

# **Destruction and Resistance in West Belarus: The Ghettos of Slonim, Zetel (Dyatlovo), and Mir During the Holocaust**

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## **Abstract**

Ghettos in West Belarus were formed shortly after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, in Operation Barbarossa, June 1941. The Germans started implementing the Nazi ideology of the “Final Solution” by what is called “Holocaust by bullets.” First to be murdered were Jewish men and the intelligentsia, and shortly after, women and children were also being shot to death. Underground groups were organized in almost every ghetto, comprising mostly young Jews who wanted to take action and resist the German occupation. They acquired arms and planned escape to the nearby forests with the intent of joining the partisan units. This paper deals with the case study of three communities: Slonim, Zetel, and Mir from the perspective of its survivors’ testimonies and memoirs. It focuses on their subjective experiences and viewpoints and revives unknown stories and events. This is an attempt to write a bottom-up microhistory of an unusual time and place, as seen by the victims. They talk about horror, loss, and betrayal but also about heroism and sacrifice. These testimonies, like many others, had been buried in archives, and the witnesses remained anonymous. I believe that this is an obligation of scholars to give them voice and use their stories as primary resources in research of the Holocaust. They not only provide facts and information but also shed light on the emotions and human ways of coping during those horrific dark days of war and destruction.

## Introduction

The morning of June 22, 1941, was the first day of Operation Barbarossa, which marked the Germans' unexpected attack on the Soviet Union, in violation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. On that same day, the Germans started bombarding cities and towns all over the area of West Belarus, among them Baranowicze, Vilna, Lida, Slonim, Grodno, and other places. In a few days, the Germans managed to occupy the entire region and started immediately to implement their plan to mass murder the Jews whose communities had existed in almost every city and town, big and small.<sup>1</sup>

Many details on the Jewish experience in Belarus during the Holocaust still remain unknown and under researched, mainly regarding Jews who dwelled in the small towns, *shtetls*, as they are called in Yiddish. While the history of the Jews in the big cities has been investigated and written over the years, the small communities hardly left any documentation or resources for the historians to research. However, personal testimonies of survivors and some diaries found in archives allow us to draw a better picture and shed light on the local events during that time.

In the first decades after the war, organizations were formed, mostly in Israel and in the US, of survivors and descendants of these small towns who had left before the war. Many of these *landsmanshafts* put together *yizkor* ("remembrance") books, which include vast information about the history of a community, its structure and institutions, names of families, and short memoirs on its fate during World War II. These books, written mostly in Hebrew and Yiddish, are a well of rich information. Survivors of the Holocaust who felt the need to tell their stories gave testimonies either in the immediate years, when historical committees operated through Europe collecting these testimonies, or much later when they grew old. Others wrote and published memoirs. A few

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<sup>1</sup> On the Holocaust in Belarus, see: Леонид Смиловицкий, *Евреи Беларуси в годы Холокоста: сборник избранных статей* (Тель Авив: автор, 2021).

diaries written in real time have been discovered and are of course a valuable resource.<sup>2</sup>

My intention in the following paper is to concentrate on what happened to three Jewish communities in West Belarus—Slonim, Zetel, and Mir—based on such primary resources. Through the eyes of those who were there and miraculously survived, I will discuss their inner lives, the horrors of the Nazi rule, and attempts to resist and fight back. Each place is unique, but there are similarities and common characteristics in the experiences of the Jews in these areas, which I shall point out.

Reading and analyzing real-time diaries and later testimonies of survivors not only provides further information about the period, but it also reveals something else—we learn about the emotions, the inner thoughts, and the feelings of the eyewitnesses. With more recognition going to the scholarly field of “history of emotions” in recent years, it is interesting to analyze such material to better understand the events and their influence, based on the protagonists’ views and narratives.<sup>3</sup> This is a history written from the bottom up that focuses on human experience and memory and pays tribute to these survivors who, despite the inhuman time they lived in and despite their personal loss, managed to recover, build new lives and new families, and tell their story.

## **Stages of the “Final Solution” in Belarus**

Jews of Belarus were murdered in two main waves: the first killing wave lasted about six months—from the beginning of the German invasion in June until December 1941. It was conducted mostly by Einsatzgruppe B, the mobile killing unit assigned to murder the Jews that was overseen by Army Group

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<sup>2</sup> Prof. Eliyana Adler is doing new research on the yizkor books and the survivors’ attempts to document their former communities.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

Center, under the command of Arthur Nebe.<sup>4</sup> Other groups that carried out the killings were police battalions and the German Army – the Wehrmacht – which was ordered to liquidate the entire Jewish population in the occupied areas.<sup>5</sup> In many places, the first to be murdered were the men. This fact influenced the ability of the remaining population (mostly women, children, and elderly) to defend themselves in later stages. As the Einsatzgruppen proceeded, the Jews were caught in their own towns and could not escape.

