Ponary Diary, 1941–1943

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1941–1943

A Bystander's Account of a Mass Murder

Kazimierz Sakowicz
EDITED BY Yitzhak Arad

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Contents

Foreword

RACHEL MARGOLIS

This is the first publication in English of the diary kept by Kazimierz Sakowicz from 1941 to 1943 in Ponary, near Wilno (Lithuanian Vilnius, Jewish Vilna). This diary, which describes the murders of some 50,000 to 60,000 Jewish men, women, and children by the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators, is one of the most shocking documents of its time. Historians were denied access to the diary for many years, possibly because it provides evidence of the atrocities committed by Lithuanians (Sakowicz's "Ponary riflemen") as well as by the German occupiers of the city.

When I first learned of the existence of this document I resolved to track it down and publish it so that the widest possible audience could learn the truth about the last years of Wilno, the Eastern European cultural center known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." The only member of my family to survive the Holocaust, I, along with my husband, Haim Zaidelsan, have spent my life collecting documents relating to that period. While I was collaborating with the Jewish Museum established in what is now Vilnius after World War II (the museum was shut down in 1949), with the assistance of Shmerke Kacherginsky and Abraham Sutskever, I learned about numerous documents relating

to the Holocaust that had survived the war. Among these newly discovered documents was Sakowicz's diary, which had been written on loose sheets that were then placed in empty lemonade bottles, sealed, and buried in the ground. After the war, Sakowicz's neighbors dug up some of these bottles and gave them to the Jewish Museum.

Many years later I was employed as director of the historical division of the Jewish State Museum of Lithuania. While searching through documents in the Central State Archives of Lithuania I discovered a folder containing a number of yellowing handwritten sheets. Some were pieces of plain paper ranging from 5.5 to 25 centimeters long; others were the margins of a Russian-Polish calendar for 1941. The entries appeared to have been written in great haste, with a trembling hand; nothing was crossed out. Many sheets had been stamped "illegible" by the archive. This was my first glimpse of Sakowicz's diary, which, along with other documents from the earlier Jewish Museum, had wound up in the Central State Archives of Lithuania. Working under special lighting and using a magnifying glass, I was eventually able to sort out and decipher the heartrending entries, which covered the period from July 11, 1941, through August 1942. Because of my familiarity with the Wilno dialect and Russian, I was able to decipher everything—a total of sixteen documents. But these pages, the first section of Sakowicz's diary, turned out to be only a fraction of the diary.

In various articles and books on the Holocaust period I encountered quotations from other entries in the diary, written in a later period. I recognized Sakowicz's style and hasty writing, even in distorted transcriptions. For example, his terms "Lithuanian killers" and "Ponary riflemen" were replaced by "Lithua-

nian police," apparently in order to diminish the role played by Lithuanian nationalists in the extermination of the Jews.

I continued my search for documents. In the 1970s an employee of the Museum of the Revolution in Vilnius had told me of her discovery of some Sakowicz documents in the museum's collection. During the Soviet period, however, access to them was impossible. After the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1989, the staff of the newly established Jewish State Museum of Lithuania submitted frequent requests for access to these documents to the Historical Museum, where many of the collections of the Museum of the Revolution had been transferred, but were refused permission to see the documents.

In the 1990s the Jewish State Museum applied to the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture for permission to see the documents, and we were granted access to the second part of Sakowicz's diary for just two days. After photocopying the sheets, I began the long task of deciphering these new pages. Most belonged to the first part of the diary. The second part comprised a total of fifty-one documents. The sheets were of various sizes, though none was more than twenty-eight centimeters long. They included one photograph and one document from the ghetto (see October 26, 1943) that Sakowicz found in Ponary. The events described in these sheets took place between September 10, 1942, and November 6, 1943.

