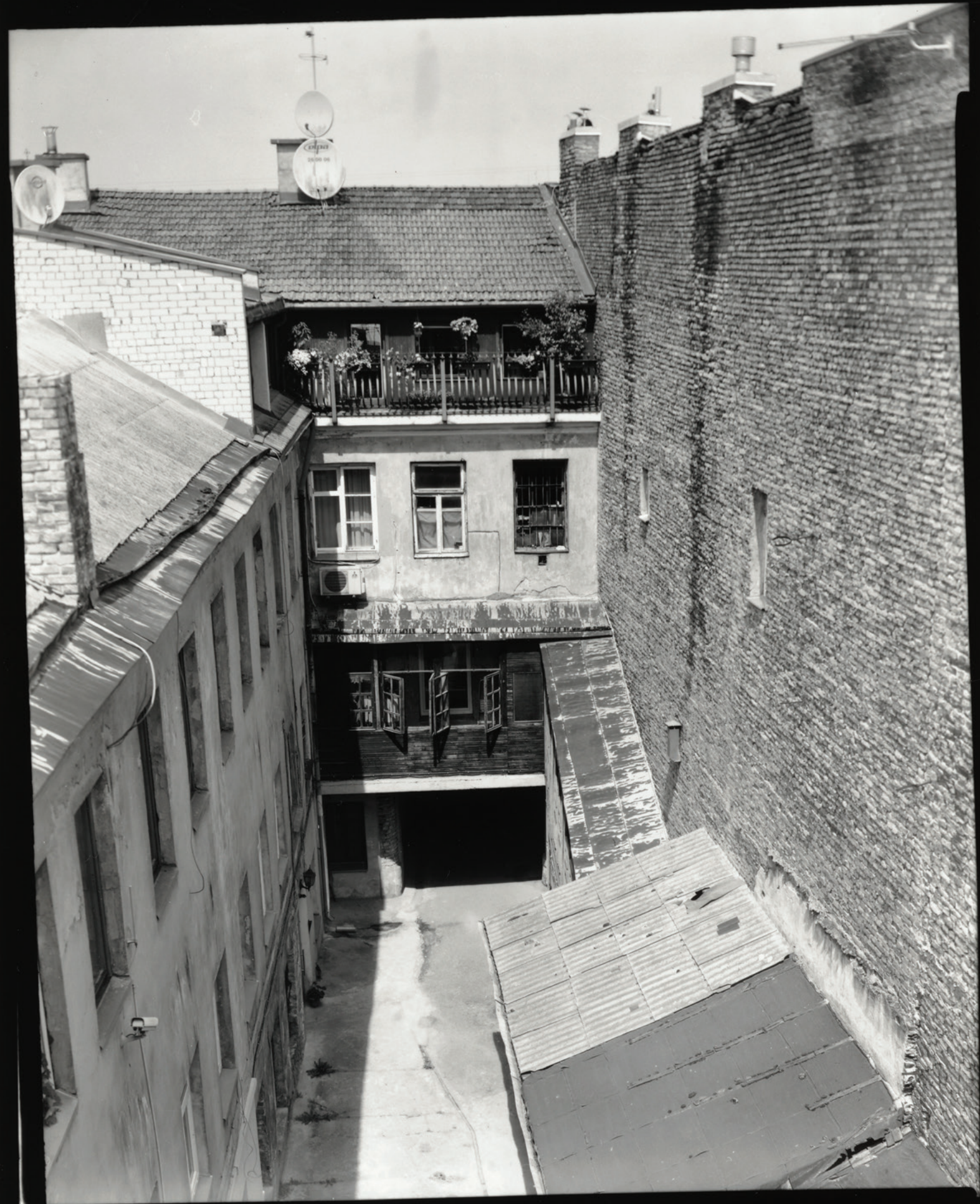
*View from the balcony of Kerry Shawn Keyes, American poet, Vilnius, Lithuania,
(former Vilna Ghetto housing)*

2021

Gelatin silver print

8x10 in. (20.32 x 25.4cm)

Kliot, Leo. "Holocaust Survivor Leo Kliot - Life in the Vilna Ghetto and in Hiding." YouTube. Montreal Holocaust Museum, January 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vleVEtYEK6g>.



