



The Kovno Ghetto Jewish Police Orchestra, 1942-1943

Lisa Anne Storer, an intern of the History Department of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum, a student of Haifa University's Weiss-Livnat International MA Program in Holocaust Studies

Thousands of Jewish civilians were murdered in Kaunas during the first weeks of the Nazi invasion in June 1941. Yosef Gar, a survivor and journalist, describes some of the violence, *"On the night of June 26, Lithuanian partisans...slaughtered some 800 Jews in Slobodka...the rioters did not distinguish between men and women, old people and children. Their cruelty knew no bounds...A house where a number of Jews found refuge was set alight and the partisans did not allow the firemen to put out the fire. The Jews were burned alive...On the afternoon of the 27th [June], about sixty Jews were cruelly murdered in the courtyard of the garage [on Vytautas Prospect] belonging to the company Lietukis, while a large crowd of inquisitive Lithuanians looked on."*

SS-Brigadier General Walter Stahlecker states, in his Operational Situation Report USSR No. 19 for Einsatzgruppen A, dated July 11, 1941, that he *"...summoned a Jewish committee and explained that up to now we had no reason to interfere with the internal arrangements between the Lithuanians and the Jews."*¹ The five assembled Jewish leaders, Leib Garfunkel, Yakov Goldberg, Dr. Ephraim

¹ *The Einsatzgruppen Reports: Selections from the Dispatches of the Nazi Death Squads' Campaign Against the Jews in Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union July 1941 – January 1943*, eds. Yitzhak Arad, Shmuel Krakowski, and Shmuel Spector. New York: Holocaust Library, 1989), 17-18.

Rabinowitz, Rabbi Snieg, and Rabbi Shmukler were told, "*The Lithuanians have announced that they no longer wish to live together with Jews; they demand that the Jews be segregated in a Ghetto. The choice is up to the Jews – either the present situation with disorder and the bloodbath, or leaving the city and moving into the Ghetto.*"² It was made clear that Lithuanians alone – with no German involvement – were to blame for the murderous actions committed against the Jews of Kaunas during the first weeks of the Nazi invasion.

Months later, General Stahlecker, in his report dated Oct. 15, 1941, took full responsibility, "*Partisan commander Clematis [Algirdas Klimaitis 1910-1988], who was expressly recruited for this action, successfully organized a pogrom according to orders given him by our advance unit deployed in Kovno, with no outside indication that the Germans had given the order or encouragement. On the first night of the riots, the night between June 25 and 26, the Lithuanian partisans liquidated 1,500 Jews, many synagogues were set on fire or destroyed, and the Jewish quarter with about 60 houses was burned.*"

By August 15, 1941, the Jews of Kaunas had no choice, but to move into the ghetto. A belief that they would be safer there was shattered on August 18, when the Germans carried out the "Intellectuals Action." They requested that the ghetto provide 500 well educated Jewish men to work in the Kaunas city archives. Instead, the 534 assembled men were taken to the Fourth Fort and shot. Dalia Hofmekler-Ginsburg (b. 1939), the daughter of Michael (Misha) Hofmekler (1898-1965), the man who became the conductor of the Kovno Ghetto Police Orchestra, explains the repercussions of that action, "*After the round-up of intellectuals the*

² Ibid., 143; Avraham Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust The Kovno Ghetto Diary*, trans. Jerzy Michalowicz, ed. Martin Gilbert, notes, Dina Porat, (London: Pimlico, 1991), 9-10: Tory provides a somewhat similar description of the meeting, while he provides the names of the Jewish leaders, he does not name Stahlecker as the general who talked to the Jewish leaders- he dates the first encounter as July 7, 1941; Dov Levin and Zvie Brown. *The Story of an Underground The Resistance of the Jews of Kovno in the Second World War*. Jerusalem: Robert (Reuven) Geffen, 2014, 21-22: Levin and Brown state that SS-Colonel Karl Jager informed the five Jewish leaders of the need to establish a ghetto.

Jewish Council...decided that it was best to employ musicians as policemen. As a result of that decision, my father not only conducted the orchestra in the ghetto, but was also a member of the Jewish police, or rather he wore its uniform when he conducted the orchestra."

Within the ranks of the Jewish police force in the Kovno Ghetto, the Elder Council sheltered many musicians from forced labor and deportations. In the summer of 1942, after obtaining German approval, Hofmekler was given permission by the Elder Council to create an official police orchestra to present public concerts. The news was debated throughout the ghetto, as many felt that performances would be disrespectful to the dead. In spite of the controversy, Hofmekler created an orchestra of 35 musicians and 5 singers with the youngest, Jenkele (1928-na), a 14 year old violinist, and the oldest, Hofmekler's father, Mordechai (1870-1944), a 71 year old cellist. Hofmekler conducted as many as 80 concerts with performances often held twice weekly.