Most Jews in Belarus were scattered in small towns and villages, and in many cases the Germans did not even bother to gather them in local ghettos or send them to concentration camps. Rather, they were victims of what is called “Holocaust by bullets” – mass killings of Jews near their homes and towns. Polish and Byelorussian policemen and German gendarmes would enter a town, concentrate its Jewish residents, lead them to a certain site in or out of the place, and shoot them there. The aim was to turn the region to a *judenrein* area, to “clean” the place of Jews.<sup>6</sup>

The Germans tried at first to keep the mass murders of the Jews “top secret.” They used to deceive their victims until the last moment and lead them to death under the pretense that they were sent to work. In most places, the murders were conducted at the outskirts of the towns and villages. The Jews were brought to a field or a forest and shot to death into large pits, and afterwards the bodies would be buried and covered. Sometimes, the Jews were forced to undress and dig their own graves. This was done, for example, in the town of Ashmyany. On July 25, 1941, about seven hundred Jewish men were

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Nebe (1894–1945), a key functionary in the security and police apparatus of Nazi Germany. Around July 5, 1941, he consolidated Einsatzgruppe B near Minsk and establishing its headquarters there. See further information in: Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2014), 92–118.

<sup>5</sup> Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust*; Yitzchak Arad, *History of the Holocaust: Soviet Union and Annexed Territories* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004), 1:287.

<sup>6</sup> Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, Moreshet, and Ghetto Fighters House, 2000), 97.

taken by force from their homes as if they were needed for work. Non-Jewish locals pointed out their homes and accompanied the Germans from house to house. It was a Friday evening, and most men were gathered in or outside the synagogue. All of them were led to the marketplace and were ordered to lie down with their faces on the ground, humiliated by their perpetrators. Then they were forced to march in lines to the nearby village of Barteli, four kilometers to the north of Ashmyany, where they were shot with no warning. Locals who witnessed the murder described the event years later.<sup>7</sup> However, a detailed report had been written shortly after by Hinda Deul, a 35-year-old Jewish woman who was incarcerated in the Ashmyany Ghetto and became a member in the Judenrat (the Jewish council) after the men were killed. She kept a personal diary in which she wrote:

The Jews were divided into three groups; they were given shovels and each group dug a ditch for the next one and covered the bodies after they were shot. The last ditch was covered by the SS people. On the way to this mass murder site the Germans abused their victims, ordered them to sing, to crawl on their bellies and eat dirt, while beating them.<sup>8</sup>

The diary, handwritten in Polish, describes the rapid deterioration of Jewish life in the Ashmyany Ghetto. The writer, who did not survive, discussed not only the “big” events, but no less interesting, the “small” daily humiliations and troubles that the Jews suffered, hence providing us with the historical perspective of a bottom-up account.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Non-Jewish locals’ testimonies can be found on the website of the *Yahad-In Unum* organization: <https://yiu.ngo/en>.

<sup>8</sup> Hinda Deul’s diary, *Moreshet Archive*, D.2.8.

<sup>9</sup> The diary was buried for decades in a small Israeli archive and was unfamiliar to researchers. Excerpts of it were printed in the Ashmyany community remembrance book. For more details, see Daniela Ozacky Stern, “A Revolutionary Jewish Woman during the Holocaust: Hinda Deul and the Holocaust in Oszmiana, Belarus,” *Tsaytshrift* 8 (2022): 153–67.

In addition to randomly murdering Jewish men at the beginning of the German occupation, the Germans focused on those who were called the “intelligentsia”: doctors, lawyers, professors, teachers, rabbis, and other professional public figures. This happened, for example, in Shchuchyn near Lida and in the village Topiliszki. In mid-September dozens of them were led to a site near Topiliszki and were shot in a ditch. Only one survivor of the shooting, Jacob Abramski, crawled out of the pit and made it back to the ghetto. There he told the story of that massacre.<sup>10</sup> These events are described in early testimonies of survivors given right after the war in 1946–1948, such as Binyamin Skopsky’s testimony on the murder of the intelligentsia in Shchuchyn, in February 1942. During this *Aktion*, rabbis, teachers, doctors, and other professionals were murdered in shootings.<sup>11</sup>

The second wave of extermination started in the spring of 1942 and lasted until the final liquidation of the Jewish communities in the autumn of 1943. During 1942, a crucial year for the Byelorussian Jews, most ghettos in West Belarus were liquidated, leaving only about 30,000 Jews alive at the end of the year (at the eve of the war there were about 375,000 Jews in Belarus).<sup>12</sup> In every town, big or small, Jews were subject to restriction of movement, forced labor, constant humiliation, and uncertainty. They were stripped of any citizens’ and human rights and faced personal losses daily. In many places, methods of resistance had been used—both passive and armed—and those who managed to escape the ghettos and join the partisan movement continued to fight in the forests.<sup>13</sup> Many of their stories are unknown to the public and remain under researched. Jewish life in this area ceased to exist after the war, and the few survivors who remained of each community realized that there was no place for them in their cities of birth and spread around the world.

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<sup>10</sup> Shmuel Spector (ed.), *Pinkas Hakehillot, Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities*, s.v. “Poland,” (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005), 8:624.

<sup>11</sup> There are several dates mentioning this massacre: mid-September 1941 and February 1942. Binyamin Skopsky, testimony, *Yad Vashem Archive* (1948), M49E/3051.

<sup>12</sup> According to Arad, *History of the Holocaust*, 1:60.

<sup>13</sup> See Shalom Cholawski, *Resistance and Partisan Struggle* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and Moreshet, 2001).