"Ghetto inmates looked at us as if we were lunatics. They were smuggling foodstuffs into the ghetto, in their clothes and boots. We were smuggling books, pieces of paper, occasionally a Torah scroll or mezuzahs."

- Shmerke Kaczerginski (1908-1954),
Yiddish writer, cultural activist, Vilna Ghetto survivor

Jonas Kulikauskas

*Building renovation, Žemaitijos Street No. 4, Vilnius, Lithuania,
(facade of former Vilna Ghetto Library)*

2021

Gelatin silver print

8x10 in. (20.32 x 25.4cm)

"The Paper Brigade." YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Accessed April 16, 2023.
<https://www.yivo.org/The-Paper-Brigade>.



"Today there was a celebration in the ghetto - the loan of the 100,000th book from the ghetto library. There was a celebration today in the theatre hall. We went... from school... there was an artistic programme. The speakers analysed the reading of the ghetto. Hundreds of people are reading in the ghetto. Reading books in the ghetto is the biggest treat that there is. Books link us to freedom; books connect us to the world. The loan of the hundred thousandth book is a great achievement for the ghetto and the ghetto can be proud of it."

-Yitskhok Rudashevski (1927-1943), murdered in Ponary forest

Jonas Kulikauskas

*Žemaitijos Street No. 4, Vilnius, Lithuania,
(facade detail of former Vilna Ghetto Library)*

2021

Gelatin silver print

8x10 in. (20.32 x 25.4cm)

"The Beginnings of the Vilna Community." The Library in the Vilna Ghetto | Vilna During the Holocaust.
Accessed April 16, 2023. <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/during/library.asp>.



"I went to visit my mother. She bore happy news: my wife had given birth to a child in the ghetto hospital. Mother had forgotten Murer's edict that condemned to death any child born in the ghetto. The next day the child was no longer among the living: Murer's orders had been carried out."

-Abraham Sutzkever (1913-2010), Yiddish poet, Vilna Ghetto Survivor, Partisan, Nuremberg Trial Witness

Jonas Kulikauskas

*Life-long resident hangs laundry in the courtyard, Vilnius, Lithuania,
(former Vilna Ghetto Hospital courtyard)*

2021

Gelatin silver print

8x10 in. (20.32 x 25.4cm)

Sutzkever, Abraham, Justin Daniel Cammy, and Avraham Novershtern. Essay. In *From the Vilna Ghetto to Nuremberg Memoir and Testimony*, 64-64. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021.



"...then at a certain point, my father came and put me in a sack. He came with a sack and said, "Get into it." And put me on his shoulder. And then he went out of that room with me in the sack and joined a line of men that were working, bringing sacks from the place where they were cutting trees into little blocks of wood, through the gate to that room. My last memory of my father is...the feeling of being on his shoulder...it's kind of physical feeling...his presence...I don't even know if the voice of somebody shouting "Run! Run! Run!" when they liberated me from...the sack...I don't even know if it is his voice or somebody else's voice."

Samuel Bak (1933-), Vilna Ghetto Survivor, Artist

Jonas Kulikauskas

*Electric scooter commuter, Žemaitijos Street No. 9, Vilnius, Lithuania,
(former entrance to Pundik's kloyz (prayer house), Vilna Ghetto No. 1)
2021*

Gelatin silver print
8x10 in. (20.32 x 25.4cm)

"How They Survived the Holocaust: Samuel Bak." YouTube. NOVA PBS, November 9, 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sktfo6O2g28>.