Before Hofmekler became the official conductor of the ghetto police orchestra in the summer of 1942, he was a renowned violinist and conductor in Kaunas. In the restaurant of the Metropolis Hotel on Daukanto Street, he was the bandmaster and played the violin in the Hofmeklerband orchestra. During the day, the orchestra played classical music, while at night it performed music influenced by what was known as estrada (stage) music and schalgers - pop songs with *catchy* melodies and lyrics. On weekends, Kaunas Radiophone broadcast live one-hour music shows from the Metropolis. Hofmekler also performed with his brothers, Leiba (1900-1942/43), Daniel (1903-1973), and Ruvim (1905-1994), in the Hofmekler Brothers Ensemble.

In his passion for music, Hofmekler embraced Lithuanian folk and classical music which influenced his innovative pop style. In turn, it affected a number of singers and musicians. Many vocalists who shared the stage with him and who sang in Lithuanian, such as Daniel Dolski (1891-1940), Antanas Šabaniauskas (1903-

1987), and Stepas Graužinis (1910-1985), included this new form of popular music in their repertoires.

Hofmekler exposed Lithuanian pop music internationally through recording over 120 songs, from 1924 to 1940, with companies including the German label "Odeon" and the British label, "Columbia Graphophone. In 1932, the president of Lithuania, Antanas Smetona (1874-1944), awarded Hofmekler the Fourth Class Order of the Grand Duke Gediminas to officially recognize his musical talent and professionalism that respected and included traditional Lithuanian music.

Ten years later, in the summer of 1942, William Mischell, a ghetto survivor, describes the audience's response to a performance conducted by Hofmekler's police orchestra in the Kovno Ghetto, *"He started the concert with a piece by Mendelssohn [1809-1847], who the Nazis had banned since he was of Jewish blood. The tune was melancholic and before he had a chance to get even half-way through, everybody in the audience had tears in their eyes... one by one even the musicians had tears filling their eyes and could not go on. The conductor had to stop and ask the people and the musicians to relax. After a short while the piece was resumed..."*

Within months, on November 1, 1942, Police Inspector Yehuda Zupovitz (1914-1944) engaged the orchestra to play at an oath taking ceremony designed to counter the Jewish Ghetto police force's reputation as callous and corrupt. He planned to lay the groundwork for national unity within the ghetto under the cover of *police activities*. The ceremony was staged in the Slobodka Yeshiva, a location that the police force acquired to conduct police activities which included the orchestra's concerts. The location was a reminder of international reverence for Jewish learning, as the yeshiva had, *"...played a part in the Jewish world - ... famous doctors, professors, Jewish leaders, bearers of culture..."* had studied within its walls.

One hundred and fifty-two policemen signed the oath which was written in Hebrew and Yiddish. After the signing ceremony, the orchestra played the national march, "Beshuv Adonai" ("When the Lord Brings Back") from Psalm 126. A policeman described the response, *"With tears in our eyes the entire assembly sang along the words of the prophecy of freedom and liberation, of the fulfillment of our dreamed-of and most sacred hopes, which are today only fantasies but may perhaps become a reality tomorrow."*

On July 24, 1943, an electrifying performance took place. It was a secret underground concert that united political factions within the ghetto through the commemoration of the deaths of Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), the creator of political Zionism, and Haym Nahman Bialik (1873-1934), the famous Hebrew poet. It was presented in Hebrew and Yiddish and profoundly affected the audience, *"Inspired by a sense of the significance of a great moment, those gathered listened to the sounds of the orchestra...one such gathering had been enough for our people to come together in one mass...Our hearts were filled with joy; tears flowing from our eyes. Hope and courage issued from the depths of our souls, crying aloud: "Our hope is not yet lost!"*

Eight months later, on March 27, 1944, as the Kovno Ghetto Jewish police force stood in formation, the musicians were removed from its ranks. The remaining officers, over 133 men, were arrested and taken to the Ninth Fort and locked into cells. At least 35 of them were murdered, for under torture they would not reveal the hiding places in the ghetto of children and the elderly, nor any information about the underground. When the policemen from the Ninth Fort who had not been murdered returned to the ghetto, the force was dissolved and replaced with the *Ordnungsdienst*, the order police, whose ranks included Jewish policemen who were believed to have been informers. They reported directly to a German authority.

