THE SUWALKI TRIANGLE. A WINDOW INTO THE GENOCIDAL FUTURE

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SUMMARY. The events described in this article were part of the destruction of Poland as a national entity. The expulsion of the Jews from Suwalki triangle was part of the Nazi Germany's plan to crush any will to resist and any possible opposition with utmost harshness and terror towards the local population. The events demonstrated that anti-Jewish policies started well before the mass extermination of the Jewish population. The people were expelled and discriminated, they starved and became victims of all kind of atrocities. The response of the Lithuanian government proved to be bureaucratically clumsy and inefficient, seeking justification for its own actions in formalities, and unable to foresee Nazi Germany's further genocidal policies or solve responsibility issues.

KEYWORDS: Second World War, Holocaust, Suwalki, Suvalkai, Lithuania, Nazi Germany, Soviet Union, Wilno, Vilnius, Vilna.

Raoul Wallenberg, while serving as Sweden's special envoy to Budapest in 1944, rescued tens of thousands of Jews by issuing protective passports and providing them with refuge in buildings designated as Swedish territory. He was captured by the NKVD after Soviets entered Budapest in 1945 and died in Soviet captivity. Wallenberg was posthumously honoured throughout the world for his humanitarianism. In addition to honorary citizenship, awarded to him by a number of countries, including Israel, the Jewish state also awarded him the status of Righteous Among the Nations. He became a symbol of bravery and resolution to help the destitute under threat of Holocaust. All the rest, who lived before or after him, were judged by this ***Golden Standard*** represented by Raul Wallenberg. Looking at the crimes in the Afghanistan, Chechnya, Congo, Iran, Syria and Lebanon, Libya and Sierra Leone retrospectively, the heroes who struggled to stop crimes against humanity were judged by this Standard as well.

The Lithuanian complicity and collaboration with the Nazis in the period of Holocaust has been under scientific scrutiny and under historical analysis to this day. The historical analysis and retrospective treatment of the past viewed the events logically leading to the Holocaust and the destruction of the Lithuanian

Jewry. This is especially true for the events that occurred in 1939–1941. All accidents, often unrelated outbursts of violence, accidental killings, etc. were argued as crimes which gave rise to allegations of genocidal intentions before the events of the Nazi-Soviet War of 1941.

Among such events, which, on the other hand, might have compromised intentions and the direction of the benevolent and compassionate policies, stressed by some of the Lithuanian authors, towards the refugees from Poland well before the outbreak of the Holocaust in Lithuania, were the events in the so-called Suwalki Triangle in 1939.

As a result of the German Military Campaign against Poland of September 1939, a territory inhabited among others by ethnic Lithuanians also happened to fall first into the Soviet hands before it had to be turned out to the German Reich.

After the Germans' attack on Poland, the local civil society started to take control over the official institutions in the area inhabited predominantly by Lithuanians. The heads of the villages were chosen based on spontaneous elections, Lithuanian schools continued to operate, and the local militia became organised.

Judging from the Lithuanian reports, the Red Army entered the area on 19 September 1939, but it was expected to be handed over to the Germans soon after. The Soviets did not interfere in the games of the local powers having unarmed militia forces at their disposal, but were in fact to supress the "class enemies". Estates were robbed, horses were taken away and cows were shot.[1]

During the last days of September, the Lithuanian authorities from Kaunas were already starting to send money to the Triangle to financially support Lithuanian primary schools having 26 teachers and try to set up small manufacturing businesses in order to alleviate the material hardships of war for the Lithuanian inhabitants.[2] The interregnum was encouraged further by the absence of border control over the territory that the Red Army was ready to leave at any moment and pass into German hands. Furthermore, even funding of the Lithuanian Scientific society was part of Kaunas bureaucrats' plans, though most of the resources went to Lithuanian schools, because their initial substantial shortage of textbooks, notebooks and pencils was even worsened by the daily increase of the number of students. The Red Army soldiers started to leave the territory of the Suwalki Triangle on 6 October 1939.[3] As a result of Soviet retreat from the area, the Triangle was renamed *Kreis Suvalki* and was annexed to the *GumbinenRegierungsbezirk*. The *Landrat,*

