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The “Final Final Solution”

The War Against Jewish Fetuses in Their Mothers’ Wombs

Abstract

Operation Barbarossa was a turning point between the array of dehumanising “solutions to the Jewish question”, hitherto concocted by the Nazis, and the gradual escalation into mass systematic annihilation in forest ravines, gas vans, and extermination camps. This article examines the distinctiveness of the decree against births imposed in the Jewish ghettos of Lithuania, established in the second half of 1941, in comparison with the Polish ghettos, as well as the possible connection to the Wannsee Conference decisions. Furthermore, the article addresses the coping strategies adopted in the ghettos. In view of the Wannsee Conference Protocol and the chronological proximity of the conference to the decree’s announcement, the decree appears to have constituted an additional frontier to ensure the “Final Final Solution” discussed at the meeting at Wannsee.

The series of measures taken by the German army and its collaborators against the Jews in the Soviet territories, following Operation Barbarossa, was a clear manifestation of an anti-Jewish extermination policy, even though a “final solution” pertaining to all Jews living in areas under Nazi oppression had not yet been authorised. Operation Barbarossa was a watershed moment between the various dehumanising methods devised by the Nazis thus far to find a “solution to the Jewish question”, such as segregation, racist and discriminatory legislation, expropriation, forced migration, ghettos, labour camps, and other “final solutions” thereafter. These solutions were progressively extended and escalated into total systematic annihilation – murder by shooting into forest pits, in gas vans, and extermination camps.¹

This article sheds light on the significance of the decree against births imposed on the Jews of the Lithuanian ghettos, established in the second half of 1941 following the extermination of most of Lithuanian Jewry in the first weeks after Operation Barbarossa.² The survivors were concentrated in temporary ghettos to exploit the young, healthy Jewish labour force for the German war effort on Soviet territory. Once exhausted, this labour force would be exterminated as well. The article examines the distinctive nature of the decree against births in comparison to the Polish ghettos, the possible connection to the Wannsee Conference decisions, and the coping strategies adopted in the ghettos. A meticulous reading of the Wannsee Conference Protocol and the conference’s chronological proximity to the decree’s announcement indicates that the decree was an additional frontier to ensure the “Final Final Solution” raised for discussion at that gathering in Wannsee.

1 Christoph Dieckmann, *Mediniyut Hahashmada Hanatzit, 1939–1945* [The Nazi Extermination Policy, 1939–1945] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2001), 277–315, in Hebrew.

2 On the decree against births, see, for example Miriam Offer, “Medicine in the Shavli Ghetto in Light of the Newly Discovered Diary of Dr. Aaron Pik”, in *Jewish Medical Resistance in the Holocaust*, ed. Michael A. Grodin (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2021), 164–172.

“Suitable Treatment” to Prevent a New Jewish Revival

The Wannsee Conference convened on 20 January 1942 to coordinate the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”. Consequently, a network of extermination camps was established, in which 1.7 million Jews were murdered in 1942 and 1943.³ The Wannsee Conference Protocol states, inter alia, that:

[u]nder appropriate direction the Jews are to be utilized for work in the East in an expedient manner in the course of the final solution. In large (labor) columns, with the sexes separated, Jews capable of work will be moved into these areas as they build roads, during which a large proportion will no doubt drop out through natural reduction. *The remnant that eventually remains will require suitable treatment; because it will without doubt represent the most [physically] resistant part, it consists of a natural selection that could, on its release, become the germ-cell of a new Jewish revival. (Witness the experience of history.)*⁴ [my emphasis, M.O.]