In the next pages I will present bottom-up versions of what happened in three ghettos in West Belarus – Slonim, Zetel, and Mir. This a local microhistory told by those who had been there and personally experienced the horrors of the Holocaust.

## **Eyewitnesses to Horrors from Slonim**

On the eve of the war, about 16,000 Jews lived in Slonim, a lively community with religious, cultural, and educational institutions; various youth movements and political activities; and a variety of Jewish business and occupations. With the 13,000 refugees who arrived from areas invaded by the Germans, the total number of Jews in the early days of Operation Barbarossa was around 29,000.<sup>14</sup>

David Yochvedovitz, born in Slonim in 1883, a teacher of Hebrew and a school principal, survived the horrors of the war with his daughter Golda. He wrote his memoirs in Hebrew two weeks after liberation, when he went back to his city to look for survivors.<sup>15</sup> Years later he published a book based on them, which provides details on the events in Slonim stage by stage.<sup>16</sup> He described the first days after the German invasion, in late June 1941, when the residents of Slonim pounced on food stores and emptied the shelves of merchandise. “People are fighting for a loaf of bread. Two or three people hold a sack of flour, carry it in partnership home. ... We see masses of people pouncing on food stores – a real pogrom.”<sup>17</sup>

“July 17 was a terrible bitter day,” begins the account of the first mass killing in Slonim.

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<sup>14</sup> Cholawski, *Resistance and Partisan Struggle*, 199; Noah Kaplinsky, “In their life and death: Figures of Slonim Leadership,” in Kalman Lichtenstein (ed.), *Pinkas Slonim* (Tel-Aviv: Organization of Slonim Immigrants in Israel, 1961–1979), 280.

<sup>15</sup> David Yochvedovitz’s diary, *Moreshet Archive*, D.2.9.

<sup>16</sup> David Yochvedovitz-Kahane, *Transmigration of Bodies* (Merhavia: Moreshet and Sifriat Poalim, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> Yochvedovitz’s diary, *Moreshet Archive*, D.2.9.

The Germans went from door to door ... 2,500 Jews were crowded, assuming that they were to be sent to do a certain work ... but soon enough they realized that they were mistaken. The Germans took their money and ripped their documents. 1,255 of them were pushed into train cars, 40-50 in each one of them, and taken to a forest near Petralowicze. When they climbed out of the cars, they rushed them to the prepared pits and shot all of them to death with machine guns. ... The rest who were released to go back home had to walk through two rows of S.S. people who hit them cruelly with bats and iron whips, and they arrived wounded and bleeding.<sup>18</sup>

Among the murdered was Yochvedovitz's son Moshe who served in the Soviet Army and came back to Slonim shortly before the occupation. In his father's home he met with his fiancée Zehava Shafir-Rivitzki. "But our happiness lasted just a few days," she wrote after the war. The Germans spread rumors that those men were in a labor camp, and she walked with a group of women loaded with baskets of food to provide for their loved ones:

We walked many kilometers ... until we reached their graves. We could not speak, our eyes filled with tears, our hearts turned to stone, and all our senses were paralyzed. ... I will never forget that day. The trees stood still; the forest was immersed in its silence around the huge graveyards in which young lives, cut off by murderers, were buried. Today it is no doubt green and blooming, and the trees just wave their tops above the graves.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Yochvedovitz-Kahane, *Transmigration of Bodies*, 19-20.

<sup>19</sup> Zehava Shafir-Rivitzki, "Those days in Slonim," *Pinkas Slonim* 2, 148.



On November 14, 1941, a violent Aktion in the Slonim Ghetto resulted in about 10,000 victims who were shot to death. Yochvedovitz described the atmosphere among the Jews during that first massacre:

Dark fear prevailed over the streets, those who had prepared hiding places hastened to run away and hide. The Germans scampered around like predatory wolves and went from door to door, instructing the Jews to put on their best clothes ... and climb on the railroad cars because they were being transferred to another town for work. Many naïve Jews believed the Germans and obeyed.<sup>20</sup>

The Germans, Russians, and Lithuanians ripped babies from their mothers' arms and threw them into the railroad cars. They hit the people and pushed them into the cars, taking them to the fields of Czepielow near the road to Baranowicze, where they were shot naked and thrown into the ditches:

No words can describe the horrific scenes near the pits. People were running around like crazy, tearing their hair out. There were some who lost their mind; mothers begged the murderers to kill them first, so they would not watch their children murdered. Those who tried to escape were cruelly tortured and later shot at. There was no way to escape since the area was surrounded by barbed wire.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Yochvedovitz-Kahane, *Transmigration of Bodies*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Yochvedovitz-Kahane, *Transmigration of Bodies*, 24.