"Those who planned ahead did not think highly of the ghetto hideouts because the Germans were teaching themselves how to locate them. Within the Ypatinga, groups dedicated to khapunes - seizing Jews - specialized in discovering malines. There was also the risk that the ghetto would be burnt to the ground. When the buildings collapsed, they would block access to the hideouts. That's why malines were built in town, directly accessible from the ghetto.

From Shpitol Street 6 (Hospital Street 6) an amazing cave was dug out leading to the monastery of the All Saints Church. An underground pathway led from the ghetto hospital to the Choral Synagogue situated on Zavalne. An underground cave led from Daytshe Street 29 to beneath the second ghetto. There were malines for the wealthy and for the poor, large and small, some able to hold a single family and others a hundred people."

-Abraham Sutzkever (1913-2010), Yiddish poet, Vilna Ghetto Survivor, Partisan, Nuremberg Trial Witness

Jonas Kulikauskas

*Ligoninès (Hospital) Street, Vilnius, Lithuania,
(former area of underground cave leading to All Saints Church)*

2021

Gelatin silver print

8x10 in. (20.32 x 25.4cm)

Sutzkever, Abraham, Justin Daniel Cammy, and Avraham Novershtern. Essay. In *From the Vilna Ghetto to Nuremberg Memoir and Testimony*, 127-128. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021.



"Darkness prevails in the tunnel...The pale light of a lamp illuminates the way and we advance. My shoulders rub against the narrow pipe, I cannot move my hand...A single thought occupies my mind-not to get my weapon wet and not to fall behind...The pipe, which is over 1 meter in diameter ends suddenly, to become a smooth, round tunnel of only 1/2 meter. I crawl. The muddy water covers my garments...The file halts. The report comes back that someone has fainted, he is lying in the middle and blocking the passage...He is put on one side...I lose all sense of time...The order is whispered back: Make ready for exit."

-Reizel (Rozka) Korczak (1921-1988), Vilna Ghetto survivor, Partisan

Jonas Kulikauskas

Monument to the Ghetto Martyrs and Fighters, Mėsinių (Butchers) Street, Vilnius, Lithuania, (former Jewish meat market, a demolished section of Vilna Ghetto No. 1)

2021

Gelatin silver print

8x10 in. (20.32 x 25.4cm)

Korczak, Reizel. "Liquidation of the Ghetto." Essay. In *Ghetto in Flames*, edited by Arad Yitzhak, 433-34. New York, NY: Holocaust Library, 1982.





THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE OF VILNA (VILNIUS)

The Great Synagogue of Vilna, built between 1633 and 1635 in Renaissance-Baroque style, was the oldest and most significant monument of Litvak Jewry. Sadly, like most of the edifices of Litvak culture, the Great Synagogue was lost. As part of the process to find a fitting memorial for the Synagogue and its associated buildings, we established a joint expedition of Lithuanian, Israeli, and North American heritage professionals to excavate, preserve and present *in-situ* the remains of the Great Synagogue.

After the liquidation of the small Ghetto on the 21st of October 1941, The Great Synagogue was ransacked, and important parts of the Aron Kodesh (Torah Ark) were looted. Some of these items were recovered and are now displayed in the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum in Vilnius. Despite attempts to preserve the remnants of the Great Synagogue in the late 1940s, the Soviet authorities demolished it together with other structures of the Shulhoyf. In their place, a brick-built elementary school was constructed in a typically Soviet unassuming manner. The Vytė Nemunėlis school, which covers half of the remains of the Synagogue, operated until 2018. Until such time as a decision is made on how to develop the site, and to display the results of the excavation, the rooms of the former school building are used as artists' studios.

Attention to finding a proper memorial at the site of the Great Synagogue of Vilna has been ongoing since the final years of the Soviet Union. The excavation has been conducted intermittently since 2016 by an internationally mixed team of laborers and volunteers with the aim of ensuring that Jewish-built cultural heritage is seen as an essential and inseparable part of both Lithuanian and Jewish heritage that needs to be celebrated by all and preserved for perpetuity.

