THE SLAUGHTER OF JEWS IN THE LITHUANIAN TOWN OF BIRZHAI

The testimony of Sheyne Beder, born in Birzhai on June 3, 1923. Her father's name was Berl Beder. She graduated from the Lithuanian gymnasium in Birzhai. Until the war she lived in Birzhai. Sheyne's parents had a food store in Birzhai. They lived at No. 21 Vytauto Street in Birzhai.

The town of Birzhai is located seventy kilometers from Panevezhys and 120 kilometers from Shauliai. A highway links Birzhai and Panevezhys. The town lies between the two rivers Aglona and Apashtzia, near lake Shirvenas.

Until the war 4,000 Jews lived in Birzhai. When the war broke out Jews from the nearby towns of Pasvalis, Radvilishkis, Taurage and Kupishkis gathered at Birzhai. In addition, Jews from the countryside and from other towns also gathered at Birzhai. Thus there were about 6,000 Jews in Birzhai during the first days of the war.

Until the war about 30% of the Jews were occupied in artisanry. There were also a large number of merchants. Most of the young people studied in the local Lithuanian gymnasium, and some went to the Hebrew gymnasiums in Panevezhys and Shauliai, and also in Kaunas University. A number also studied in foreign universities.

The town had three large synagogues and one large chapel. There were two elementary schools, one Yiddish and one Hebrew, a community bank directed by Lifshitz, and a joint stock bank. The director of the second bank was Elye Kaplan. Birzhai had a large Yiddish-Hebrew library.

For several years before the war the surrounding Lithuanian population expressed considerable hostility and anti-Semitism. The Verslas movement had great influence in town and in the surrounding
The War Breaks Out; Robbery, Arrest and Murder of Innocent Jews

As soon as the war began on June 22, 1941, some of the town's Jews tried to flee. Armed Lithuanian bands in the villages, roads and forests used every means to prevent the Jews from escaping to the Soviet Union. Many Jews were shot by the partisan bands while trying to escape. Two people who died in this fashion were Mrs. Asne Fridman and her husband Leyb Fridman. They were both shot by Lithuanian murderers not far from the town of Rokishkis. A very small number managed to escape to the Soviet Union. A large number remained spread out on various roads, in towns and villages closer to the Latvian border. The activities of the Lithuanian murderers grew more intense from hour to hour. More than a thousand Red soldiers lost their lives on account of the partisans, or were taken prisoner by the Germans. The German army caught up with the Jews, and forced to return to their homes in the town of Birzhai. The German army entered Birzhai on Wednesday, June 25, 1941. As soon as the Germans entered town, they began working with the Lithuanians, looking for "rich Jews." They would threaten the Jews with their weapons and take everything they wanted. Gradually all of the Jews who had fled the town returned. As they returned to town they were detained by the armed Lithuanians, who robbed the more valuable possessions of the Jews. The returning Jews found their houses robbed. Hundreds of armed Lithuanians from town and from the countryside roamed the streets of the town.

The entire civilian authority in town immediately fell into the hands of the Lithuanian bandits, who were free to do to the Jews whatever they found necessary. The bandits began passing anti-Semitic laws. The able-bodied Jewish men and women had to go to work every day. At work they were guarded by Lithuanians. While the Jewish men and
women were working, they were beaten with sticks and whips, and they were sadistically tormented and harassed. The Jews were tormented both morally and physically.

1. Sheyne's brother Mote-Yosel Beder and Tevye Tabakin worked together with other Jews on a construction project outside the Lithuanian gymnasium in Birzhai. The Lithuanians forced the two Jews to carry bricks up to the fourth floor. But the murderers forced them to carry so many bricks that it was humanly impossible to carry out the order. The two were murderously beaten, and had to go to bed as soon as they came home. The next day the two Lithuanian murderers who had beaten Mote-Yosel returned to take him to work. Mote-Yosel was weak and felt too sick to do the heavy work. His mother begged the murderers to let him stay in bed one more day. The murderers beat his mother, dragged him out of bed, and took him to work.

