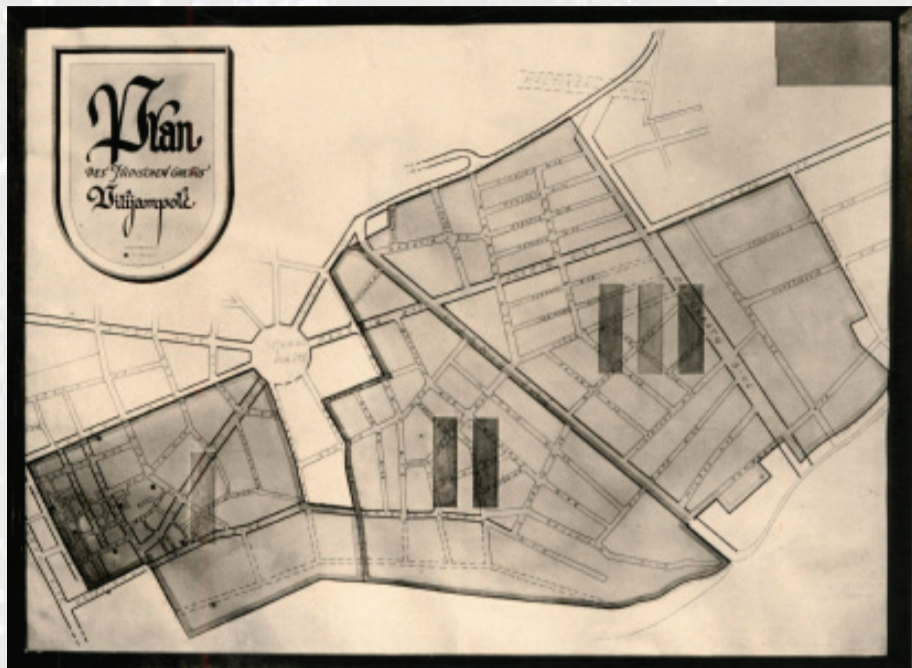




THE KAUNAS GHETTO



The Kaunas Ghetto scheme: the Large Ghetto and the Small Ghetto. 1941. From the Lithuanian Central State Archives



Labor brigades of the Kaunas Ghetto prisoners at the ghetto gates. 1942. From the Lithuanian Central State Archives



Children of the Kaunas Ghetto. 1944. From the Yad Vashem archives



A bread seller. 1941–1944. From the Lithuanian Central State Archives

The discrimination and persecution of the Jews of Kaunas began since the first days of the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Very few Jews managed to escape from the rapidly approaching German army. On June 23, 1941, the Lithuanian insurgents took control over the city of Kaunas. In the end of June 1941, the SS-Brigadeführer Franz Walter Stahlecker-commanded Einsatzgruppe A (special-ops unit, in German; a Nazi German death squad during the Holocaust) of the Sicherheitspolizei (SiPo; security police, in German) and Sicherheitsdienst (SD; security service, in German) arrived in Kaunas along with the first Wehrmacht troops and began organizing the anti-Jewish pogroms (the largest ever pogroms in Lithuania) in the city district of Vilijampolė and the rest of Kaunas. The mass killings of Jews were carried out by the German security-obeying Lithuanian armed units (so-called partisans, persons liberated from Soviet prisons and criminals). During the pogroms, several thousand Jews were murdered.

In the beginning of July of 1941, the mass killings of Jews were perpetrated by the German Gestapo and the 1st Lithuanian police battalion (former Tautinio Darbo Apsaugos Batalionas, or TDA; National Labor Security, in Lithuanian) in the Seventh Fort. Since the start of the war and until the Kaunas Ghetto establishment on Aug. 15, 1941, some 8,000 Jews were killed in Kaunas. After the ghetto was established, the mass killings continued. Jews were executed in the Fourth Fort and the Ninth Fort. On Oct. 29, 1941, the Germans staged what became known as the Great Action (the largest mass murder of Lithuanian Jews). In a single day, 9,200 Jews – including children, women and the elderly – were machine-gunned to death at the Ninth Fort. The legal and financial discrimination of Jews was conducted alongside arrests and mass killings of Jews.

The Great Action of Oct. 29, 1941 was followed by a relatively quiet period, which continued until September 1943. Some 17,000 Jews (twice less than the number of the pre-war Jewish population of Kaunas) lived in the Kaunas Ghetto. It was no 'unnecessary people' (i.e. no people incapable for work) in the ghetto, according to the Nazis. No major massacres were carried out during the quiet period. The Council of Elders, or the Aeltestenrat, which was in charge of the Jewish self-rule in the large administrative structures of the ghetto (responsible for the ghetto's Jewish police and court as well as welfare, health, accommodation, work, economy-related matters, and other matters), hoped the Germans would not kill Jews who were producing for the German army. In 1943, some 9,600 Jews (out of the total number of 17,000) went to work every day. The biggest share of their workforce was exploited in the construction of a military airbase in Aleksotas.

In the fall of 1943, the Kaunas Ghetto went from the jurisdiction of the German civil administration to the SS. The ghetto was reorganized into the SS-run concentration camp. The control over the Jewish prisoners became stricter. Since then, the Jewish labor brigades ceased to exist and the Jewish prisoners could work only in isolated labor camps. Some 4,000 Jews were transferred to the isolated labor camps of Aleksotas and Šančiai.

On March 26–27, 1944, the SS men and Ukrainian policemen took 1,700 children and the elderly and arrested 130 policemen of the Jewish Ghetto Police. The arrested (including 34 Jewish policemen) were shot dead in the Ninth Fort. It was the end of the quiet period. The Jewish police and the Council of Elders were disbanded by the Germans. The ghetto self-rule was abolished and the German control over the ghetto life became extremely strict.

On July 8–13, 1944, the Kaunas Ghetto was liquidated due to the approaching war front-line: almost all the ghetto-located were set on fire by the Gestapo men. Some 300–400 Jews managed to escape. Some 6,000–7,000 Jews were transferred to Dachau, Stutthof and other concentration camps in Germany while 1,000 Jews were killed. Only several hundred Jews of Kaunas were able to survive there until the end of WWII.

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