The writer goes on with the unbearable description of the scenes and expressed his emotions by pointing the contrast between the beauty of nature and the cruelty of human beings, asking:

How come the sun did not darken when it watched the killings of our innocent children? Why did the earth not open and swallow the murderers' gang? ... Outside it was a beautiful day, the sun spread its light, the sky was blue, and from far away the green of the forest was seen. And God remained silent, no mercy was shown, nor miracles happened.<sup>22</sup>

Yochvedovitz memoirs are handwritten in Hebrew and combine a realistic portrayal of events and facts with thoughts and feelings and a literary account of his individual experiences. When he returned to his hometown Slonim after the war, Yochvedovich was appalled by what he had seen: "I walk alone through the streets of the destructed city to visit and tour my relatives' and friends' homes and I wonder if I will find one of them. But to my great sorrow I find there only the ruins of burnt houses, under which – as they say – many Jews were suffocated and burned."<sup>23</sup>

He visited Petralowicze Hill, on which between the end of June until mid-July 1942, about eight thousand Jews of the Slonim Ghetto were shot to death, among them his other son and his son-in-law. He noticed that on the mass grave of about five hundred Christians who were murdered there, a large memorial stone was placed to commemorate the victims. But on the Jews' mass graves, there were no signs.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Yochvedovitz-Kahane, *Transmigration of Bodies*.

<sup>23</sup> Yochvedovitz's diary, *Moreshet Archive*, D.2.9.

<sup>24</sup> Yochvedovitz's diary, *Moreshet Archive*, D.2.9.

Another eyewitness survivor of Slonim is Zehava Ravitz-Yakimovski, who gave a long, painful testimony after the war.<sup>25</sup> She was incarcerated in the ghetto and later escaped to the forests and joined the partisans. Her testimony is dotted with many stories and anecdotes from her personal experience, of which I chose to quote just one. In the second Aktion of June 29, 1942, she was hiding in the ghetto in a bunker prepared by fifty tenants of three neighboring buildings. For many nights they would dig under the stable situated in the joint courtyard and spread the dirt around. They stored food and clothes inside. One night they sensed unusual traffic and restlessness in the area and put guards around the place. In the morning German and Polish soldiers announced that those who held the red documents of craftsmen could go out and no harm would be done to them. People believed and came out, among them her brother and uncle. This was of course a fraud – they were all led to Chepilovo, about seven kilometers from the town, and shot dead:

My mother, father, sister, and more people were sitting in the bunker. There were no children among us. Suddenly, a woman came in with a small child, she lived in another building not far. She asked us to join in, but we were afraid that the child might start crying and expose us all, so we refused. Then she said, "If you do not let me and the child in, I will give you all away to the Germans." And so it happened that the child cried, and the Germans heard his voice but did not know where the entrance was, so they started to throw hand grenades. ... Everything was set on fire, including the wood we put on top of the bunker, and the smoke penetrated inside. We were sitting as long as we could

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<sup>25</sup> Zehava Ravitz-Yakimovski, testimony, *Moreshet Archive* (no date), A.200.

breathe. A seventy-year-old grandmother went out first and many others followed ... they took them all by train car.<sup>26</sup>

She herself went out only when she could not take it anymore; the family ran to the street, which was in flames, and did not know where to go. "I ran to the right and Mama to the left ... in just a moment she disappeared, and I have never seen her again. ..." <sup>27</sup> From the cracks of a small wooden toilet shack in which Zehava was crowded with seven more people, she saw a scene she would never forget. A woman who was with them said that there was no point staying there, as "they will catch us and kill us." So, she went out and offered money to the Lithuanians, who approached her. "She begged them to spare her life, since she has small children, but they commanded her to turn around, shot her in the back and she fell into the fire and was totally burnt."<sup>28</sup>

On that same day another notable event occurred – the cold-blooded killing of a Judenrat member who tried to prevent the Aktion. Gershon Quint had already a reputation of someone who was not afraid of standing up against the Germans. On the morning of June 29, he was seen running around in the ghetto excited and agitated, calling on everyone to hide, pushing people with his own hands to their homes. When the streets were almost empty, he stood alone in the ghetto gate, as if waiting, refusing his wife and daughter, who urged him to come in. A convoy of heavy trucks entered the ghetto led by two small cars, which stopped by Quint. It was Ritmayer, a newly appointed notorious commander of the SS who was known as a sadist. Quint took off his hat, as was demanded, and opened his mouth to talk to the German. "He believed he could save at least part of the Jews."<sup>29</sup> But the German said, "And what will you say now Quint?" and shot him with his automatic rifle. "Quint

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<sup>26</sup> Ravitz-Yakimovski, *Moreshet Archive*, A.200; see also Arad, *History of the Holocaust*, 288.

<sup>27</sup> Ravitz-Yakimovski, *Moreshet Archive*, A.200.

<sup>28</sup> Ravitz-Yakimovski, *Moreshet Archive*, A.200.

<sup>29</sup> Ravitz-Yakimovski, *Moreshet Archive*, A.200.

fell on the gate entrance, his hat dropped a short distance from his head, his legs and arms spread apart as if saying: you can pass only over my dead body." Thousands of Jews saw him on their last way on that day. It was a kind of march of the Slonim Jews to whom Quint had bowed and fallen.<sup>30</sup>

Yochvedovich also described the event of the day in many details. In the midst of the chaos, he remembered "the image of a good-looking woman, dressed in black, walking upright and standing out from the crowd." She was Rabbi Fein's wife, and beside her walked her daughter and her little granddaughter who came for a visit from Moscow, where they had found refuge, but they could not go back.<sup>31</sup> Rabbi Yehuda Leib Fein, the chief rabbi of Slonim who was admired all over the country as a highly educated and prominent person, had been murdered a year before, in the first Aktion of July 1941, when he insisted on going with his people who were gathered in the marketplace. An SS unit attacked him and tortured him publicly. They stripped his clothes off, cut his beard, and beat him to death, thus making him the first victim of that massacre.<sup>32</sup>

During the second Aktion, cases of resistance and defiance occurred, where people tried to fight back. One of them killed a German soldier with an ax. A few hundred Jews managed to escape the ghetto and later joined partisan units in the nearby forests. In the following months, small groups of them, armed with weapons they managed to obtain, infiltrated back into the city to take revenge on the Germans. One of them was Zerach Kermin, who took part in several operations that involved taking people out of the ghetto and into the forest. He later testified on their methods to obtain arms stolen from a German warehouse.<sup>33</sup> He took part in many sabotage operations and received a medal of honor from the partisans' command.