At the time I was deciphering Sakowicz's diary I knew little about the man himself. When the Polish edition of the diary was being prepared for publication, the editor, Jan Malinowski, was able to contact Sakowicz's relatives and gather some information about him. Kazimierz Sakowicz, the son of Elias and Sofia, was born in Wilno in 1894 and studied law in Moscow. After re-

turning to Wilno he served on the staff of various newspapers. He later opened a print shop that published journals, such as the *Przegląd Gospodarczy* (Economic Review), on Mickewicz Street, where he and his wife, Maria, lived. The couple had no children. In 1939, when Wilno and the surrounding region were occupied by Soviet troops and handed over to Lithuania, Sakowicz had to close his print shop and find cheaper lodgings. He moved to a frame cottage in Ponary, a suburb of Wilno. From there he rode his bicycle back into town, taking odd jobs to support his family. The cottage was located in the woods, adjacent to an area where, during the period of Soviet control of Lithuania (1940–41), a fuel storage facility to serve the nearby airbase had been under construction. Large pits—twelve to thirty-two meters in diameter and five to eight meters deep—had been excavated for fuel tanks. The pits were connected by ditches in which pipes were to be laid. But the facility was never completed. Instead, the Nazis—who occupied Wilno on June 24, 1941—used the pits and ditches for the extermination of tens of thousands of people. Ponary became one of several sites of large-scale massacres in Eastern Europe. Executions by shooting continued there for three years, from July 1941 until July 1944.

On July 11, 1941, the first day of mass executions, Sakowicz and his wife heard the sounds of gunfire at the airbase. He immediately recognized the importance of recording the ongoing events, and from then on never missed anything that occurred at Ponary. From a hiding place in his attic he observed the executions taking place at one of the pits. He also made inquiries among his neighbors and talked with railroad employees, farmers who bought the victims' clothes, and the Lithuanian killers,

or "Ponary riflemen," themselves. He counted the number of people brought to the execution site, noted the numbers on the trucks and automobiles that carried the victims, and described the clothing the victims wore.

Sakowicz's record ends on November 6, 1943. Because we still have not located other entries and the diary breaks off abruptly, I originally thought that Sakowicz must have died that fall; in the last entries, Sakowicz noted that people were looking at him with suspicion. But Sakowicz's first cousin told Malinowski that she had heard from his late wife that he kept writing until July 3–4, 1944, and that he had hidden these pages. Sakowicz was discovered in the woods on July 5, 1944, mortally wounded, next to his bicycle. His grave is located in the Rossa Cemetery in Vilnius, among graves of the fallen soldiers of the Polish underground (Armia Krajowa).

Through his diary, Sakowicz, an eyewitness to the atrocities at Ponary, left key testimony against the Nazi coverup that attempted to hide the crimes committed there.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Jewish State Museum of Lithuania, especially Deputy Director Rachel Kostanian, for giving me access to the archival holdings. In addition, museum personnel assisted my study of Sakowicz's diary by helping me locate statements by witnesses and other materials from the museum's collections—mainly diaries and testimonies from residents of the Wilno ghetto—with which I was able to verify the accuracy of the diary.

I am also deeply grateful to Jan Malinowski for publishing the first edition of the diary in Polish with my annotations and for uncovering information about its author.

I dedicate my labor of locating, deciphering, and re-creating the diary to the members of my family who perished at Ponary on July 5, 1944: my father, Samuel Margolis; my mother, Emmy; and my brother, Josef.

Preface

YITZHAK ARAD

Kazimierz Sakowicz's Ponary diary is a unique document, without parallel in the chronicles of the Holocaust. It provides a bystander's view of the activities of the Nazi extermination machine in the restricted arena of Ponary, a wooded area in the countryside some ten kilometers southwest of Wilno on the road to Grodno. Once it served as a holiday resort for the people of Wilno, and a paved road and railroad connected it to the city. In 1941, during the Soviet occupation of the region, the Soviets began excavating giant pits to serve as storage tanks for airplane fuel, but before they finished the task, the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, on June 22, 1941. The subsequent occupation of the region by the German army two days later left the excavation of the pits and construction of the storage tanks unfinished. During the German occupation, these pits became the site of the mass murder of some 50,000 to 60,000 men, women, and children, who were shot on the edge of the pit and then buried within it. The vast majority of the victims described by Sakowicz in his diary were Jews from the Wilno ghetto and environs. A few thousand were members of the underground or hostages—Poles, Communist cadres, Soviet prisoners of war, and some anti-German Lithuanians. Ponary thus became the

gravesite of the Jews of Wilno, which, under its Jewish name, Vilna, was known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania."