2. Six girls worked for the Germans. They were guarded by Lithuanian partisans. The girls had to clean out several toilets in a house. Sheyne's cousins Sore Zelkovitz, aged 18 and Miriam Zelkovitz, aged 16, asked a German officer for rags to clean the toilets. The officers forced them to clean out the filth with their hands, and then he forced them to take off their underwear and use it to wipe the toilets. The girls didn't want to carry out the command. Two Lithuanian bandits who were guarding them at work beat the six girls and forced them to carry out the officer's order. After the girls wiped the toilets with their underwear, the Lithuanian degenerates forced them to put the filthy clothes back on.

Miriam Zelkovitz was a pretty young girl, and had already graduated gymnasium at the age of sixteen. She had long, beautiful black hair. The Lithuanian murderers forced her to dip her head into the toilet bowl, and one of them flushed it. The murderers doubled over with
laughter at their clever method of washing Miriam's beautiful hair.

Miriam and her sister Sore came home weeping in the evening, and complained to their mother. Miriam was a proud and stubborn young woman. She asked her mother to allow her to refuse to work for the murderers any longer. The next morning the two girls did not go to work. Their mother Hene hid the two girls in their beds and covered them with pillows. Two Lithuanian murderers who stood guard at work and who had "washed" Miriam's hair in the toilet, came to the house to look for the girls. Their mother Hene explained that a German had come in the morning to take the two girls to work. The Lithuanian bandits didn't believe Hene, and they beat her. Hene's young daughter Khasele was there. Khasele was afraid the murderers would kill her mother, and pleaded with her mother to tell them where the sisters were. The murderers guessed that little Khasele knew where her two sisters were. They pushed her, and Khasele fell down. As she fell she struck her head. Her entire brow was split open, and blood poured from Khasele's head. Khasele was taken to the hospital, where she was kept illegally until the Jews of Birzhal were annihilated. The next day Miriam and Sore went to work. They were afraid their mother Hene would be shot on account of them. Their innocent father had already been arrested.

At work the next day the two Lithuanian murderers took revenge on the girls. The six girls were all young and pretty. The murderers began demanding that the girls sleep with them. Their demands grew more insistent from day to day. Eventually their demands turned into blows. They murderously beat and tormented the girls. At that time groups of Jewish men were arrested in town or taken away and shot. The bandits threatened to shoot the girls if they did not agree to sleep with them. The girls eventually gave in, and all six were exploited by the Lithuanian sadists. The murderers then boasted to everyone in town
about their success.

One day several Lithuanian bandits forced young women with manicured hands out of their houses and set them to work pulling weeds out from between the paving stones.

3. During the fifth week of the war, armed Lithuanian murderers came to Beder's house at night and announced that they had come to search for weapons in Beder's possession. They looked everywhere, but of course they did not find any weapons. They robbed everything they wanted, and arrested Mote-Yosl Beder and his father Berl Beder (Sheyne Beder's brother and father). The same evening they arrested the Beder's neighbor Itzik Mas. The three Jews were taken away by the Lithuanian murderers, and no one knew where to. Many Jewish men had already been imprisoned by then. The next day Sheyne Beder went to the prison to find out about her brother and father. A German there checked the list of all the arrestees, but did not find Sheyne's father and brother on the lists. As she left the prison Sheyne encountered the Lithuanian murderer Gumbrevitzius. He assured Sheyne that her father and brother had been taken to a concentration camp near Radivilishkis. Sheyne went to a Lithuanian woman named Baltziunis. Her husband had been arrested the same night for belonging to the Communist party. Mrs. Baltziunis told Sheyne that her father Berl and brother Mote-Yosl, together with Itzik Mas, had been shot at the edge of Lake Shirvenas, between the Jewish cemetery and the Ostrava compound.

