

Ponar and the will to remember: Holocaust commemorations in Soviet Lithuania

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Abstract

This article explores the post-war history of the largest mass murder site in Lithuania, Ponar, and attempts by Jewish survivors to commemorate Holocaust victims during the period of Soviet occupation (1944–1990). The research shows that in spite of the ruling authorities creating significant obstacles for the small Jewish population to hold commemorations and over the course of the various physical transformations of Ponar, the site remained one of the most significant and most symbolic for Jewish identity and Jewish resistance to state policies.

Key Words

Jews, memory, post-war period, Vilnius

Approximately 208,000 Jews lived in Lithuania at the beginning of 1941. On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union and Lithuania was completely occupied within a week. The mass murder of Jews began within days of the invasion. Lithuanian Jews were shot and their bodies left in more than 200 pits near their homes, in forests, at Jewish cemeteries and in fields. Very few Jews from the once populous Lithuanian Jewish communities survived the war and the Holocaust. After the war, survivors immediately began to congregate and organize themselves. Many of the attempts to commemorate the extermination of the Jews centered on Ponar (Ponary/Paneriai), located in the vicinity of Vilnius, where from 1941 to 1944 around 80,000 people were systematically exterminated by the Nazis and their Lithuanian auxiliaries, making it one of the largest mass murder sites in Lithuania. The vast majority of victims were civilians, most of them Jews, with smaller numbers of Russian, Polish, Roma and Lithuanian victims (Record 1944: 211).

In the aftermath of the war, survivors took differing approaches to remembering and commemorating the ex-

periences of their family members and other representatives of the Jewish community during the Holocaust. Usually, though, these efforts took the form of work to protect and mark the mass murder sites. As soon as Vilnius was liberated from the Nazis, various experiences of Jewish survival came to light – from those who survived through evacuation to the Soviet Union or service in the Red Army, to those who survived the ghettos in Lithuania. For the latter, the situation was clear: they knew that none of their relatives had survived. This is true, for instance, in the case of Vitka Kempner (quoted in Porat 2009: 178), who said: “I didn’t go find out whether anyone in my family was still alive. I knew there was nothing to look for.” Those who spent the war as evacuees did not have the experience of living in the ghetto and thus could not easily discern what had happened to their loved ones, so they looked for acquaintances who could tell them of their fate. The Jewish Religious Community in Vilnius was established in October 1944 while the Jewish Museum opened its doors in July 1944. Both organizations focused on the preservation of Ponar as a mass murder site and burial ground.

The Stalinist authorities made a department at the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, established at the Council of Ministers of the USSR, responsible for Jewish religious life. Council officials equated Jewish “religiousness” with “nationalism”, believing that Judaism represented bourgeois nationalist elements who wanted to enter synagogues and transform them into centers of Jewish communal life. For this reason, the council found it unacceptable that the community should speak in the name of the entire people. All welfare activities, contacts with foreign organizations and initiatives to raise funds were considered undesirable, as were initiatives to erect monuments to victims of the Holocaust and attempts to publicize the general idea that the extermination of Jews was unique among Nazi crimes (Laukaitytė 2012: 295–308). Against the background of this policy was the will to remember and honor the dead drove Jewish communities to initiate commemorative practices. Mass murder sites were visited and attempts were made to unveil memorials, with the efforts relating to Ponar epitomizing this process.

The first commemorative gathering at the site took place in August 1944, shortly after the liberation of Vilnius from the Nazis and military hostilities continued in Lithuania. With the permission of the local Soviet government, the representatives of the Vilnius society staged an event at Ponar, attended by a large assembly of mourners. Kaddish and prayers were performed and heartbreaking testimonies were shared. Those who gathered at Ponar that year sought not only to commemorate the dead, but also more information about the fate of their own family members. In advance of the ceremony, Mikhail Sobol (Sobolis 1994: 180) wrote: “I will go to Ponar today. There will be a meeting there. Pits have been exhumed containing 12,000 and 10,000 people, and many recognize [the corpses of] their family members.” Between 15 and 26 August 1944 the Special Commission for Investigating Nazi Crimes was active at Ponar, determining the location of mass graves and performing exhumations. Survivors hoped to be able to identify exhumed corpses and several of the bodies unearthed by the Commission were indeed identified by relatives (Potanin 1944: 93–95). Nonetheless, one aspect of the memorial service angered many survivors, namely the fact that representatives of the Lithuanian civil government had given eulogies for the Poles and Russians buried at the site, whereas Jews – who had been the overwhelming majority of those murdered in Ponar – were not mentioned even once during preparations for the commemoration. This expression of state anti-Semitism was for some survivors a reason enough not to attend the event. In his diary, the Jewish partisan Abba Kovner (quoted in Porat 2009: 180) wrote: “We decided together with Sutzkever [poet and Jewish partisan Avraom Sutzkever] not to go to Ponar today.”