1 Notes. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 65.

2 Notes. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 64–65.

3 Notes. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 63.

which was appointed to run *Kreis,* possessed 18 *Amtsbezirks* and 3 *Stadtmeistereein* having the area of 3000 sq. km and 120,000 inhabitants.[4]

Ten thousand or so Lithuanians did not represent a dominant ethnic group in Kreis. Therefore, they could not even become an independent factor in the Polish and German cultural standoff in the area.

Even though in the beginning the invaders' administration and military made efforts to establish a contact with the local Lithuanian community, the groups of the local ethnic communities struggled to attract their new occupiers' attention. Apart from that, the Lithuanians and Poles struggled for Germans' attention in order win better positions for their schooling. The teachers of Lithuanian schools wanted to keep the premises that they had taken away from Polish primary schools.

However, soon all the local struggles and games ended. A month later, an anonymous report was sent from the Triangle to the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 3 November 1939, which did not offer a single glimmer of optimism:

> The fate of the schools does not look favourable. Formally, all the schools are closed. Those which are still working have not been closed only by mistake. It is said that the schools are closed only temporarily, but that temporary period would last until the end of the war. We plan to approach this issue in the *Landrat*. There are 13 gymnasium students from Vilnius gymnasium in the Suwalki Triangle.[5] They are wasting their time in vain. They must be taken to Vilnius. What should be done with the local intellectuals? If the Germans do not allow us to pursue any cultural work, maybe part of them should remain here, while the rest should go to independent Lithuania – some to study and the others to work. Do we have any hope of annexing the Sejny District (Lithuanian: Seinų Apskritis), the area in Suwalki Triangle, to Lithuania?[6]

Just a few months ago, the government was not able to defend Lithuanian cultural interests in the Klaipėda District, and now it seemed that the same fate was going to befall the inhabitants of the Suwalki Triangle. Jonas Pajaujis' suggestion to the Lithuanian government that it should attempt to help establish the Lithuanian Cultural Union, based on the example of the German *Kulturverband* (Eng. The Culture Union), did not have any success. Lithuania was a Soviet satellite state at the time, and as such it did not have any leverage in the larger context of the cultural or ethnic policies implemented by Nazi Germany in the occupied Polish territories.[7] The Lithuanian cultural and educational activities were eradicated by

4 Lietuvos Generalinis Konsulatas Karaliaučiuje L. Dymša, No.101, 21 November 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 39.

5 Eleven ended up going to Vilnius, according to the message of J. Pajaujis, 15 November 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 58.

6 Message from J. Pajaujis, 3 November 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 60.

7 Notes (no date). LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 53.

2 December 1939.[8] However, the Lithuanian government viewed the situation in Vilnius, as well as many problems related to the situation in the newly acquired territories, such as the cultural issues concerning the existence of Lithuanians in the Suwalki Triangle, as the issues of secondary importance. Instead, other questions started to accumulate on the government's agenda that needed to be solved urgently. The Suwalki Triangle, as well as all the other territories, was subjected to German colonisation after it became clear that the area would not be given to Lithuania. Arrests, intimidation and threats of deportation became an everyday routine. Lithuania had been conceded to the Soviets, and the image of Nazi Germany in Lithuania was not of great interest to the German bureaucracy, unless it would have led to visible complications in German-Soviet relations.