—Dr. Jon Seligman, Israel Antiquities Authority, Jerusalem, Israel

Zigmund Chajkowski,
*The Strashun Library in front of the
Great synagogue,*
1944,
Drawing
From the Collections of the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History







Jonas Kulikauskas

Sifters No. 1-3

2023,

Installation

Sifters containing photographs taken from the
Great Synagogue of Vilna excavation site,
3 ea sifters, 21 ea 8x10" gelatin silver prints



Jonas Kulikauskas

Ponar/Ponary (Paneriai) Memorial
2023,

Installation

Projection of a photograph taken with
a World War II era lens from within a
massacre pit at Paneriai, Lithuania,
black veil, fan, and 75,000 stones

PONARY/PONAR (PANERIAI)

Ponary/Ponar (Paneriai) became one of the notorious killing fields of the Holocaust, where most of those imprisoned at the Vilnius ghetto were taken and murdered. Located on a major rail line and near the Vilnius-Grodno motorway, the groves around Ponary had once been a favorite escape from the summer heat for city residents. In early 1941 the Soviets began the construction here of an underground fuel storage complex. The deep pits of this unfinished project provided a gruesomely ideal site for the killing operations. In his diary, the Polish journalist Kazimierz Sakowicz (1899-1944), who lived on the edge of the Ponary woods and observed the shootings from his vantage point, estimated that nearly 5,000 people were shot during the month of July 1941, mostly Jews, along with a smaller number of alleged Communists and Polish activists. Sakowicz kept watch and wrote: "By the second day, July 12, a Saturday, we already knew what was going on, because at about 3 P. M. a large group of Jews was taken to the forest, about 300 people, mainly intelligentsia with suitcases, beautifully dressed... An hour later the volleys began. Ten people were shot at a time."

To carry out the mass shootings of the victims, the German SD founded a special unit composed of mostly Lithuanian volunteers, known in German as the Sonderkommando (in Lithuanian, *Ypatingasis būrys*, literally, the "Special Squad"). The detailed accounts of their activities in postwar trials suggest that those who remained came to see their job as routine and, further, as an opportunity for plunder. Germans were present at most of the killing operations and oversaw the murders.

The majority of the Ponary victims were Jews from the Vilna Ghetto, although the dead also included at least several thousand Jews from shtetls in eastern Lithuania. Thousands of Poles and Soviet POWs, and a smaller number of Lithuanians, were also killed here. In 1944 Soviet authorities declared an official estimate of 100,000 Ponary victims. Today's historians put the number of Ponary victims at between 75,000 (USHMM) and a lower estimate of nearly 50,000 by historians working in Vilnius.

–Saulius Sužiedelis, Professor of History, Emeritus





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am pleased to present the work of Jonas Kulikauskas, "I Often Forget," at the Ronald H. Silverman Fine Arts Gallery. I found his work of great social merit compels us to question and reflect on the human condition. We also wish to extend a heartfelt thanks to the individuals and institutions for supporting this exhibition. They are,

Saulius Sužiedelis for writing on the Holocaust in Lithuania; Jon Seligman for writing an essay on the Great Vilna Synagogue excavation site; Archeologist Justinas Račas; Rita Glassman; Loïc Salfati for the recording of "El Maleh Rachamim" by Rita Glassman; Dovid Katz for Yiddish translation of "I Often Forget"; Ilona Murauskaitė, Head of the Collections Department, Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History, Vilnius, Lithuania for providing access to the museum's collection; and the Fulbright Foundation and Puffin Foundation.

Special thanks go to the gallery assistants Karla Navarro and Lena Mari Carannante, and our former gallery assistants Rudolph Rodriguez, and Matas Kulikauskas for their installation of this exhibition.

I also wish to express my gratitude to those who ceaselessly encourage and support me and my exhibitions at the Ronald H. Silverman Fine Arts Gallery.

Mika M. Cho
Director, Ronald H. Silverman Fine Arts Gallery

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