“A new Jewish revival” referred to the fertility potential of Jews who were fit for work and could survive the “dropout through natural reduction”. Thus, they would jeopardise the Final Solution by forming a new generation of Jews who would ensure the continuity of the Jewish people’s heritage. “Witness the experience of history”, states the protocol, reflecting the unmistakable fear that Jewish survivors of the Lithuanian work ghettos could foil the Final Solution intended to exterminate more than 11,000,000 Jews. In response to this potential “danger”, the Wannsee Protocol proposed “suitable treatment” to cope with the issue.⁵

The “suitable treatment” to cope with this “threat”, according to German policy, was apparently to issue a decree prohibiting the birth of Jewish children and enforcing abortions among Jewish pregnant women. In this context, the decree against births in the Lithuanian ghettos can be seen as a “Final Final Solution”.

The Decree Against Births in the Šiauliai Ghetto

The decree against births was imposed in the Lithuanian ghettos of Vilnius, Kovno, and Šiauliai, which were established in the summer of 1941, after war broke out between Germany and the Soviet Union. In the Vilnius and Šiauliai ghettos, the decree was announced on 5 February 1942, and for the first time in Kovno on 24 July 1942. This article investigates the unique nature of the decree against births in the Lithuanian ghettos, focusing on Šiauliai as a case study. As was to be expected, the need to cope with this harsh decree made a grave impression on the ghetto inhabitants, as evidenced in diaries written in the ghetto, in protocols that were preserved, and in survivors’ memoirs.⁶

3 Yad Vashem, *Protocol of the Wannsee Conference, January 20, 1942*, accessed 20 January 2025, <https://www.yadvashem.org/docs/wannsee-conference-protocol.html>.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Miriam Offer, “Refua Verof’im Begeto Shavli Be’ikvot Hasifat Yomano Shel Harofe Aaron Pik, Reshimot Migai Hahariga: Zihronot Ktuvim Bageto Hashavla’i (Lita), 1942, 1943, 1944” [Medicine and Doctors in the Shavli Ghetto Following the Discovery of the Diary of Dr Aharon Pik: *Notes from the Valley of Death – Written Notes from the Shavli Ghetto in Lithuania from the Years 1942, 1943, 1944*] (master’s thesis, University of Haifa, 1993), 52–58, 85–99, in Hebrew; Lea Prais, “Harefua Vehabriyot Begeta’ot Vilna, Kovna Veshavli (1941–1944) Bein Hapitaron Hasofi Leproduktivizatzia” [Between Productivity and the ‘Final Solution’: Medical and Healthcare Problems in the Lithuanian Ghettos – Vilna, Kovna and Shavli (1941–1944)] (master’s thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1998), 79–81, 109–112, in Hebrew.

First-hand sources from the Šiauliai ghetto shed light, from different perspectives, on the decree against births. Particularly important are the diaries of the teacher, author, and historian Dr Eliezer Yerushalmi, in which he documented the history of the ghetto, on request of the *Aeltestenrat* (Council of Elders). Yerushalmi, who had a PhD in history, established an archive in the ghetto and was principal of the ghetto school. During the interwar period, he had been involved in public matters and was active in the Zionist organisation. With the knowledge and consent of the *Aeltestenrat*, he documented, inter alia, the decree against births and the means of coping with it in the ghetto.⁷ Another important source are the personal diaries of the physician Dr Aharon Pick, who played a role in carrying out the policy adopted by the ghetto leaders and physicians by implementing the decree. He described, first-hand, how he was forced to assist several women in advanced stages of pregnancy by aborting the pregnancies and killing the newborns, after they had sought his help due to the worsening conditions and growing impossibility of saving their unborn babies.