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<sup>30</sup> Kaplinsky, "In their life and death," 165.

<sup>31</sup> Yochvedovitz-Kahane, *Transmigration of Bodies*, 43.

<sup>32</sup> Kaplinsky, "In their life and death," 160.

<sup>33</sup> Zerach Kermin, "Partisans' infiltrations to Slonim," *Pinkas Slonim*, 132-33.

Yochvedovitz and Ravitz-Yakimovski also escaped and joined the partisans, and both their testimonies tell in length many important details about their lives and resistance in the forests, stories that sample the Jewish will to live and get revenge.

## **Zetel (Dyatlovo) – Ghetto and Resistance**

Under these extreme situations of the Nazi occupation, in almost every ghetto in Belarus an underground organization was formed, mostly of young Jewish men and women who sought ways to resist the Germans and not stay passive. They felt that they must act, even though they had no arms or previous military experience and training. Underground groups were formed mainly towards the end of 1941 and over 1942, after experiencing the horrors of the first wave of mass executions.

In Zetel (Dyatlovo or Dziajlava in Grodno Oblast) an underground was formed at the end of 1941, after executions of 120 of the community's intellectual leaders and the deportation of 400 to the Dworzec forced labor camp. This was before the ghetto was established in February 1942. The active figure in this underground was Alter Dworcki, one of the prominent lawyers in the area before the war, who had contacts with many local non-Jewish residents. Under the pressure of the community, Dworcki took it upon himself to be the head of the Judenrat, a position that made it easier for him to fulfill his other task as the head of the underground.<sup>34</sup> As he understood the Germans' true intentions, Dworcki arranged for ten underground members to join the Jewish police, and thus, the group had actually become part of the Jewish leadership of the ghetto. The underground spread leaflets among the local population and in the nearby villages giving them true information about the state of the war and warning them that revenge would come after the war against those who cooperated with the Germans, an act that intimidated the

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<sup>34</sup> Moshe Kahanovich, *The Fighting of the Jewish Partisans in Eastern Europe* (Tel-Aviv: Ayanot, 1954), 85.

local collaborators. He managed to collect money and purchase some weapons and also helped non-Jewish antifascist elements from the town to leave and join the Soviet partisans in the nearby forests.<sup>35</sup> The local cemetery was used as a meeting point for the underground members and Soviet partisans, who provided them with arms that were later stored in one of the empty houses in the ghetto.<sup>36</sup> Other providers of arms were local farmers who obtained weapons from Red Army deserters, who exchanged them for food and supplies when the Germans invaded the area.<sup>37</sup>

One day Dworcki was approached by a Soviet officer named Vania, who offered to purchase weapons for the underground, but Dworcki suspected his credibility and canceled the meeting at the last minute. A young underground member, Shalom Fiulon, insisted on meeting him and said that there was no danger in it. But indeed, it was a trap. Vania offered him a gun, and when Fiulon took it, they were surrounded by Gestapo members. Fiulon tried to shoot, but the gun failed him; he was captured and cruelly tortured but did not give away any secrets. He even managed to throw a note written in his own blood through the window, saying: "Have no fear friends, I will not betray you, save yourself, continue with the underground and avenge my spilled blood."<sup>38</sup> Horrible shouts were heard all over the place from the torture, and there were Jews who worked nearby. One of them, a blacksmith, approached the place where Fiulon was being kept and found the note.<sup>39</sup> Fiulon died a few days later. He was only nineteen years old.

"We knew that the Germans would punish the ghetto and Jews started hiding in bunkers they had prepared," testified Avraham Leibovitz after the war.<sup>40</sup> He and his family hid for a few days in a bunker they had prepared and left, wandering around until they reached the forest. Only 150 professionals of

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<sup>35</sup> Kahanovich, *The Fighting of the Jewish Partisans*.

<sup>36</sup> Baruch Kaplinski (ed.), *Pinkas Zetel (A Memorial to the Jewish Community in Zetel)* (Tel-Aviv: Organization of Zetel Immigrants in Israel, 1957), 372.

<sup>37</sup> Sonia Berenchuk, video testimony (1993), *Fortunoff Visual Archive*, HVT-3377.

<sup>38</sup> Berenchuk, video testimony.

<sup>39</sup> Berenchuk, video testimony.

