



## **CHILDHOOD DESTROYED. ACTIONS THAT KILLED CHILDREN IN KAUNAS GHETTO**

*Museologist Greta Ščeliokaitė*

The word *action* (in Latin *action* means *operation*) refers to organised activities in order to achieve political or diplomatic goals. Another meaning is "securities." In spoken language, *action* refers to discounts in supermarkets. However, during the occupation of Nazi Germany, an action was a brutal extermination of the masses. The masses who, in the eyes of the occupiers, did not deserve to live.

On October 24, 1941, a black Gestapo car rolled into Kaunas Ghetto. Deputy Gestapo commander Hauptsturmführer Schmitz got out of the car, together with Hauptsturmführer Helmunt Rauka. Their appearance in the ghetto caused anxiety. Their behaviour was particularly strange: after walking around in the ghetto and looking around Demokratų Square for an hour, the Gestapo left and did not even visit to the Council of Elders.

On October 25, Helmunt Rauka returned to the ghetto accompanied by another Gestapo officer. Without explaining too much, he demanded the Council of Elders to announce in its own name an order in the ghetto: on October 28 at 6 am, all inhabitants of the ghetto, irrespective of age or sex, should assemble in Demokratų Square. Rauka only added that he wanted to increase the food ration for the working people (because it is necessary to increase labour productivity), while the non-working ones would have to make do with the present ration. In

order to ensure that the more substantial ration goes to those for whom it is intended, it is planned to move the non-workers to the Small Ghetto. This was not the first time that the Council had been lied to, and the frightened members were confused and did not know what to do.

On October 26, the Council asked Chief Rabbi Abraham Ber Shapira for advice: should it publish the order? For the Rabbi, this was a really difficult question. He felt very uneasy and asked for more time to think. Shapira spent the whole night with his books of wisdom. When he had not found an answer by morning, he asked for a little more time. According to Rauka's demand, the order should have already been hung. Finally, at 11 am Shapira said he had found the answer:

*In such cases, he said, when an evil decree threatened the entire Jewish community, and a certain act could save a part of the community, the leaders had to summon all their courage, take responsibility and save as many lives as possible.*

On October 27, an order in Yiddish and German was posted in the ghetto that on October 28 at 6 am all residents, without exception, were to assemble in groups according to the work place of the head of the family in Demokratų Square. Also, it was forbidden to lock the houses, and anyone found in the house after 6 am would be shot.

The ghetto was paralysed with fear. The inhabitants had already seen the *actions*, and rumours of trenches being dug near the Ninth Fort caused even more anxiety. Being useful to the Reich seemed to be the only salvation. The ones who were working were preparing Jordan's certificates. Single women were looking for single men who could protect them. Single mothers were looking for fathers for their children. Hardly anyone in the ghetto at least dozed that night.

Everyone remembers October 28 in a similar way. The only difference is whether it was raining or snowing that day. Then all the witnesses remember the same thing: the mournful crowds flocking to Demokratų Square. They all remember waiting because the executioners did not appear until 9 am. They remember the children crying and the cold penetrating down to their bones. The elders staggering. The thirst and the fear. And Rauka, standing on the podium like a conductor, and waving to the right and left.

On October 29, there was not a single hut in the ghetto whose inhabitants had not been affected by yesterday's selection in one way or another. Holocaust survivor Yochanan Fain will later share his memories:

*The morning after the action, I woke up at sunrise, earlier than usual, to the sound of weapons in the distance. I got up and went outside as I didn't find my father in bed. My father was standing in the yard. When I came closer, I saw that he was crying. Until then, I had thought that only children cried. He explained to me that the shots we were hearing were killing our brothers. I did not want to believe it. He showed me a long column of people stretching behind the ghetto between the hills. <...> The massacre lasted all day. My father's sister was also in the endless queue of people waiting for their death.*

On that day, 9,200 Jews were shot in Kaunas Ninth Fort: 2,007 men, 2,920 women and 4,273 children.



Iza and Fira, daughters of Dora and Girska Kagan. The 1930s, Kaunas. They were murdered together with their parents in October, 1941 in Kaunas Ninth Fort.

