

Witnesses to Horror

Long-suppressed accounts of Nazi genocide in the Soviet territories

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January 19, 2008; Page W8

The Unknown Black Book

Edited by Joshua Rubenstein and Ilya Altman

Indiana University Press,

446 pages, \$34.95

In 1941, Rasha Shuster and her two sisters escaped from their hometown just before the Germans slaughtered the 12,000 Jews who lived there. A peasant sheltered the girls for three weeks. Then his neighbor betrayed them. The local police killed Rasha's sisters, but she heard the gunshots and ran for her life. After weeks of wandering in the forests and finding only temporary shelter, she was taken in by a middle-aged, truly destitute peasant living alone in a shack. She hid there for 2½ years. Later, she recalled: "When I asked him why he was doing this and risking his life . . . he answered that it was because I was not guilty of anything."

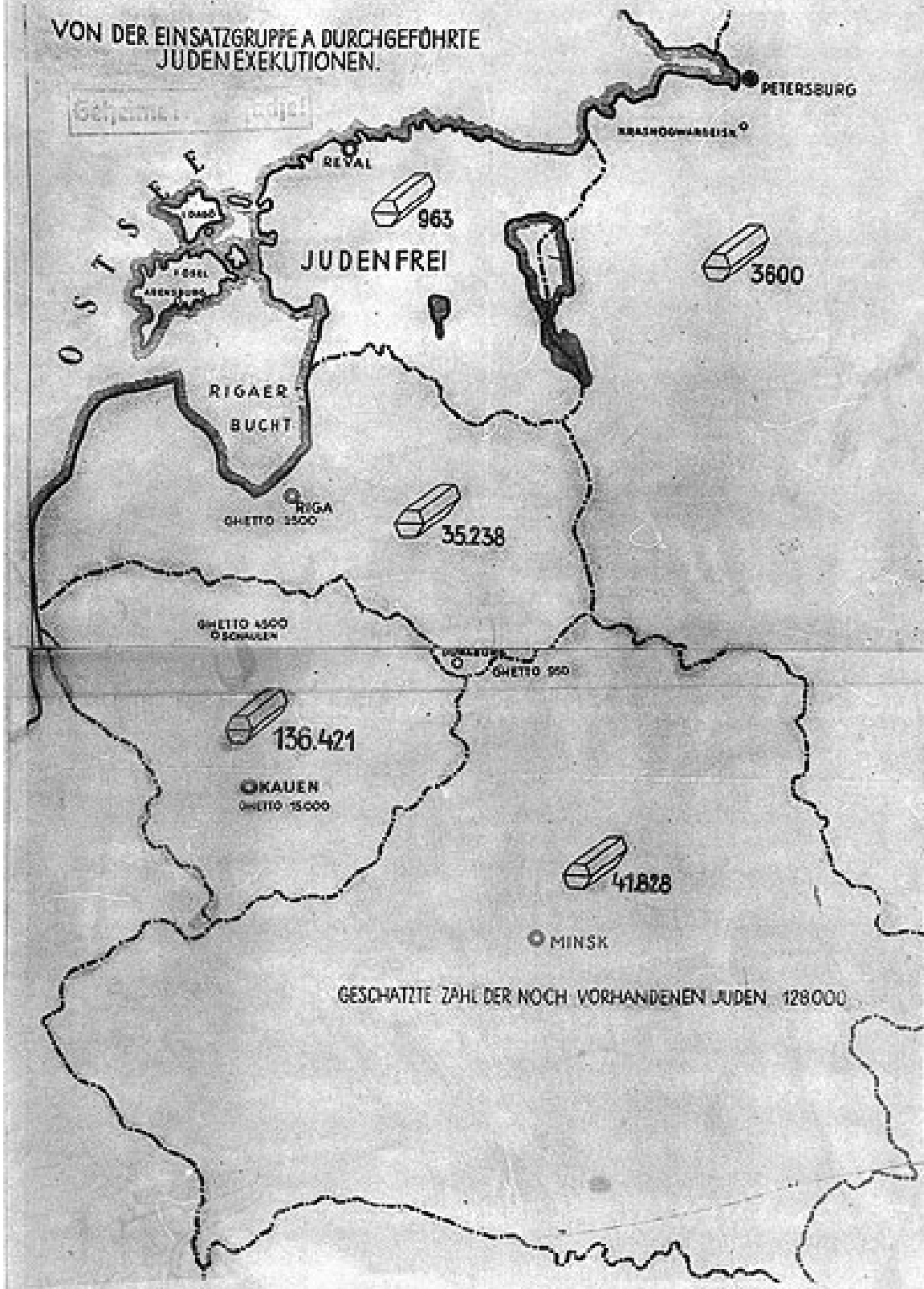
The town where Rasha Shuster lived and where thousands of Jews died wasn't in Germany or Poland or anywhere else in the Europe so often described in Holocaust narratives. Shuster was from Stoklishki, Lithuania, and the police -- eager to do the Nazis' bidding by shooting her sisters -- were fellow Lithuanians. Her first-person account is found in "The Unknown Black Book," an extraordinary collection of eye-witness reports, diary entries and other accounts of the mass murder of Jews far from the gates of Auschwitz and Treblinka. Of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, more than 2.5 million died in territories controlled by the Soviet Union before the war. Most of the victims were slaughtered in open-air massacres.