Sakowicz, a Polish journalist who lived in Ponary, decided to keep a record of the atrocities taking place almost outside his front door. He was taking a risk in committing to paper his meticulous chronicle of the unspeakable crimes he witnessed: the genocide being perpetrated by the Germans and their Lithuanian collaborators. Sakowicz was certainly aware that discovery of his diary would cost him, and perhaps also his family, their lives. We can only conjecture as to what motivated him to continue his perilous task. Was it an intellectual urge to transcribe an event whose scope and atrocity were unprecedented in European history? Did he envision publishing the diary after the war, or using it as the basis for a book? Perhaps his goal was to produce a document that could serve as an indictment of the murderers. Whatever his motive, Sakowicz did not live to fulfill it, but now, sixty years later, his diary, published in both Polish and English, stands as a testament to the events Sakowicz witnessed and a monument to the man who so bravely recorded them.

Because of the conditions under which the diary was buried, described in the Foreword by Rachel Margolis, some pages were severely damaged. But thanks to Dr. Margolis, an inmate of the Wilno ghetto who escaped to fight as a partisan, the diary was resurrected from the archive in which it had remained hidden throughout the Soviet period, laboriously deciphered, and published in the original Polish in 1999. In the Polish edition the entries are not always chronological, owing to Sakowicz's practice of writing on loose sheets and stuffing them into lemonade bottles in no clear order. In this, the first English edition of the diary, the entries have been reordered chronologically.

In his diary, Sakowicz describes the final stage in the destruction of the Jews of Wilno, their last journey and hours in the valley of death that was Ponary. The diary offers testimony from a bystander, an "objective" observer who saw tens of thousands of Jews murdered in front of his eyes on an almost daily basis over a period of two years and four months. The diary is written as a chronicle: the diarist evinces no personal involvement or manifestations of emotion or identification with the Jewish victims. He begins, "July 11: Quite nice weather, warm, white clouds, windy, some shots from the forest. Probably exercises." This matter-of-fact opening sets the tone for what follows, although sometimes Sakowicz's scorn at the conduct of the Jewish victims, the way they go unresisting to their deaths, shows through, especially in contrast to his proud description of the demeanor of the Polish victims, whom he feels behaved "honorably" in the face of death. In Sakowicz's accounts of the behavior of the perpetrators, particularly the Lithuanians, whom he, as a Pole, despised, we feel his disgust at their greed—trading in their victims' personal effects—and in their drunkenness, which Sakowicz stresses repeatedly. We can also discern his distaste for the Soviet Union in his references to Soviet partisans as "Bolsheviks" and his description of their seizures of food and clothing for survival as "banditry."

Sakowicz also provides details about events in Ponary and the region that he did not witness personally but heard about from his neighbors, occasionally some time after the fact. The events he describes—the murderers leading the victims to the fenced-off area and the pits, shooting them, and covering the bodies with lime—constituted the final stage in the destruction of the Wilno Jews. Before the Jews were murdered, they

went through several stages: roundups, confinement in the ghetto, eviction from their homes, selection for either Ponary and extermination or labor camps, and finally transport to Ponary and death.

Many of Sakowicz's descriptions are extremely terse, comprehensible only to the diarist himself—perhaps they were meant as a sort of aide-mémoire for future expansion. The translation endeavors to preserve Sakowicz's style. But to help readers understand the events described so elliptically in the diary, we have provided introductions to the various sections that offer details of the events that preceded the victims' arrival at Ponary.

Sakowicz's diary is unique. No similar documentation has survived from any of the other mass murder sites at which Jews were shot: Babi Yar in Kiev, Maly Trostinets near Minsk, Bogdanovka in Transnistria, and hundreds of other places in the occupied Soviet Union. That Sakowicz's diary offers "objective" testimony from a bystander rather than from a victim, devoid of any emotional agenda that might call its credibility into question, places it among the most important of the Holocaust testimonies.

Note on the Text

Because Kazimierz Sakowicz wrote his diary in Polish, placenames for the period 1939 to 1944 are given in Polish; if the Lithuanian name is more familiar, it is given in parentheses. Vilna (Lithuanian Vilnius) therefore appears as Wilno.

Sakowicz dated his entries somewhat erratically, and the editor has had to piece them together. Datelines were sometimes Sakowicz's own and sometimes supplied by the editor. Occasionally Sakowicz wrote two or more separate entries for the same date. In such cases, we have retained his datelines. In addition, he would sometimes return to an entry and add new information under the date; thus some entries refer to events that happened after the date in the dateline.

Sakowicz set a number of words in quotes, which have been retained. Bracketed ellipses ([. . .]) indicate illegible or obviously missing material.