Apart from Lithuanian affairs, which caused considerably greater interest, the government almost immediately became involved in Jewish matters with certain institutional repercussions. There were some indications that the German authorities had been denying the existence of Jews since the very onset of their move into the newly acquired territory.[9] Among the first signs of ideological bias towards the Jews was the demolition of Jewish cemeteries all over the Triangle. The stone monuments in the cemeteries were removed and crushed, and later used in the construction of roads. Even the fences of the cemeteries were turned into rubble and moulded into the road structure. Officials advised the local peasants to sow oats for fodder on the cemetery grounds for the next 50 years. Only after this period different sorts of grains and vegetables could be planted in the soil, where Jewish people were buried .[10] But all these developments were just the first signs of the crisis which was looming on the very borders of Lithuania.

The Nazi occupation and the fate of the Jewish communities were not fully known or understood. Everything was based on hearsay or rumours. The only evident thing was that the economic future of the Jews looked bleak. Private conversations among the new authorities revealed that the Jews would be prevented from retaining their economic status under the new authorities. It was evident that Jews were not to be allowed to engage in agriculture, nor would they be offered public service jobs.[11] One of the main events which indicated the oncoming emergency situation started to take place between 9 and 14 November 1939, with reports of Jews attempting to cross the Lithuanian border en masse.[12] Those events showed

8 MessagefromS. Varnelis, 2 December 1939.

9 Notes LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 61.

10 Naujienos iš Punsko 27 January 1940. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 20.

11 Pranešimas 15 January, 1940. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 25.

12 Message from S. Varnelis, 14 November 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 59.

the start of international repercussions. The authorities only later discovered that rumours were circulating in the area, that Lithuanians were changing places with the Jews willing to repatriate the Germans' side which had triggered a mass exodus of Jews from the area.[13]

HOW DID THE SUWALKI JEWISH CRISIS START?

However, not the rumours, but concrete actions of the Nazi authorities caused the crisis. Jews from the towns and villages bordering the Lithuanian territory in the Suwalki Triangle were assembled by German soldiers at the Lithuanian border in three locations on 27 October 1939. Those who did not want to obey were forced to go to the new German-Lithuanian border. Soldiers had brought Jews' belongings on horse-pulled carriages, as well as the Jews who were not able to walk. After crossing the border, two groups were stopped and made to return back over the border. The German soldiers, who had earlier pushed the Jews towards the border, now had to take them back and temporarily leave them in the Olszowka Manor near the border. Later, in the afternoon, a third group of around 250 people had been pushed over into the Lithuanian side of the border. But this time the German soldiers had explained to the border guards that if the Jews tried to return, they would be immediately shot by soldiers with machine guns at the ready. When questioned by the border guards, the Jews could confirm the German soldiers' information that the machine guns were indeed set on the hills, ready to start a fire at anyone who would return to the territory under German control.

Assessing the situation, the Lithuanian border police officers went to Olszowka Manor to ask the Germans to allow the Jews to return to where they had been taken from. The NCO, who was in command of the expulsion operation, decidedly refused to accept the Jews back into the territory under German control. He pointed to the machine guns and said that he would order his men to open fire as the Jews were not needed here. When the Lithuanian side objected by saying that Lithuania was not ready to accept non-Lithuanian citizens into its territory and that it did not have any other choice but to deport the refugees back to Suwalki Triangle, the German NCO suggested that the Lithuanians could also put up machine guns and open fire on those entering their territory… The conversation ended with the Lithuanian officers threatening by diplomatic complications which might be caused by the events and forcing the NCO to change his opinion.[14]

[13] *Pro Memoria*, 9 November 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2289, 41–41 a. p.

[14] Telefonograma Nr. 47 Policijos departamentui. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2230, 25–26.