"The Unknown Black Book" is the first publication of materials excluded for political reasons from "The Black Book," a collection of survivors' testimony that was compiled toward the end of the war but then ran afoul of the Stalinist regime -- even after it was heavily censored -- and fell into political limbo for decades. The project traces its roots to February 1942, when the Soviet government established the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) in an effort to drum up international support as the Red Army struggled to withstand the onslaught of the German Wehrmacht.

Headed by the Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels and staffed by other well-known actors, writers and poets, the JAC did its job for a year, publishing articles, making radio broadcasts and hosting visitors in Moscow. But when the fortunes of war changed after the Soviet victory at Stalingrad in 1943, the regime began to have second thoughts about the JAC. Ukrainian auxiliary police prepare to kill Jewish prisoners in 1942.

VON DER EINSATZGRUPPE A DURCHGEFÖHRTE
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Geheim. Topf!



As Soviet forces advanced to the west, revealing the Nazis' systematic extermination of Jews, the JAC felt duty-bound to collect and present the evidence of genocide. The committee started gathering eyewitness testimony about the atrocities and planned to publish a collection of the accounts.

The JAC had thought its "Black Book" effort, led by well-known Soviet Jewish writers Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, would both serve the Soviet cause and record the Jews' terrible fate under German rule. But when it became apparent that any accounting of the genocide would include descriptions of the often enthusiastic cooperation between Soviet citizens and Nazi occupiers, the government balked, accusing the JAC of focusing on "the vile activity of traitors among the Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and others."

Publication of "The Black Book" was deemed "inexpedient." In January 1948, Solomon Mikhoels was assassinated on Stalin's orders, heralding the beginning of an anti-Semitic campaign that ended only with Stalin's death in 1953. The secret police soon arrested the leaders and staff of the JAC on charges of "bourgeois nationalism." Following mock trials, 13 of them were executed in 1952.

For several decades thereafter only a few experts knew about the existence of the Russian "Black Book." Incomplete versions of it began appearing in the 1980s; in 1993, the first complete version of "The Black Book" was published in Lithuania with newly discovered material from Russian archives and with government-censored sections restored. That same year, "The Unknown Black Book" was published in Russia. Now we have a translation by Christopher Morris and Joshua Rubenstein, edited by Mr. Rubenstein, the Northeast regional director of Amnesty International USA, and Ilya Altman, co-chairman of the Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Center in Moscow.

It is impossible to convey the full impact of these testimonies in a short review. But a few examples may provide an inkling of the nature of the material. Sara Gleykh described the destruction of the Jewish population of Mariupol, a city in the Ukraine. The Germans arrived there on Oct. 8, 1941, and immediately instituted anti-Jewish measures. On Oct. 18, Sara's family was ordered to leave their apartment for resettlement: Neighbors, told that they could "take whatever they wanted," Sara recalled, "all rushed into the apartment" and "quarreled over things before my eyes, snatching things out of each other's hands and dragging off pillows, pots and pans, quilts." That day, the 9,000 Jews of the city were murdered.