Dr Pick was a respected figure in the Šiauliai community, well-versed in Jewish tradition and with rich professional medical experience. He was the only Jewish physician working in the Šiauliai general hospital, where, for sixteen years, he directed the departments of internal medicine and infectious diseases. Alongside his work, he took on numerous public responsibilities in the Šiauliai Jewish community, serving as a member of the Jewish Council, deputy chair of the General Zionist Federation, chair of the local branch of *Tarbut* (culture), and director of the Hebrew public library, and he was also one of the founders of the Hebrew Gymnasium.⁸

While coping with the events imposed on them in the ghetto, Dr Pick and his fellow physicians risked their lives in their attempts to save the inhabitants. In June 1944, a month before the liquidation of the ghetto, Pick died of an illness at the age of seventy-two.⁹

On the eve of the war, approximately 8,000 Jews lived in the city, including refugees. When the Germans invaded, approximately 1,000 refugees fled, and approximately 2,500 Jews were massacred in the Kužiai Forest during the first weeks of the occupation. The ghetto was officially sealed on 1 September 1941, with approximately 5,000 Jews crammed inside. In September 1943, the ghetto was transferred to SS control and became a concentration camp. It was liquidated in July 1944.¹⁰

Two weeks after the Wannsee Conference, on 5 February 1942, the German security police summoned the *Aeltestenrat* of the Šiauliai Ghetto and informed it of the decree against births in the ghetto. On the following day, the decree was announced to all the Jews in the ghetto, and it included the following elements: 1) childbirth in the ghetto was undesirable; 2) the artificial termination of Jewish women's pregnancies was permissible, and required (!); 3) Jewish women giving birth were to be severely punished.¹¹ Pick wrote in his diary that “[t]he date of this decree reducing us to

7 Eliezer Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli, Yoman Migeto Lita'i (1941–1944)* [Shavli Notebook, A Diary from a Lithuanian Ghetto (1941–1944)] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute and Yad Vashem, 1958), in Hebrew.

8 Aharon Pick, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter: A Memoir of the Ghetto of Siauliai, Lithuania*, trans. Gabriel Laufer and Andrew Cassel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023).

9 Shmuel Gadon, ed., *Tedik David Pik, Mishelo, Ito, Alav* [Tedik David Pick, By Him, With Him and About Him] (Kibbutz Netzer Hazani: Sifrei Te'ud Vezikaron, 1979), 13–15, in Hebrew.

10 Sima Itzikas, “Korot Geto Shavli (1941–1944)” [The History of the Šiauliai Ghetto (1941–1944)], master's thesis, in *Yahadut Lita, vol. IV* [The Jews of Lithuania, vol. IV] (Tel Aviv: Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel, 1944), 1–185, in Hebrew; Yad Vashem, *Encyclopedia of the Ghettos, Šiauliai*, accessed 22 January 2025, https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/he/research/ghettos_encyclopedia/ghetto_details.asp?cid=1060.

11 Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli*, 59, 61; Pick, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter*, 167.

beasts must be remembered from one generation to the next: it was February 5, 1942”¹²

Pick also expressed his wish and hope for future generations to explore these events in-depth, to understand the unique suffering of the Jews under the Nazi regime: “[f]uture readers will surely have hearts sensitive enough to imagine, even without many words, our bitter lives and our emotional tribulations. They will marvel at the extent of our endurance at how much suffering this weak creature called a Jew could bear. ...”¹³

A turbulent atmosphere prevailed in the ghetto following the issue of the decree. “There are no words to describe our feelings upon hearing this decree: helpless rage, disgust, desire for revenge, aggrievement toward heaven ...”¹⁴ Neither Dr Pick nor Dr Yerushalmi could avoid the historical comparison between this decree and the biblical decree by Pharaoh: “Pharaoh only ordered the male children killed, but our modern-day Haman intends to annihilate all.”¹⁵

Two days later, on 7 February 1942, an order was issued to obstetricians: “[t]hey are permitted to perform abortions on Jewish women but are forbidden to allow live births”. That is, both the Jewish women and the obstetricians were responsible for upholding the decree. If they failed, “harsh punishment” would be meted out.¹⁶

About two months later, on 7 April 1942, the Aeltestenrat issued a memorandum to the ghetto inhabitants: “[a] memorandum of the notice issued by the security police on February 5 ... we remind the ghetto inhabitants once again regarding strict adherence to the order ...”¹⁷

Five months after the decree was announced, on 4 July 1942, and about a month before it was put into force, the head of the German security police, Dr Charny, addressed the Aeltestenrat, drawing its attention, once again, to the decree against births. “The last day for permissible births is August 5, 1942”, the head of the German security police reminded the council’s members. He informed them of an extension until 15 August 1942, adding: “[i]n the event of a birth in a Jewish family after that date, the entire Jewish family will be executed, and the *Aeltestenrat* will be held responsible”¹⁸.