At the liquidation of the ghetto in July 1944, Hofmekler was believed to have been deported to Stutthof and then to Dachau. After his liberation, he went to the St. Ottilien Displaced Persons hospital in Bavaria where with other surviving musicians, including several from the Kovno Ghetto, he formed the "St. Ottilien Orchestra" (later, the "Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra"). In 1946, the American military invited the orchestra to perform in Nuremberg. On May 7, the orchestra held a concert in the Nuremberg Opera House, *"...to an audience of witnesses, prosecutors and judges of the International War Crimes Tribunal."*



Performance of the Kovno ghetto orchestra. Among those pictured are: Yankele (the 13-year-old youth playing the violin at the back), Michael Hofmekler (standing at the left), Boris Stupel (sitting next to Hofmekler), Alexander (Shmaya) Stupel (standing at the top right). Kaunas, 1944.

© United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Robert W. Hofmekler



Performance of the Kovno ghetto orchestra. Among those pictured are: Mordechai Borstein (left), Korijski (middle), and Maya Gladstein (right). Bornstein and Gladstein both survived and moved to Israel, while Korijski perished. Kaunas, 1944.

© United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Robert W. Hofmekler



Alexander (Shmaya) Stupel, a well-known German-Jewish violinist and a member of the Kovno ghetto orchestra, stands outside with his instrument case. Kaunas, Circa August 1942 - March 1944

© United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of George Kadish/Zvi Kadushin



Performance by two members of the Kovno ghetto orchestra. Pictured are Yerachmiel Wolfberg and Yitzhak Borstein. Kaunas, circa 1943.

© United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of George Kadish/Zvi Kadushin

Resources

Anonymous Members of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police. *The Clandestine History of the Kovno*

Jewish Ghetto Police. Edited and translated by Samuel Schalkowsky.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014.

Anderton, Abby. "Displaced Music: The Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra in Postwar Germany."

Journal of Musicological Research, 34 (2015): 141-159.

Arad, Yitzhak. *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009.
"The Kovno Ghetto Orchestra: 1943-1944," *Jewish Virtual Library*, The American-Israeli

Cooperative Enterprise (2014). Retrieved, March 1, 2023.

https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Kovno_Orchestra.html.

Levin, Dov. "How the Jewish Police in the Kovno Ghetto Saw Itself." *Yad Vashem Resource*

Center: 1-53. Retrieved, March 5, 2023,
https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/through-the-lens/images/until-last-jew/dov_levin.pdf

Levin, Dov and Zvie Brown. *The Story of an Underground The Resistance of the Jews of Kovno*

in the Second World War. Jerusalem: Robert (Reuven) Geffen, 2014.

Melnikas, L. "Michelis (Moise) Hofmekleris." *Visuotinė Lietuvių Enciklopedija* (Vinius, 2008).

Retrieved March 6, 2023, <https://www.vle.lt/michelis-moise-hofmekleris/>.

"Michael Hofmekler," *Music and the Holocaust*, Retrieved, March 5, 2023,

<https://holocaustmusic.org/places/ghettos/kovno/hofmeklermichael/>.

Meisel, Judith. Interview code: 5916. Segment 129. 1995. USC Shoah Foundation Visual

History Archive Online.

"Personal-Liste Tarnybos Lapas, Hofmeleris, Michelis," LVIA, Project 39, Roll Number R-6,

Fonda R-973, Inventory 2, File 87, 1941-1942, 25, 25ap, 26.

Petrauskaite, Danute. "Music in the Kaunas Ghetto against the Background of Vilijampole

(Slabodka)." *Lithuanian Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2017): 59-87.

Shubitz, Michael. "Dalia Hofmekler." *Back to Kaunas*, (2022).

<https://back-to-kaunas.com/people/dalia-hofmekler>.

Skudienė, Rūta. "Moishe Hofmekler." *Music Information Centre Lithuania*,

<https://www.mic.lt/en/database/oldies/composers-artists/hofmekleris/#bio>.

"The Secret of the Kovno Ghetto Orchestra Discovered," *International March of the Living*

(2016). Retrieved March 1, 2023. <https://www.motl.org/>.

Smuggled in Potato Sacks Fifty Stories of the Hidden Children of the Kaunas Ghetto. Editors,

Abramovich, Solomon and Yakov Zilberg. London and Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2011.

Tory, Avraham. *Surviving the Holocaust The Kovno Ghetto Diary*. Edited by Martin Gilbert.

Textual and historical notes by Dina Porat. Translated by Jerzy Michalowicz.

London:

Pimlico, 1991.