4. The first Jewish martyr in Birzhai was the Jewish Dr. Avrom Levin. This was during the third week of the war. Once, in the middle of the night, armed Lithuanians came to the doctor's house and announced to Levin that he was expected at the headquarters of the Lithuanian murderers. The doctor and his wife asked to postpone the appointment for the following morning. The murderers beat the doctor in his house,
and dragged him out onto the street. They shot him not far from his house. This happened between Vytauto Street and the market place. The doctor's wife Sore Levin (born Dorfson) heard shooting, but didn't imagine that her husband had been shot. The next morning she learned what had happened. She took her best white sheets and went to the place where her husband lay murdered. All of her husband's blood, every bit of earth that had soaked up blood, went into the sheets. The Lithuanian murderers eventually permitted Dr. Levin to be buried at the Jewish cemetery in Birzhai.

5. One day, shortly after Dr. Levin was shot the Lithuanian murderers carried out the popular rabbi of Birzhai, Rabbi Bernshteyn. He was taken to the Shirvenas Lake. There the rabbi was forced to duck underwater several times. Then the murders explained to the rabbi that he, Bernshteyn, was guilty of all the sins that Jews had committed against the world, and that he was responsible for the sins of all the Jews of Birzhai. They set his beard on fire, burned his body with irons and finally shot him.

6. Moyshe-Shiye Hendler was a popular iron merchant, more than sixty years old. One day Lithuanian bandits caught him hiding in the woods. He was herded through all the streets of town wearing only his underwear. Hendler was barefoot. The Lithuanian bandits chased him around, and the entire Lithuanian civilian population followed after, enjoying the scene. Hendler's feet were bloody, and his whole body was bruised and cut from the blows he had received. Then the Lithuanian murderers shot the tortured Hendler. Moyshe-shiye Hendler was herded through the streets by a Lithuanian from town named Bertulils along with other murderers from town.

7. After Moyshe-Shiye Hendler was shot, the murderers shot Ben-Tsiyon Hendler (Moyshe-Shiye's son) and Moyshe Lurya, Moyshe-Shiye's
son-in-law. Moyshe Lurya was a construction engineer, who had been forced to work with Ben-Tsiyon Hendler pulling weeds at the town priest's house every day. The murderers took Lurya and Ben-Tsiyon from work and shot both of them.

Sheyne Marries a Lithuanian Engineer
In Order to Save Her Mother and Grandmother

The situation of the Jews in Birzhai worsened from day to day. No Jew's life was safe any longer. Sheyne Beder thought long and hard about the fate of her mother, small brother and grandmother. Sheyne went to Kaunas to look for help.

Sheyne Beder remembered a Lithuanian engineer whom she knew well, named Antanas Ratziukaitis. Sheyne had worked with the engineer at the building commission in Kaunas for two months. Sheyne had worked for him as a typist. The Lithuanian engineer always invited Sheyne to go for walks. He invited her to the cinema and to the theater. Sheyne had always avoided going anywhere with him, because she was a proud Jewish girl and didn't want to be too friendly with a non-Jewish engineer. A few weeks before the war the engineer had scolded Sheyne for refusing to be more friendly with him. Once he had insisted to Sheyne that it would not be long before Sheyne might need his help. At that time Sheyne had not guessed what he meant. At that time rich Jews were being taken from Lithuania to Russia. Sheyne thought that the Lithuanian engineer was thinking of that, and refused to accept help in such cases. Sheyne's parents actually were rich, but she didn't want the Lithuanian to have a chance to do Sheyne any favors.

But when death was threatening the Jews of Birzhai, Sheyne looked for ways to save her mother, brother and grandmother. At that tragic moment, when the lives of the Jews were in the hands of the Lithuanian murderers, Sheyne remembered the engineer Antanas Ratziukaitis, and went
to see him in Kaunas.

The engineer Ratzukaitis warmly received Sheyne at his home. He immediately proposed marriage to her. The engineer was 44 years old at the time. Sheyne was only eighteen. He didn't stop asking her to marry him and convert to Christianity. Sheyne didn't want to betray her faith, not because she was religious but because Sheyne considered the Jewish religion to be a sign of membership in the Jewish people. Precisely at that time Jewish pride was more important to Sheyne than during the peaceful times. Sheyne would under no circumstances agree to abandon her persecuted people, and refused to convert.