As the deadline approached, on 13 July 1942, the Aeltestenrat publicised harsher details concerning births in the ghetto than in the initial notices. Repeated warnings by the Aeltestenrat took a genuinely threatening tone: “[c]hildbirth is forbidden in hospitals and pregnant women’s homes. The women and their families are in danger of death. A list of the women will be drawn up.”¹⁹ For any women who had thought of disregarding the decree by giving birth in secret, this notice left no room for doubt about the future. “... [T]he unprecedented and infamous prohibition against Jewish women giving birth to sons, thus forcing them to abort their pregnancies. How could a heart not break on hearing this?”, wrote Pick.²⁰ About two weeks prior to the enforcement of the decree, the Aeltestenrat issued the following notice:

Last warning! Time is running out. The last hour is almost upon us! August 15 is not far away! Remember, Jewish women, that after the fifteenth, there

¹² Pick, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter*, 168.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli*, 59.

¹⁶ Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli*, 61; Pick, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter*, 153.

¹⁷ Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli*, 72.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Pick, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter*, 152.

are to be no more births in the hospitals in the ghetto. Remember that, after the fifteenth, it is forbidden to give birth at home. Strict inspections of private homes will be carried out. Physicians, midwives, and nurses will be forbidden to attend to Jewish women in childbirth. Violations of the prohibition will be severely punished. Do not forget the dangerous outcomes for you and for your families! This is our last warning!²¹

The Germans strictly supervised the decree's implementation. About a week after its enforcement, the Germans reprimanded the Aeltestenrat: "[t]here are still pregnant women and many children in the ghetto."²²

About five months later, in January 1943, a terrifying conversation took place between the Aeltestenrat and the German official in charge, who asked: "[h]ave new children been born? By what means were the births stopped? Can the ghetto physicians perform castrations?" Yerushalmi wrote: "[t]he questions were presented in the most mundane fashion as if they were discussing horses, not people. Faces darkened and hearts went silent. Were we to experience something so terrible, even worse than death? To be mutilated and uglified for the rest of our lives? Destruction of the entire ghetto, like of other Jewish communities, would be preferable to this suffering..."²³

The castration rumour spread through the ghetto and people genuinely feared that husbands of women who gave birth would be punished by castration. Following this conversation, the Aeltestenrat ordered cyanide for the entire ghetto via Aharon Zeigernick, a pharmacist in the ghetto.²⁴

The War Against the Unborn in Nazi Ideology

The researcher Beverly Chalmers claims that literature on the Holocaust extensively documents direct extermination methods used against the Jews, such as gassing, torture, starvation, disease, and appalling conditions in ghettos and camps, as well as through the brutality of the *Einsatzgruppen*. She states that the more indirect means of genocide, through the manipulation of human reproduction, have thus far been under-researched.²⁵ Annette Finley-Croswhite claims that Jewish women during the Holocaust were victims of specific gendered violence, in the form of assault on pregnant women, sterilisation, forced abortion, and infanticide. However, studies on this specific aspect of Nazi atrocities are scarce, particularly in the literature not explicitly focused on women. Thus far, no detailed research exists regarding the numbers of Jewish fetuses either shot or gassed in the womb, forcibly aborted, or murdered at birth.²⁶

Nonetheless, the research and documentation point to the planning and execution of total biological extermination, including abortions, mass sterilisation, and castration.²⁷ Even though the biological extermination was directed toward those "unworthy of life" in Germany itself and was perpetuated via other means among

21 Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli*, 96–97.