As a result, the Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Juozas Urbšys, sent a cable to the Lithuanian Ambassador in Germany, Kazys Škirpa, asking him to intervene as soon as possible, while the events were still developing. The Minister, in turn, held a conversation with the German Ambassador to Lithuania.[15] A response followed immediately. The same day, at 7:30 p.m., the German soldiers moved away and the Jewish deportees came back to the German side of the border. However, they were not able to go anywhere further. The reports dated from 9 November show that the deportees were not allowed to go back to their homes. For more than ten days these people were forced to remain in the open fields and peat bogs. The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that the commission including one American, among others, learnt that many people were sick, including a number of children. Some people died. In one locality a mother of two baby twins had tried to commit suicide out of desperation by attempting to drown herself in the river. She was saved by border guards on the Lithuanian side. It was noticed that all along the German-Lithuanian border, Germans were trying to force people to go over into the Lithuanian side of the border. There were rumours that Nazis had deported 120,000 people from Gdansk and Gdynia. Anyone having any kind of connection with Lithuania were taken to the border. In its *Pro Memoria,* the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had stressed that they had distributed questionnaires in the consulates to establish how many people were potentially eligible to receive citizenship. The applications of the possible candidates for Lithuanian citizenship were closely examined. The Lithuanian MFA expressed their view that the anarchy at the borders was just as unacceptable as forcing the aliens over the borders.[16]

The Lithuanian Ambassador Kazys Škirpa visited the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the same day. He had informed Dr Ernst Woermann, the Deputy State Secretary and the Head of the Political Division in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the grim situation with the Jewish deportees in the Suwalki Triangle, but, in addition, to hit the pressure point, he also said the following:

> The Trustees Committee for Refugees, Polish refugees and different Jewish organisations, which communicate with the wider world, have become interested in this situation. I said that the Lithuanian government was not willing to make the Jewish question the object of propaganda and therefore it tried to settle matters in a friendly way with Germany. But because the settlement has become protracted, it is impossible to control and stop from becoming public.[17]

[15] Coded Cable to Berlin, 27 October 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2230, 28.

[16] Turausko E. *Pro Memoria*, 9 November 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2230, 22–22a. p.

[17] Ponui užsienio reikalų ministrui, 9 November 1939. LCSA F.383, In. 7, file 2230, 18 a. p.

By 14 November 1939, the issue seemed to have been settled as the representatives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs promised that they had given orders to stop the deportations. The German side had denied any concentration of deported Jews at the border. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had even agreed to consider the issue and start negotiations regarding the return of 560 Jews who had already entered Lithuanian territory during the period.[18] However, these promises were empty, without any possibility of being implemented. The only practical result of the Lithuanian diplomatic interference was that the German government had agreed that the Lithuanians could release the Polish servicemen who were mobilised from the Vilnius area. The German diplomats in principle agreed and also sanctioned the return of the interned Polish military personnel from the areas under the Soviet regime. At the same time, the German diplomats expressed their keen interest in receiving the interned Polish military personnel, especially the so-called "Deutschstammig", or German-speakers.[19]

The illusions that those Jews who were already in Lithuanian territory could return soon collapsed. On 19 November 1939, representatives of the Lithuanian border police went to the German customs office on the Seinai-Lazdijai road to discuss matters related to the transfer of the deported Jews back into the territory under German control, and referred to the earlier conversation of the Lithuanian Ambassador that had taken place in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The German customs officers refused to enter into any negotiations, arguing that they did not have any information on the issue. In fact, the opposite was true – they had received orders not to let the Jews back, and all the attempts to argue or to convince them were fruitless. The following visit to the police station in the town of Seinai did not bring any results either. The Lithuanian officials had to come back to Seinai on 20 November, but the consultations and requests for information from Berlin resulted in a short answer from Berlin. The capital said that there was no knowledge of any conversation that could have taken place in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Yet, it was acknowledged that Škirpa and Dr Woermann had spoken only about those 200 Jews, who had been taken back over the border line previously. The other Jews were not mentioned.[20]

A repeated attempt to solve "the Jewish question" in the Suwalki Triangle took place on 1 December. By then, the Lithuanian police officials had already registered 900 Jewish refugees. This time, the officials in their conversation with the

[18] Lietuvos pasiuntinybė Vokietijoje ponui užsienio reikalų ministrui, 14 November 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2230, 5.