The engineer tempted Sheyne with the chance to save her family. Sheyne agreed to become his wife, but refused to convert. Sheyne became the engineer's wife. Sheyne went to live in the engineer's house, and began to plan ways to save her mother, brother and grandmother.

Once when Sheyne was in a cafe with the Lithuanian engineer, Sheyne met two drivers from Birzhal named Shlepitis and Lapenas. The two men from Birzhal told Sheyne that her brother Mote-Yosl and her father were no longer living. Sheyne could no longer stay safe in Kaunas, and with great difficulty she returned to her mother and grandmother in Birzhal.

Sheyne Returns and Survives the Total Slaughter of Jews

When she returned to Birzhal, Sheyne no longer found her mother and grandmother at the house. A Lithuanian peasant had moved into Sheyne's house. The peasant had also inherited everything belonging to Sheyne's wealthy parents.

Sheyne learned that all of the Jews of Birzhal were no longer living in their houses. All of the Jewish women, children and men had been herded into the synagogue by the Lithuanian murderers. At the gate of the synagogue stood an armed Lithuanian who had worked for Sheyne's father for many years. Sheyne saw a number of Lithuanians from town
with weapons in their hands, guarding the Jews in the synagogue. Civilian townspeople also stood near the synagogue, happily looking at the interned Jews. The Lithuanian murderer Stragis (the son of a shoemaker) greeted Sheyne with these words: "I've been looking for you for a long time. It's a shame you weren't here earlier. You're polished fingernails would have cleaned out all the garbage cans in town." Sheyne burst into the synagogue.

Sheyne saw all of the women and children she knew on the floor of the synagogue, weeping, exhausted and starving. They all reproached her for entering the synagogue when they were all waiting for death. Sonia's mother Khane-Leye and grandmother Sheyne-Rive Sovosetza began tearing their hair, realizing that Sheyne had come there to die instead of saving her young life.

Every now and then the Lithuanian murderers would enter the synagogue demanding money, gold and silver from the Jews. The Jews were depressed and hopeless, and many of them willingly gave up everything they owned. They hoped to win mercy from the drunken murderers, who would drink and then beat the Jews with boards and rifle butts.

The torture of the Jews in the synagogue lasted for exactly twenty-four hours. At night the Jews could not sleep. They all knew that their last moments of life were slipping away. Thousands of eyes looked sorrowfully at the Holy Ark, which remained mute. All night long mothers kissed their small children and wept... They wept constantly as they took their leave of their little children, who quietly slept in the arms of their mothers. Every now and then the door would open and drunken Lithuanian murderers would come in. They kept threatening to shoot the Jews on the spot if they didn't hand over their money, gold and silver.

A Lithuanian named Setnikas, who had graduated from the Lithuanian
gymnasium, gave a speech to the unfortunate Jews in the synagogue. He
demanded that all the Jews surrender their money, gold and valuables.
He threatened to shoot on the spot anyone who didn't carry out his
command. All of the Jews surrendered everything they still possessed.

But other murderers came later and demanded money, gold and the
like from the Jews.

The Jews of Birzhaï were kept in the synagogue for one full day.
They spent one night at the synagogue. In the morning the Jews were
told that they were being taken to work near the Latvian border. The
Jews did not believe what they were told, but there was nothing they
could do about it.

Some of them brought along part of the things they had brought with
them into the synagogue.

The Lithuanian murderers took everyone out of the synagogue and
lined the Jews up in rows of five. As the Jews were herded out of the
synagogue, the Lithuanian murderers beat them, robbed them and tormented
them.

All the Jews were driven out that day to the Ostravos forest. The
pits were among the shrubs. The murderers separated out groups of
Jewish men, women and children and forced them to strip entirely naked,
removing even their underwear. The murderers herded the naked Jewish
men, women and children to the pit. At the edge of the pit the Jews
were forced to kneel.

Soon the fire of various kinds of weapons could be heard, followed
immediately by the screams and moans of the wounded.