Collections of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum (KDFM 14198)

The Great Action made the people fear every day. Standing on the brink of life and death became a daily reality. Some of the ghetto inhabitants understood that the ghetto meant destruction. The anxiety about the future was described by Holocaust survivor Miron Gink:

*The Great Action has opened everyone's eyes. No one believes the rumours about labour camps anymore. It has become clear that we were facing the same end. In the Ninth Fort or elsewhere, the same end for everyone. We just don't know when: how long from now, or maybe tomorrow, or even right now, at the moment.*

However, only a small part of the population fled the ghetto immediately after the Great Action. Since the Nazis considered the ghetto to be *cleansed of*

*unnecessary elements*, the mass killings stopped for a while. The ghetto fell into a period of stagnation. However, not everyone agreed to await their fate in peace. Rumours began to spread in the Ghetto that some people had managed to escape and hide in the city. There were also rumours of parents who decided to take their sleeping offspring out in potato sacks and give them to Catholics to raise.

On July 24, 1942, the ghetto announced that pregnancy was forbidden. All pregnancies must be terminated. From September onwards, childbirth was forbidden. However, women still gave birth, only the births were not registered. Since the children were outside the law, the parents had to hide them, preferably outside the ghetto. One such example was the birth of Leib and Tirca Bass's daughter in Kaunas Ghetto on January 26, 1942. Jadvyga and Alfonsas Babarskiai warmly welcomed Rut (Rūta) and raised her until she was thirteen. Rut maintained a relationship with her rescuers for the rest of her life.



Jadvyga Babarskienė with her children. 1955, Kaunas. From left to right: Rut Bass (Basaitė-Babarskytė-Glikman), who was brought away and rescued from Kaunas Ghetto, Alius and Danutė. Copy. Author unknown. Collections of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum (KDFM PF 14155)

In November, 1943, Kaunas Ghetto became a concentration camp. The SS took over the leadership, and security became even tighter. Some of the inhabitants were sent to Aleksotas and Šančiai labour camps. At the same time, a rumour spread in the ghetto about a children's action in Šiauliai Ghetto. Many parents, who had been hesitating, now began to actively look for a place to hide their children. On December 14, 1943, Ariela Abraivič-Sef became such a child. Her father, Jakob Abramavič, injected the child with sleeping drugs and, dressed in

peasant clothes, left her on the doorstep of the orphanage. A note was attached to the bag in which Ariela was laying:

*I am an unmarried mother and cannot take care of my daughter. I am asking you to take my daughter Bronė Mažilytė into your care.*

This was the maiden name of Ariella's mother. Only later did Jakob Abramavičius contact Petras Baublys and indicate the girl's real name. Ariela survived the Holocaust thanks to her parents' determination and intelligence, as well as the will of the kind people who agreed to help her: Petras Baublys, Julija and Vladas Dautartai, and other contributors.

On March 27, 1944, very loud music came over the loudspeakers in the ghetto. Yet, this did not promise anything festive. In the memories of Kaunas Ghetto prisoners, it was one of the blackest days of the entire Nazi occupation. The SS invaded the ghetto and took children up to the age of 12 from their mothers and threw them into trucks. The mothers who resisted were beaten with rifle butts or strangled by dogs. Old people were collected along with the children. The music played at full volume was supposed to mask the nightmare in the ghetto. Jochanan Fain was fourteen at the time, but, given the diet and living conditions of the time, he was smaller and leaner than was typical for his age. Jochanan remembers the *Children's Action*:

*I saw a ten-year-old boy carrying his two-year-old brother in his arms, both of them being pushed into a bus by the soldiers with kicks and punches. It was a public transport bus, but with white painted windows. <...> The terrible screaming of mothers and children tore heads and hearts.*

The children's action lasted for two days, after which the ghetto plunged into seven days of mourning. The fate of approximately 1,700 children and old people is not known. They are believed to have been taken to concentration camps in

Poland. For children, staying in the ghetto became particularly dangerous. They were to cease to exist. It was not only the soldiers who posed a threat, but also their own people as anyone in pain and blinded by jealousy can report against others.

At that time, Jochanan Fain also left the ghetto. The Paulavičius family in Panemunė was already waiting for him. During the war, Jonas Paulavičius accommodated and cared for as many as 16 people, 12 of whom were Jews.

During such days, when we commemorate the Great Action and honour the victims perished, I reflect upon humanity and utter dehumanisation. Sometimes, somewhat naively, I try to console myself that the world learns from history. We remember all this and we will not let it happen again. However, in the background of the days when I am writing these words, this theme is even more relevant. The days when innocent children are brutally murdered in Israel, when Ukrainian children are forcibly separated from their parents and taken to the depths of the red terrorist. During such days, the only hope is these who do not allow atrocities to take root. The people who do not turn a blind eye to the pain of others.