[19] Lietuvos pasiuntinybė Vokietijoje, 9 November1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, File 2243, 48.

[20] Pasienio policijos Seinų baro viršininkas Seinų apskrities viršininkui, 22 November 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2230, 10–11.

Lithuanian Ambassador to Germany, Kazys Škirpa, did not provide any definite promises. The issue had only been taken into consideration and the decision was to come later.[21] However, no decision was reached and the number of deported Jews was growing every day. On 9 December 1939, the Administrative Department of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that they had by that day registered 1,584 Jews (both deported and refugees) from the Suwalki Triangle. In Marijampolė district there were 924 refugees, in Seinai district there were 406 individuals, and in Vilkaviškis district – 254 individuals.[22] The state did not have enough resources to support the gradually increasing number of refugees. As a result, the next visit to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs soon followed, and there was another conversation between the Lithuanian ambassador Škirpa and Dr Woermann. After listening to the complaints that the matter was not progressing, Dr Woermann, as if making a joke, said: "Wie Sie wissen, wirhabenkeine Liebe zu den Juden." (Eng. As you know, we do not love the Jews at all).

Škirpa replied, also as if he was joking, that the Jews were not loved in Lithuania either as there were too many of them in the country already. Afterwards, he added that together with the Vilnius Jews, the total number of Jews represents over 10 per cent of the population. Lithuania, as a small country, could not have the luxury of giving refuge to anybody who needed help, especially to Jews. Škirpa hinted that the Reich had other options regarding the places where to put Jews instead of deporting them to small Lithuania, for example, the Jewish ghetto in the surroundings of Lublin. Dr Woermann almost started laughing after hearing the preposition. Seeing that they were moving into an unclear and humorous territory, Škirpa ended their conversation, saying that the Reich had the right to do what it pleased with its own Jews, but it should not burden Lithuania as thrusting ones' Jews into the territory of others is not acceptable.[23]

One of the last visits by Lithuanian diplomats to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs ended in a fiasco. Juozas Kajeckas received a strong "No" to any attempts to convince the Germans to take back the Jewish refugees. The German diplomat, Grundherr, stressed that Lithuania had to do whatever it liked with the Jews thrown over the border. Not sending Jews back over the border would help maintain mutual relations, especially after Germany had accepted Polish refugees from Lithuania. The only suggestion offered by the German diplomat was to push

[21] Lietuvos pasiuntinybė Vokietijoje ponui užsienio reikalų ministrui, 1 December 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2230, 7–7 a. p.

[22] VRM administracinis departamentas Užsienio reikalų ministerijai, 9 December 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2230, 6.

[23] Lietuvos pasiuntinybė Vokietijoje Politikos departamento direktoriui URM, 14 December 1939. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2230, 5 and 5 a. p.

the poor Jewish refugees over the Soviet border. In his memo Kajeckas made a silent reply to these recommendations, referring to the long pre-meditated German decision that had been suggested to Kaunas:

> It appears to me indeed that we have only one option – to send them <the Jews> back to the Germans by including them in the lists of refugees who have to be returned to the former Polish territories.[24]

Although in reality the whole story appeared not to have any possible solution, from the point of view of the Lithuanian government, the authorities did not make any moves to expel the refugees that were seen as unwanted and continued to try to make the Germans to agree to readmit them. This was not because the Jews were disliked, but simply because they were seen as foreigners, ineligible for the citizenship as representing a burden on the country. It was all in vain however; the Lithuanian diplomat Juozas Kajeckas reported from Berlin the next day, and repeated the ideas he had suggested one month ago:

> I had requested Mr Grunderr to answer the question regarding the return of the Jews. Officially, he had promised to consider the issue and pass it on for further discussion. But privately he had advised me to forget the matter and direct the expelled Jews elsewhere, for example, to Soviet territory. After this conversation, the matter looks hopeless…[25]