At the beginning the murderers took the Jews in groups of sixteen,
and then they increased the size of the groups to twenty-five at a time.
The women threw themselves at the feet of the Lithuanian murderers,
begging them not to shoot their children. The women asked nothing for
themselves but a quick death. The murderers did not shoot the children. Instead they threw them into the pit alive. The larger children were killed with rifle butts or boards.

Sheyne Beder saw a pregnant woman named Tzirke Milner being shot. At that moment the woman gave birth. Mixed in with the terrible screams of the wounded Jews in the pit could be heard the cries of a newborn child.

How Did Sheyne Survive?

Sheyne, her mother and her grandmother were totally naked and walked toward the pits. Sheyne’s brother Khatzkele kissed the murderer’s boots, pleading not to be shot. The murderer struck him in the head with his rifle butt. Sheyne saw a piece of her brother’s skull falling to the ground. Khaskele lay dead. Sheyne’s mother wept bitterly and wildly, and began pushing at Sheyne, to get her to run away. At that moment Sheyne thought of a plan.

Not far from the Jewish cemetery lived an acquaintance of hers named Hela Savitzky, with whom Sheyne had hidden gold and other valuables. The murderers appointed a Lithuanian to go with Sheyne and pick up the “treasure.” Sheyne walked away naked and put on any clothes she could find on the pile. But the man who went with her was quite drunk. The murderer stopped to straighten out his pants and boots. Sheyne kept going, and then began to run. Sheyne returned to Birzhai and entered a church, the day after all the Jews were shot. Sheyne stayed in the church one day and one night. Sheyne experienced terrible pain in the church. She had various hallucinations in the church at night. From the church Sheyne fled to PaBirzhai. There the Lithuanian police recognized her and arrested her. The chief of the Lithuanian police in that town was the famous murderer Kateiva. Pabirzhai is eight kilometers from Birzhai. From there Sheyne was taken to Pasvalis in a
On the way they stopped to get a drink. The driver shot the Lithuanian murderer who was guarding Sheyne, and brought Sheyne to Telshiai. In Telshiai Sheyne found Engineer Ratziukaitis, with whom she stayed for over two months.

In Telshiai Sheyne lived as the wife of Engineer Ratziukaitis. Another Lithuanian engineer named Bjoshovas from Kaunas, who was working at the Statyba Mashtis near the railroad station in Telshiai at the time, recognized that Sheyne was Jewish and betrayed her to the Lithuanian Gestapo. Sheyne escaped to hide with a neighboring peasant woman. Sheyne was there for several days. One night Sheyne spoke in Yiddish in her sleep. Evidently the peasant woman betrayed Sheyne to the German Gestapo. Sheyne was arrested at the peasant woman's house and taken straight to the pit to be shot. A short time earlier the women of Telshiai had been shot at Gerulaliai. Sheyne was taken to a barn, where there were about thirty women from Telshiai who had not yet been shot. The Lithuanian murderer from Telshiai Platakas knew that Sheyne was Engineer Ratziukaitis's wife, and he let her escape from Gerulaliai. Sheyne escaped from Gerulaliai to Trishkiai and hid in a warehouse. She stayed in the warehouse for a few days. It was after the Jewish holidays by then. The weather was quite cold.

The woman who owned the warehouse found Sheyne and took her into the house. It turned out that the peasant was the father of the infamous Jew murderer in Trishkiai. Two Lithuanian murderers took Sheyne away to shoot her. Fortunately they met a German sergeant on the way. Sheyne showed the documents she had obtained in Telshiai to the German. The German took the Lithuanians' weapons and took everyone to the police in Trishkiai. The German left the two murderers at the Trishkiai police station, and took Sheyne to the highway. The sergeant
put Sheyne into an automobile and she arrived in Shiauliai.

The Lithuanian Engineer Ratziukaitis found out what had happened, and moved all of his furniture and other possessions to Shiauliai. Sheyne met the Lithuanian engineer again, and stayed with him in Shiauliai for fourteen months.