<sup>40</sup> Avraham Leibovitz, testimony, *Ghetto Fighters House Archive*, 20787.

the Zetel Jewish community were taken to Nowogródek for work; the rest were killed.<sup>41</sup>

Dworcki and three of his close aids escaped the ghetto to the Lipiczański Forest on April 28, 1942, but were tricked by non-Jewish partisans, who refrained from confronting the Germans and opposed their courageous ideas to attack the ghetto. They killed Dworcki and his friend Moshe Pozdonski in a planned ambush.<sup>42</sup> Survivors of this group managed to return to the Zetel Ghetto and report what happened to Dworcki and his friends. Despite this failure, the underground continued to operate in the ghetto and succeeded to save more than eight hundred Jews who were hiding in *malinas* (hideouts) during the second massacre of August 6, 1942. The underground led them to the forest where they joined the partisans as a separate Jewish unit headed by Hirsh Kaplinski in the Soviet battalion of Orlianski-Borba, whose commander was a Jew from Pinsk named Naum Feldman.<sup>43</sup> “It is obvious that without the blessed activity of Alter Dworcki in organizing the underground, such a big number of Jews would not have been saved,” concludes historian Moshe Kahanovich.<sup>44</sup>

Sonia Barenchuk was born in Belitsa and lived there until the Nazi occupation.<sup>45</sup> She escaped east with a friend when the Germans entered the town, but after much hardship they had to turn back since the borders were blocked. The Jewish community was very small, about six hundred people, and suffered killings and prosecution from the first day, including the burning of houses and forced labor inspected by local Polish residents. Few of them escaped to the forests. In November, the remaining Jews were transferred to three different ghettos. Barenchuk and her family ended up in Zetel. As refugees, strangers in the ghetto, their situation was much worse since they had no home, property, or means of living. The family of thirty people was crowded

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<sup>41</sup> Leibovitz, testimony.

<sup>42</sup> Leibovitz, testimony.

<sup>43</sup> Kahanovich, *Fighting of the Jewish Partisans*, 86, 135.

<sup>44</sup> Kahanovich, *Fighting of the Jewish Partisans*, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Berenchuk, video testimony.



in a small warehouse with no floor and broken windows. Sonia and her friend Chasia learned about the local underground and sought ways to join. They were interviewed by Shalom Gerling, a senior member of the underground, and when he was convinced by their strength and determination, they were accepted. The young women took upon themselves missions of finding food and clothes for the refugees who came from other ghettos. They would hide them in many places in the ghetto, even in the synagogue behind the Holy Ark. Even her young brother, thirteen-year-old David, was sent to missions outside the ghetto by the underground.<sup>46</sup>

On April 30 and August 6, 1942, the remaining Jews in Zetel were murdered in two Aktions, bringing an end to the 450-year-old community. Sonia Barenchuk and a few others managed to escape to the forests, where they joined the partisans and continued their resistance till the day of liberation.

## **Resistance in the Ghetto of Mir**

In a battle against the German invasion of Mir on June 26, 1941, most of the city's houses were burnt. Two weeks later, the Jewish residents were called to the main square and robbed of their valuables. Here too, dignitaries and leading members of the community, twenty-five of them, were immediately murdered and a Judenrat was established. An underground in Mir was formed after the first violent Aktion of November 9, 1941, killing fifteen hundreds of the town Jews. The underground consisted of about eighty young Jews. Dov (Berl) Reznik, who lost his father and two brothers in this initial Aktion, gave this testimony in 1946: "Our goal was to resist when the Germans would attack the ghetto ... we prepared stones, iron sticks, wooden bates etc. ... we did not want to fall into pits the way our parents died ... our wish was to fight with weapons at hand, but we did not have firearms yet."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Barenchuk, video testimony.

<sup>47</sup> Dov Reznik, testimony, *Moreshet Archive* (1946), A.119.

However, a while later they decided to change their plans and try to escape to the forests and join the partisan units who operated nearby. While working as an electrician in the local police station, Reznik met a man whom he recognized from Vilna. This was Shmuel Rufeisen, a Polish Jew who managed to get forged documents German and lived in Mir for a while undercover as a *Volksdeutsche* (a person of German ethnic origin) named Josef Oswald. He worked for the Germans as an interpreter and was looking for ways to help Jews and Christians by using his position and the trust of the German commanders in the city. After meeting Reznik, he agreed to support the underground and provide information. He did it through two Jewish women, Rasha and Shifra, who worked as cleaners in the German station. Years later, Rufeisen recalled that meeting with Reznik and said that he saw himself as a soldier, as a man who had a mission that he was obliged to fulfill. "Thus was a struggle of a soldier. One fights in a certain way and the other in a different form. ... I had to do the right thing." He knew that he must be highly careful and that "one wrong step might ruin it all." Oswald asked that no one be informed about his past and the fact that he was Jewish. He was very pleased to have established this contact and was eager to help the local Jews.<sup>48</sup> Reznik recalled:

We asked Rufeisen to inform us about the dates of the planned Aktions against the Jews. We would receive information from him about the situation on the front lines and in Palestine, as well as about German policy, because he had access to a radio. ... Shmuel would often come to my house, and I would come to his, as if for electrical repairs.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Tec, *In the Lion's Den*, 97-98, 125-26. The author interviewed Rufeisen, and he recounted in length the many cases of rescue and support he was involved in as he remembered them.

<sup>49</sup> Reznik, testimony.