Despite its attempts to settle the issue, Lithuania went down in history bearing the image of a country not only dismissive of its own Jews, but dismissive towards Jewish refugees as well. The last reports on Lithuania's policies vis-à-vis the Jews, over the issues in the Suwalki Triangle were critical of the Lithuanian government, and heralded *Lithuania delivers Jews to Germany*, claiming that Lithuanian authorities are forcibly deporting German refugees who escaped from occupied Poland. During the last week nearly 2,000 refugees from Poland were rounded up by Lithuanians and dumped across the German border.[26]

In a time of national egoism there was not much hope for the members of the stateless minority thrown over the borders of one country into another. Similar incidents, though little known, were also taking place at the Soviet and Lithuanian border. The new border with the Soviets was an area of tension in November 1939. There are reports that on 12 November the Soviets used some force in driving 21 individuals over the Soviet border over the river Ulė. There were rumours that the Soviets had mustered and were ready to transfer over the border the remaining

[24] Lietuvos pasiuntinybė Vokietijoje Politikos departamento direktoriui URM, 30 December 1939. LCSA F. 383, In.7, file 2230, 3–4.

[25] Telegrama į Užsienio reikalų ministeriją, 2 February 1940. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2230, 2.

[26] Telegrama į Užsienio reikalų ministeriją, 2 February 1940. LCSA F. 383, In. 7, file 2230, 1.

1,000 Jewish refugees. Another similar incidence took place close to Šalčininkėliai on 11 November 1939, when 460 Jewish refugees were forced over the Soviet border into the Lithuanian side. Later, all of them were registered as refugees.[27]

The described events were part of the sad consequences of the destruction of Poland as a national entity. The expulsion of the Jews was part of the plan to crush any will to resist and any opposition with utmost harshness and terror towards the local population. The events demonstrated that anti-Jewish policies started well before the mass extermination of the Jewish population. The people were expelled and discriminated; they starved and became victims of all kinds of atrocities. The response of the Lithuanian government proved to be bureaucratically clumsy and inefficient. The authorities treated their own kin more leniently, at the same time, seeking justification for their own actions in formalities. The rules and following the rules were the motto of the day. And, most importantly, it lacked awareness of the larger scale situation related to the quilt brought by the war crimes and the crimes against humanity. All things considered, the complicated situation in the Suwalki Triangle can be seen as a result of the government activities that lacked resolution, capacity, and a real intention to save human life.

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[27] Strelcovas S. *Antrojo Pasaulinio karo pabėgėliai Lietuvoje 1939–1940*. Daktaro disertacija. Kaunas, 2007, 90.

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Šarūnas Liekis

SUVALKŲ TRIKAMPIS – BŪSIMOS GENOCIDO POLITIKOS PAVYZDYS

SANTRAUKA. Įvykiai, aptariami šiame straipsnyje, nutiko tuomet, kai buvo sunaikintas Lenkijos suverenitetas. Varydama žydus iš Suvalkų trikampio nacistinė Vokietija bandė grieštumu ir teroru palaužti bet kokį vietinių gyventojų pasipriešinimą. Suvalkų trikampio įvykiai pademonstravo, kad prieš žydus nukreipta nacistų politika buvo pradėta dar iki žydų masinio naikinimo politikos įgyvendinimo. Suvalkų trikampyje žmonės buvo tremiami, diskriminuojami, marinami badu, jie tapo įvairiausios prievartos aukomis. Lietuvos vyriausybės atsakas parodė, jog valstybė elgėsi biurokratiškai neapdairiai bei neefektyviai ir ieškojo savo veiksmų pateisinimo formalumuose, nenumatė Vokietijos genocidinių veiksmų pasekmių ir nesvarstė apie savo atsakomybę.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Antrasis pasaulinis karas, Holokaustas, Suvalkai, Lietuva, nacistinė Vokietija, Sovietų Sąjunga, Vilnius.