The following years also saw commemorations initiated by religious community leaders taking place at Ponar with the permission of officials from Soviet Religious Affairs. Vilnius Jews organized trips to visit the graves in Ponar in summer during the Tisha B’Av Jewish holiday.¹ On that day, community members would travel from the synagogue to pray in Ponar. The authorities granted permission to hold such an assembly for the final time in 1947 (Complaints 1946, 1947). That year marked a turning point between tolerant support of Jewish identity and the emerging systemic and openly anti-Semitic attitude of the government.

As early as 1945, the Jewish religious community attempted to establish Ponar as a special location worthy of commemoration. In October that year representatives of the community contacted the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party Antanas Sniečkus, requesting his help in preserving and memorializing the site of mass murder at Ponar along with other sites in Lithuania. The issue seemed particularly urgent because the sites had been gradually built over by roads and used as pastures for livestock, rendering them undistinguishable as locations for mass murder and mass graves (Complaints 1945: 121). However, officials rejected a request to preserve Ponar as a site of Jewish death. The following explanation was given, clearly expressing doubt in Jewish sovereignty over the site (Complaints 1945: 125–127): “The locations where the Germans carried out mass murders are not limited to what are described as cemeteries. These are locations with political significance, guarding against the successors to German fascism on the international level as well as against gangs of Nazi Lithuanians in our land. Therefore, the preservation of sites such as Ponar and others is not exclusively a matter of religious affiliation, but the duty of local executive organs.” Local and national government authorities, however, made no efforts to preserve the graves at Ponar. This is evidenced by persistent requests put forward by the executive board of the Vilnius Jewish community to allow them to protect the graves and erect a monument at Ponar and other sites (Letters: 106–108; Complaints 1948: 77).

Employees of the postwar Jewish Museum in Vilnius also petitioned the Council of Ministers (Letters: 106–108; Complaints 1948: 77): “to erect a memorial plaque at the gate leading to the mass execution site, and to erect a commemorative monument to honor the victims’ memory both ideologically and artistically.” They proposed a state-funded competition for a memorial design. Anticipating a negative answer from government officials, museum staff also suggested that the memorial could be financed by donations from the members of the Jewish community. Ultimately, the latter option was implemented (Finding 1949: 221).

1 Tisha B’Av is an annual day of fasting in Judaism, commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. Tisha B’Av, the ninth day of the month of Av on the Jewish calendar, falls in July or August. This specific day to commemorate the Holocaust was chosen only by Lithuanian Jews and demonstrates a local Litvak type of consciousness and behavior based on local rules for commemorating the dead. (see Zeltser 2018: 60).

The monument was erected in May 1948 and was to be officially unveiled on Tisha B'Av, August 15, the same year. Its design immediately drew criticism from the authorities because it was considered too religious in both its symbolism and the inscriptions framing the monument. It featured a biblical verse and a Russian text establishing Jews as the main victims of Ponar (Report 1949: 10–11). The reluctance of representatives of the Jewish community to acquiesce to official demands to change the inscription on the monument to a purely secular one led the authorities to take the matter into their own hands. The monument was ultimately taken down,² with a new obelisk, decorated with a five-pointed star and the standard inscription in Lithuanian and Russian, “to the victims of fascist terror, 1941–1944”, erected on the plinth of the former statue in the early 1960s.