22 *Ibid.*, 102.

23 *Ibid.*, 154–155.

24 *Ibid.*, 155, n. 3.

25 Beverly Chalmers, *Birth, Sex and Abuse: Women's Voices under Nazi Rule* (London: Grosvenor House, 2015).

26 Annette Finley-Croswhite, "Un(B)earable: Pregnant Bodies and Obstetrical Genocide", in *Recognizing the Past in the Present: New Studies on Medicine Before, During and After the Holocaust*, eds. Sabine Hildebrandt, Miriam Offer, and Michael A. Grodin (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2021), 103–124.

27 Mark Dworzecki, *Eropa Lelo Yeladim: Tohmit Hanatzim Leheres Biyologi* [Europe without Children – The Nazi Program for Biological Destruction] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1958), in Hebrew.

other populations considered inferior and undesirable by the Germans, Saul Friedländer made a distinction between these processes, identifying the unique nature of the Final Solution:

[i]f sterilization and euthanasia were meant only to enhance the purity of the national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*] and rested on cost–benefit calculations, the segregation and extermination of the Jews – although these, too, were a process of racial purification – were aimed principally at an active and daunting enemy that was perceived as a menace to the very existence of Germany and the Aryan world. Therefore, apart from the objective of purifying the race, common to sterilization and euthanasia, and in contrast to it, the war on the Jews was perceived as a confrontation of apocalyptic magnitude.²⁸

That is also the reason why the fear of a “new Jewish revival” appears in the Wannsee Protocol on the “Final Solution”. Finley-Croswhite claims that the Nazi onslaught on Jewish pregnant women was extensive. Gynaecological genocide was an effective means of exterminating the Jews during World War II, and its long-term statistical and emotional implications demand in-depth research.²⁹

Coping with the Decree Against Births in the Šiauliai Ghetto

The decree against births was one of the harshest inflicted on the ghetto, both ethically and practically. The Germans made the Aeltestenrat, medical staff, pregnant women, and their families responsible for implementing the order. Not only would the “culprits” be put to death, but violation of the decree would put the entire ghetto under the threat of destruction. The implementation of the decree was strictly followed up. The Aeltestenrat’s decisions and coping strategies would seal the fate of the ghetto.

The ghetto historian Yerushalmi wrote:

[t]he *Aeltestenrat* knew very well that their actions would be recorded in the diary. They knew they would be judged by history and therefore weighed up every act. However, they were not deterred from taking on the burden of responsibility for terrible deeds imposed on them by the Nazis such as abortions and the killing of newborns and allowed me to write the details in the protocol.³⁰

The protocol of this meeting in Šiauliai, held by the Aeltestenrat and a select group of ghetto physicians, reflects the issues contemplated in the ghetto regarding the measures to be taken following the decree against births. The meeting took place in March 1943, seven months after the enforcement of the decree in August 1942. It can be assumed that the first “forbidden” births, violations of the decree, were to occur about two months later. During this period, the Aeltestenrat saw fit to discuss the ways to act. At that time it was known that, following a recent birth in Kovno, all the members of the family had been shot and killed. The Aeltestenrat was aware of the implementation of the Nazi policy and attempted to find ways to spare the ghetto inhabitants from harsh punishments.

28 Friedländer, Saul, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York and London: HarperCollins, 1997), 39–49.

29 Finley-Croswhite, “Un(B)earable”.

30 *Ibid.*, 15.