The Lithuanian engineer often left Shiauliai, without leaving food for Sheyne. Sheyne suffered a great deal of hunger. She tried not to go out into the street too much, to avoid being seen by the Lithuanian population.

Once while standing in line at a store, Sheyne was spotted by a Lithuanian who worked for the German Gestapo. The Lithuanian had found out about Sheyne from other Lithuanians. At the Gestapo headquarters Sheyne was beaten. They wanted her to tell them who had shot the Lithuanian partisan who was guarding Sheyne on the way from Pabirzhai to Telshiai. Sheyne lied, saying that the Lithuanian partisan had taken her to Pasvalis in the automobile and left her there. Sheyne lied further, saying that she and other Jewish women had escaped from the pits at Pasvalis. The German Gestapo sent Sheyne into the Shiauliai ghetto.

*Sheyne's Hard and Desperate Struggle to Live; The Tragic Balance*

While in the Shiauliai ghetto Sheyne went to see Engineer Ratziukaitis several times. However, he received Sheyne coldly, and would not even allow her into his house. Once he allowed her into his room and asked her to sleep with him and then return to the ghetto. Thus the educated Lithuanian finally showed his true face. Up until that moment Sheyne had a certain respect for the Lithuanian who had helped her more than once. Sheyne had thought all along that the Lithuanian engineer was truly in love with her. Finally Sheyne had a chance to see just how calculating the engineer had been.
A flood of hate and fury was aroused in Sheyne's heart. She felt she had been insulted, mocked and exploited in an open and underhanded way. At that moment Sheyne felt like a fool. Tears flowed from her eyes. Her heart pounded with anger at the "good Lithuanian." But again the engineer suggested that she take her clothes off and sleep with him... Sheyne roundly cursed him, adding that if she survived, she would take her revenge on all the Lithuanian murderers, including him. Sheyne then returned to join her fellow Jews in the Shiauliai ghetto.

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Not all of the Jews, particularly the leaders, understood the pain and suffering the young woman had gone through. The Jews in the Shiauliai ghetto considered her attempt to save her life by marrying the Lithuanian engineer as evidence of loose morals. Sheyne was sent to do the hardest tasks. Nor was she supported by anyone. Sheyne Beder, then just twenty years old, felt like a bruised and bloodied mass of sorrow, pain and moral defeat. She was evacuated together with the last Jews in the Shiauliai ghetto to Germany, where she lived through several camps. Finally Sheyne Beder wound up in the Dachau concentration camp. When the Jews were taken from that camp to the Tyrol, Sheyne Beder escaped together with a Jewish girl from Telshiai. The name of the woman from Telshiai is Rokhel Rozenblum.

The Jews of Birzhai were shot in some bushes near Astravas forest, four kilometers from Birzhai.

On that date (which Sheyne Beder no longer remembers) all the Jews from Birzhai were shot, men, women and children. In addition to the Jews of Birzhai, Jews brought from the villages and from some of the surrounding towns were shot that day as well. In Sheyne Beder's opinion, some 6,000 Jewish men, women and children were shot that day by students in the eighth class in the Lithuanian gymnasium in Linkuva,
along with local Lithuanians. Sheyne Beder remembers well the following names of the Lithuanian murderers from the town of Birzai who shot Jews: students from the eighth class of the Lithuanian gymnasium, two brothers named Kairys; Attorney Zovje; Agronomist Jakshtas; Bubinas; Variakojis; Staliunas; Baltziunas; Mikelunas; Gudeika; Shaulius; Setnikas; Gumbrevitzius; Bartkevitzius; Zheromskis; Statkus; Bertulis; Papuoshalas; and Springis.

THE END

Everything written on twelve pages at the Landsberg cultural commission was related personally by me, Sheyne Beder, to L. Koniuchowsky. All of the dates and locations are accurate, and I attest thereto with my signature on each and every page.

Sheyne Beder (signature)

The report was written by L. Koniuchowsky (signature)

Epsenhausen, December 25, 1946

The signature of Sheyne Beder is attested to by the Jewish committee in Epsenhausen (illegible signature)

Translated by Dr. Jonathan Boyarin

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