The “overly religious” message and symbolism of the 1948 monument was not the only reason for it never being officially unveiled. 1948 was the year in which Stalin’s anti-Semitic campaign got underway, compelling many Jews to leave the country. Between 1948 and 1956, numerous Jewish survivors reclaimed their prewar Polish citizenship, giving them the right to repatriate to Poland. Those who stayed hid their Jewish identity. As a result, the Jewish community in Lithuania and, more specifically, in Vilnius, significantly dwindled in numbers and their religious and communal activities were performed in secret. This does not mean, however, that commemorations at, and visits to, Ponar stopped, but they did become less organized and took on a lower profile as they were performed individually or by small groups. Such activities continued to take place throughout the 1950s and 1960s, usually on May 9, the official Liberation Day holiday, during the latter decade. Žana Ranaitė-Čarnienė (Ranaitė-Čarnienė 1994: 171) writes: “I used to remember my dear parents, brother, relatives and acquaintances outside of the synagogue. Often I travelled alone to Ponar. The tall old pine trees, the witnesses to the terrible massacres there, rustled in the wind as if they were moaning in agony over the innocent victims.”

It was only in the 1970s that Ponar once again became a symbol of Jewish resistance to official state policies and the politics of memory surrounding the Holocaust. Following the large-scale commemorations that took place at Babi Yar in Ukraine, Rumbula in Latvia and Vilnius in Lithuania in 1971, which coincided with the struggle for the right of Jews to leave the Soviet Union, a similar event occurred at Ponar in 1972. Eitanas Finkelšteinas, a participant at that event and later an active member of the Helsinki Group (the Lithuanian dissident organization), together with several friends, organized

a commemoration at Ponar on Tisha B'Av. The group read a prayer, laid down a large six-pointed star made of yellow flowers and sang a few songs. The claim to sovereignty over Ponar as a site of Jewish suffering and death met with a decisive response from the authorities. The leaders of the event were arrested and their cameras confiscated. Thereafter, all Jewish commemorations at the site took place under the banner of services intended to honor victims of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet name for World War II.

A new wave of commemorations at Ponar began when the Lithuanian independence movement Sąjūdis was established in the 1980s. Sąjūdis, literally ‘Movement’, was the political organization that led the struggle for Lithuanian independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was then that two important Jewish organizations were established: Tkuma and the Lithuanian Cultural Foundation’s Jewish Culture Association, the latter forming the basis for the Lithuanian Jewish Community. Although they were based on different administrative structures and pursued divergent agendas, both organizations took the initiative in maintaining the sites of mass murder in Lithuania, including Ponar. The main difference in the policies of these organizations lay in their conformity to state policy. The Association continued to organize events in May when victims of fascism killed in the Great Patriotic War were commemorated in Lithuania and the Soviet Union, while Tkuma would hold their annual March of the Living in the autumn, in remembrance of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto.³ At their first meeting, held in 1988, the organization openly displayed Jewish symbols, with the participants carrying a Star of David that they then placed at the edge of burial pits.

Following the wave of *aliyah*, the emigration to Israel in 1990, the already small Jewish population of Lithuania dwindled further. It was in this context that a member of Tkuma, Hirsh Belitsky, came up with the idea that those leaving could leave a symbolic mark at the graves of their relatives by way of a farewell. He suggested that the families emigrating to Israel should plant an oak at the site. The initiative was publicized in the newspaper *Etzleinu*⁴, striking a chord with many readers. In an acknowledgement letter one family wrote (Simovich 1990: 19): “We were preparing to leave but felt some sort of dissatisfaction, and then, all of a sudden, we read in *Etzleinu* about planting a small oak tree in remembrance. This was when we realized what the feeling of dissatisfaction was all about. After all, until then, everything we had done had been for ourselves: we studied the language, we bought things for the trip. But to plant a tree means to leave something behind after you’re gone. To

² Some survivors say the monument was destroyed or even blown up.

³ September 23 was the day of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto. The Day of Remembrance of the Lithuanian Jewish Victims of Genocide was listed on the official list of state holidays by order of the Presidium of the Supreme Council (Reconstituent Seimas 1990–1992) of Lithuania on October 31, 1990. Since 1994 it has been commemorated annually.

⁴ *Etzleinu* was the newspaper published by the Tkuma Jewish national revival educational association.

plant a small oak at Ponar, where our departed brothers and sisters rest, means to be together invisibly, wherever we might be..." This act made it possible to establish and maintain a connection between the dead and the living, even in the absence of the latter.

Commemorations organized by Jews took place at Ponar throughout the entire period from 1944 until the 1990s, despite the ruling authorities discouraging such acts and creating significant barriers. Throughout the various physical transformations of Ponar, the site remained one of the most significant and most symbolic for Jews, both for preserving the memory of those murdered and for freely expressing one's values, identities and resistance to state policies.

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