Sara, who lost her entire family, climbed out of the mass grave and eventually reached the Soviet lines. In Minsk, Tsetsilia Shapiro, a 26-year-old doctor, found herself enclosed in the city's ghetto -- guarded mostly by Belorussian policemen - - with a newborn baby and a 5-year-old boy. When she begged a former colleague and professor of medicine to help her find work in the countryside, he

responded: "We don't send kikes to work. We exterminate them if they don't understand that they're supposed to drop dead from hunger." When the Germans began murdering the Jews with gas vans, as extra entertainment "young women had their hair tied to the axles of the vehicles in such a way that they were dragged alive through the city" while "the killing by gas of those who were inside the mobile vans was being carried out."

Shapiro escaped with false papers to Gomel, where the chief of police, a former Red Army officer, sent her to a German racial "specialist." Fortunately, he determined that she was "undoubtedly" of Aryan descent. Shapiro's son survived in an orphanage, protected from German inspections by not having been circumcised. Another witness from Minsk, Tamar Gershakovich, maintained that "many Russians and Belorussians, risking not only their own lives but the lives of their families, hid Jewish children in their homes." But accounts from Lithuania paint a grim picture of local participation in murder and robbery. The Lithuanian underground fighter Dr. Viktor Kutroga described how Lithuanian "partisans" – meaning civilian collaborators -- "burst into Jewish apartments, killed men, women, and children, and looted the property of those murdered" as soon as the Germans marched into Kovno on June 23, 1941. On Sept. 1, he wrote: "The mass extermination of Jews in the provinces by members of Lithuanian 'partisan' units under the leadership of the Germans has begun. . . . The Jews have been made to dig their own graves. Then they have to bring their sick and their children and remove their outer clothes. After that, they are shot in groups. . . . All of this is happening in broad daylight, often in front of thousands of witnesses. . . . The slightly wounded were finished off with bayonets or else buried alive; the small children were treated the same way. Often, the 'partisans' simply killed children with shovels."

Dr. Kutroga pointed out that many Lithuanian intellectuals and clergymen, and even some German soldiers, were appalled by these actions. But in many accounts we find that those who ultimately saved Jews were wretchedly poor peasants. Major Z. G. Ostrovsky, who collected testimonies in Lithuania, wrote: "There were hundreds of reported cases of Lithuanian peasants hiding Jews who had fled from the ghetto." But those were exceptions. Reysa Miselevich, from the region of Zhmud in northwestern Lithuania, escaped the destruction of the entire Jewish population there in July 1941, when they were incarcerated in improvised camps guarded by Lithuanians. Conditions were appalling, and young women were regularly raped. Toward the end of the month all the male Jews, numbering some 5,000, were first subjected to prolonged torture and humiliation and then murdered. "The earth on top of the pits was heaving the entire time, since many had been buried alive. For an entire week after this, blood burst from the pits like a fountain," Reysa said. Several weeks later the older women and the children, about 4,000 altogether, were also massacred in a single day. The last remaining Jews, 400 young women, were killed on Christmas Day, 1941. All of the murders were carried out by Lithuanian policemen.

These accounts do not provide any simple explanation for such gratuitous yet systematic and relentless violence. Sometimes it seems as if the Jews' countrymen were prepared to murder them wholesale simply out of greed for their possessions. But that hardly explains such dark evil, just as attempts to portray the Holocaust as a bureaucratic undertaking planned and executed by detached civil servants and automaton-like killers are inadequate.

"The Unknown Black Book" reveals the sheer barbarity on the individual level -- the tortures and rapes, the looting and destruction, and, not least, the glee and humor, as well as the hatred and contempt, expressed by the killers. It makes for very disturbing reading. But these accounts from those who saw what happened convey what we cannot learn from official documents about the nature of this vast criminal enterprise, in which hundreds of thousands were transformed into monsters -- mostly returning home after the war as "ordinary" men -- and millions of others became helpless, dehumanized, mutilated and finally forgotten victims. Mr. Bartov, a professor of European history and German studies at Brown University, is the author of "Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine" (Princeton, 2007).