The medical staff knew of twenty pregnant women in the ghetto; some may already have been visibly so. Clearly, they were facing a practical problem with potentially disastrous outcomes for the entire ghetto population, not only for the individuals involved.³¹ During the discussion, Aeltestenrat member Berl Karton remarked: “[i]f the newborn’s family were the only ones in danger, we could leave the responsibility to the person involved, but the event is likely to put the whole ghetto at risk.”³²

As mentioned above, the Aeltestenrat warned of the danger several times and of the need to adhere to the decree against births. From 15 August 1942, the day the decree was enforced, the Aeltestenrat ceased its propaganda activity, fearing that continued warnings would attract the attention of the Germans and Lithuanians to cases of recalcitrant pregnancy and birth. In the attempt to propose ways to cope with the decree, the discussion revolved around recalcitrance. That is to say, the Aeltestenrat and ghetto physicians accepted the Nazis’ decree against births as inviolable, and all they needed to do was to ensure its implementation.

The proposed solutions to the problem of recalcitrant pregnancies ranged from mild to severe:

First stage – persuasion, involving several actions: 1. Follow-up and registration of pregnancies. 2. Persuasion, in the presence of a physician and a member of the Aeltestenrat, to perform an abortion. This constituted official clarification to the woman regarding her grave responsibility for the severe catastrophe to come. 3. Making threats, some of them false, such as possible intervention by the German security police, who had supposedly been watching the pregnant woman for some time.

Second stage, if the above-mentioned measures were ineffective: 1. Prohibiting the medical staff from attending to the recalcitrant pregnant woman in the hope of indirectly leading to the death of the newborn. 2. Punishing the pregnant woman’s family by reducing food rations, deporting for forced labour. 3. Killing the newborns; two physicians would deliver the baby, and a nurse would inject the poison while remaining ignorant of the nature of the injection and its outcomes.

During the meeting, Dr Luntz, a gynaecologist, fiercely opposed abortions in the advanced months of pregnancy, as in the case discussed of a woman in her eighth month, regarding whom it was decided that “a premature birth must be induced immediately”. It was also said that “the child must not be born alive because if the child is born, he will serve as an example to others”. “I cannot have such a responsibility on my conscience”, said Luntz. Dr Blecher added: “[t]his is a truly difficult case since no physician can take upon himself to kill a living child. That would be murder.”³³ Dr Direktorowicz claimed that the need to kill fetuses during the final months of pregnancy resembled a case in which the mother’s life is in danger during the birth. According to the *Halakhah* (Jewish Law), the mother’s life takes precedence over the fetus and, therefore, the fetus must be killed to save the mother”.

Luntz was not convinced and reiterated his stance: “I cannot do that.”³⁴

It is interesting to note that Dr L. Pesachowicz, the director of the hospital in the ghetto, and Dr Burstein, the head doctor in the ghetto, indicated unequivocally that the decree be upheld. Dr Pesachowicz suggested making the above-mentioned threats, on behalf of the security police, and Dr Burstein suggested forbidding the medical staff to attend births. It is possible that, by virtue of their senior positions,

31 Ibid., 188–190.

32 Ibid., 189.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 190.

they felt a greater responsibility than the others toward the German and Lithuanian officials and thus were steadfast in their opinions. In contrast, Dr Luntz, as a gynaecologist, would have been required to implement these harsh decisions and hence was the moral standard-bearer who opposed killing the fetuses. Naturally, the members of the Aeltestenrat sided with absolute adherence to the law. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that, according to the protocol, all the attendees at the meeting – without exception – signed the decisions.

It is important to note that, in the specific case discussed, Rivka (Regina) Ton-Guz – the woman who was eight months pregnant – refused to have an abortion, gave birth to a live boy, and managed to send him out of the ghetto. The birth took place underground, in a neglected cellar, aided by Dr Luntz. Dr Pesachowicz assisted in anesthetising the baby to transfer him to the Lithuanian side. Consequently, Rivka's husband, Zeev Ton, was dismissed from his work with the Jewish police and was sent to perform light work outside the ghetto. The baby's parents survived the war and, in 1957, the child returned to them and lived with them in the United States. This baby, Ben Zion, eventually became an expert in nuclear physics.³⁵ This case illustrates the heroism of women who refused to capitulate, but it is important to observe that Rivka Ton-Guz gave birth to her son in April 1943, five months before the ghetto became a concentration camp under SS control. The ghetto camp conditions made the options of clandestine births and hiding the babies seem hopeless and extremely dangerous.