In his testimony, Reznik also told about the tragic event of four young Jewish men from the town who contacted a Russian soldier and a local farmer, asking that they connect them with the partisans. The farmer tricked them into a meeting in a barn and killed three of them with his ax. The fourth man survived and informed the Jewish Council of the murder. Oswald reported this case to the local gendarmerie and the farmer was arrested and executed.<sup>50</sup>

In May 1942, all Mir Jews were moved to the Mirsky Castle, which had been transformed into a closed ghetto.<sup>51</sup> The underground recruited more young members, mainly those who belonged to youth movement, and divided them into small cells of five people who did not know each other, to maintain secrecy. Each cell was responsible for one part of the ghetto and collected cold weapons for the coming days. The underground decided to ask Oswald to get them arms, revealing their plans for resistance. He burst into tears and promised to do his best, and indeed, within a few days he gave them a Nagan pistol with six bullets and a rifle, which was the first arms in the ghetto.<sup>52</sup> Within a short time they received more weapons, including hand grenades, and started training the underground members. "Three underground men worked in the police stable, so Oswald would put the weapons under the garbage, and they would take it – bullets, guns, and even automatic weapons, we hid them in the cracks of the castle walls."<sup>53</sup>

In early August 1942 Oswald informed his friends that the Germans were planning a mass Aktion on August 13 and advised that the young ones should escape, since he realized that there was no chance that an armed rebellion inside the ghetto would succeed. He warned them that starting a fight in the ghetto would cause cruel revenge by the Germans.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Reznik, testimony.

<sup>51</sup> Shmuel Rufeisen, video testimony, *Fortunoff Visual Archive* (1987), HVT-1834.

<sup>52</sup> Reznik, testimony.

<sup>53</sup> Chaim Rabinovitch, testimony, *Moreshet Archive* (July 1945), A.118. Rabinovitch was born in Bessarabia and studied in Mir Yeshiva.

<sup>54</sup> Rabinovitch, testimony; Rufeisen, visual testimony.

About three hundred Jews did manage to get out and left the ghetto for the forest on the night of August 10. Three days later the ghetto was liquidated. Reznik described the dilemma they faced before the escape: they tried to convince the other residents of the ghetto, among them elderly family members, to join them, but failed and realized that they would have to leave them behind: "My mother told me: Children, do not go anywhere, for now it's quiet here, you may be the first victims. ... my sister who had a small child and my brother said that because of my 'game' the entire ghetto Jews would be lost." They were his only surviving family and it was "a terrible tragedy for me to leave them," he said.<sup>55</sup>

They walked in groups of ten but had no detailed plan where to go or whom to meet. From the start, there were those who were not sure it was the right decision and complained, asking, "Why did you take us out without knowing where to go?" Reznik continues:

On the second day after we had left, when we met the first partisans, our joy increased. They taught us the basics of partisan life, how to get food and how to ambush. Then they started asking for our watches and money, asked if we had alcoholic beverage, which we did not like. They started sending us from one place to another, and a dispute began between the partisan units over who would receive us. We learned from them about the massacre that took place in our town on August 13. In this massacre, all our dear families who remained in the ghetto were murdered.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, the Germans liquidated the Mir Ghetto on that day and killed hundreds of Jews. Many of the escapees perished as well under various circumstances, and those who remained joined Soviet partisan units and the

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<sup>55</sup> Reznik, testimony.

<sup>56</sup> Reznik, testimony.

Jewish partisan battalion of the Bielski brothers.<sup>57</sup> They took part in revenge operations against local farmers who collaborated with the Germans and in many other partisan actions. Reznik met Oswald in the Bielski partisan camp, and he told him that after the ghetto's liquidation he had to take off his pants for the head of the police, who then realized that he was Jewish and wanted to kill him. But he managed to escape and was hid by nuns in a stable. Later, he converted to Christianity.<sup>58</sup>

A female underground member in Mir, Miriam (Mara) Gilimowski, was among those who escaped to the forests from the ghetto in August 1942. Her father was murdered by a Polish policeman and her older sister was murdered a short while later, so Gilimowski decided to get out of the ghetto and fight the Germans. After much trouble she joined the partisan unit *Za Sovietskoyu Bielarus* ("for a Soviet Belarus") in Naliboki Forest. She was only twenty years old but very brave, as depicted in a testimony about her experiences: "After studying the secrets of the weapons she used to clean, she demanded to join the sabotage groups who were sent for operations. The comrades laughed at her and said that it is impossible for a woman to have the courage to climb to the railroads and blow the trains."<sup>59</sup> But she insisted and showed much courage in putting a mine on the railroad near Minsk and blowing off an enemy train that carried German soldiers. Following this successful operation were many more to come. She blew bridges and trucks with German soldiers, and soon the partisans became fond of her and called her "our Mariska." When her sister Bela fell in a partisan battle, Mara became desperate and would go ahead of her unit to every operation calling: "This is for Bela, this is for my father!" Then she would risk herself by confronting Germans and attacking them.<sup>60</sup> She would say that she did not want to stay alive, only to take revenge for her people's

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<sup>57</sup> For more on the Bielski brothers' partisan camp, see Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>58</sup> Reznik, testimony. Oswald told about his escape to Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den*, chap. 13, 169-84.

<sup>59</sup> Zesia Berzek, "The Bravery of Miriam (Mara) Gilimowski from Mir," *Moreshet Archive* (no date), A.120.

<sup>60</sup> Berzek, "The Bravery of Miriam."

spilled blood.<sup>61</sup> It is estimated that she mined at least twelve trains and took part in every fight of her battalion. After the war, she received the Red Star military decoration and settled in Minsk, working in a medical institute.<sup>62</sup>

Shmuel Tessler was also among the young underground members who fled to the forests before the final liquidation of the ghetto. He recalled that the Judenrat opened the only gate of the ghetto and announced that whoever wished to save himself could leave.<sup>63</sup>

On the first days it was hard for me to grasp how it would be possible to live here [in the forests]. We heard various stories about the partisans ... my brother-in-law Shimon Skalut had a radio in his attic and listened to the broadcasts from Moscow. He encouraged us that the Soviets are on their way. He did not leave to the forests because he had three small kids but demanded the Judenrat to let us go.

Tessler also talked about successful partisan operations in the Naliboki Forest and revenge actions against Germans and locals who collaborated with them. But as more and more Jews joined the partisans, so grew the antisemitism among the partisans. In the winter it was very cold, sometimes forty degrees Celsius, but they carried on nevertheless. His many details on partisan warfare in the forests in 1943–1944 until liberation are fascinating. He concludes with the huge operation of blowing up railroads all over Belarus on the night prior to the Soviet offensive. The partisans called it “the concert,” and it required a simultaneous attack. It came as a big surprise to the Germans and succeeded. Tessler himself was wounded towards the end of the war and immigrated to Israel.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Rabinovitch, testimony.

<sup>62</sup> Kahanovich, *Fighting of the Jewish Partisans*, 332–33.

<sup>63</sup> Shmuel Tessler, testimony, *Moreshet Archive* (no date), A.114.

<sup>64</sup> Tessler, testimony.

## Summary

This article deals with three Jewish communities in West Belarus, Slonim, Zetel, and Mir, as case studies of the destruction and resistance in the whole area occupied by Nazi Germany, starting in 1941 after its violation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Much has been written about Operation Barbarossa and the destruction it brought to Jewish communities in the occupied areas. My aim here is to bring to light personal testimonies of survivors who experienced the events first-handedly and recounted them from a bottom-up perspective. Thus, I wish to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of this time and place through microhistorical lenses.

Shortly after the invasion, the Germans started to implement their murderous “Final Solution” to annihilate the Jews. They received active support from local non-Jewish residents—Poles, Lithuanians, and Byelorussians—who were antisemites and regarded the Jews as communists. The Holocaust in ghettos in Belarus had been conducted in both similar and dissimilar characteristics, according to different circumstances in each place. It depended on the German authorities, sometimes on the very person in charge; on the social dynamics with the local non-Jewish residents; and on the different responses of the Jews themselves to their persecution. Personal attitudes and choices of both Jewish leadership (Judenrats) and the public influenced the sequence of events as well.

But in most cases, the Germans operated according to the same methods: first to be captured were the men, then the “intelligentsia” – the educated and professionals. The killings were done nearby, at the outskirts of the town; in most cases, the Jews had been deceived and manipulated. The Wehrmacht was an active player in murdering the Jews and its soldiers took part in their annihilation.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See more on the German Army’s participation in the mass murders in Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

In every town, Jews were subject to extreme violence, unprecedented torture, separation of families, robbing of their belongings, forced hard labor, hunger, abuse, and violation of any rights. In a short while after the occupation, the process of ghettoization started in almost each town and village. All testimonies and personal diaries repeat the descriptions of the fast deterioration and complete upheaval of their normal life.<sup>66</sup>

One of the harshest psychological measures the Germans implemented in the daily life of the ghettos' inmates was isolation from the outside world. They built fences—physical and mental—which cut the Jews off from their surroundings and prevented the flow of news and information. This caused ignorance about what was going on in their immediate areas, the fates of their family members, and the situation at the front and in the world at large. They depended on rumors or on Germans' false information. It was part of the Nazi tactic against their subordinates to isolate them and provide only subjective information to their helpless victims.

Jews' attempts to resist and fight back were almost impossible and had no chance of success but occurred in almost every ghetto in Belarus. Small underground groups organized and tried to acquire arms. Their attempts were not always fruitful, and in many cases, they were betrayed by locals who were German accomplices and deceived them. Such stories are recounted in many testimonies. Nonetheless, young Jewish men and women actively responded to the situation, and when it had become clear that rebelling inside the ghettos meant almost definitely suicide, they preferred to escape to the nearby forests and join the partisans. It is estimated that about 25,000 Jews made it to the dense forests of West Belarus and took part in fighting the Germans with the partisans, but not all of them survived.<sup>67</sup> Their experience among Soviet partisans is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is certainly a heroic chapter inside the gloomy picture of the Holocaust in Belarus. Most existing testimonies

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<sup>66</sup> This is true of the personal diaries of Hinda Deul from Ashmyany and David Yochvedovich from Slonim, which are mentioned above.

<sup>67</sup> Cholawski, *Resistance and Partisan Struggle*, chap. 4.



and memoirs were given and written by those partisans who survived the Holocaust, either in the immediate period after the war when survivors had established “historical committees” and collected numerous documents, or in later years. This paper uses some of them to tell their personal narratives.