In the Šiauliai ghetto, the Aeltestenrat members were highly respected by the ghetto inhabitants. Their stance regarding the decree was undoubtedly taken for the benefit of the entire ghetto, and not out of personal interest to save themselves. This was evident in one incident in which the Germans caught a group of Jews smuggling provisions into the ghetto and ordered the Aeltestenrat to draw up a list of “culprits”. After refusing to comply with the Germans' orders, they were commanded to draw up a list of fifty hostages. Pick writes that “[a]ll that previous night our representatives had pondered, considered, and reviewed a variety of responses, and had finally assembled a list of fifty people to be executed. At the top of the list were the names of the council members, the ghetto managers, and the Jewish policemen. This was the list they turned in.” Thus, the members of the Aeltestenrat offered themselves up as hostages.³⁶

It emerges from the material that abortions were performed in the ghetto nearly every day. Even Dr Luntz, who had voiced his disgust regarding the option of implementing the decree against mothers and their fetuses, was forced to participate. Motek Brum testified that his wife was about to give birth to their first child, “but the threat of death hovered over our heads for such a transgression ... Dr Luntz killed the fetus, underground, in terrible sanitary conditions ... The hospital became a slaughterhouse. Hundreds of pregnancies were aborted, dozens of children were murdered, there was no more childbirth among the 5,000 Jews in the Šiauliai Ghetto.”³⁷

35 Ibid., n. 32, 348, n. 5; Schneidermann, S.L. “Pegisha Ahat Benyo York” [A Meeting in New York] *Davar Hashavua*, 23, 7 June 1957, in Hebrew, <https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/dav/1957/06/07/01/?e=-----he-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1>, accessed 25 January 2025; Schneidermann, “Di Elteren Fun Bn-Tsiun Gats Zeynen Geven Farshikt in Natsishe Shklafen-Lagern” [The Parents of Ben Zion Guz Were Sent to a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp] *Forverts* 61, 26 April 1957, in Yiddish, <https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/?a=d&d=frw19570426-01.1.2&e=-----en-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1>, accessed 25 January 2025.

36 Pick, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter*, 222.

37 Mordechai (Motek) Brum, *Pirkei Hayyim* [Chapters in My Life] (Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetaot: Pinkas Edut, Beit Lohamei Haghetaot-Ghetto Fighters House, 1990), 73, in Hebrew.

In September 1943, after the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto, the Kovno and Šiauliai ghettos were turned into concentration camps and placed under SS control. About two months later, on 5 November 1943, when most of the ghetto inhabitants had left for the forced labour camps, the Children's *Aktion* took place. About 500 children under the age of ten were deported to their deaths, except for a small number who managed to hide. Pick wrote as follows:

[v]engeance like this, for the blood of a child, Satan has yet to devise ... A deathly silence has descended on the ghetto. Not a person can be heard in the street, only mourning and moaning from every direction. Terror and desperation ... Rachel is weeping for her children; mothers cry for their babies, torn away from them and now gone. Has such a thing ever been heard of? Has anything like this ever happened?³⁸

At this stage, repeated attempts were made to seek help to hide, in Lithuanian homes outside the ghetto, children and babies who had hitherto been concealed in the ghetto. Yerushalmi wrote that the *Aeltestenrat* escaped to the city and knocked on the doors of all of the important Lithuanian businessmen. They begged them to save the children who remained after the *Aktion*, but no one would help. No one would risk his freedom by heading a project to save the Jewish children. "Nonetheless, a handful of parents succeeded in persuading Lithuanian acquaintances to take in their children, but many changed their minds on the spot. Others did not even accept the children when they were brought to them in the city and the wretched parents had to return them to the ghetto at risk to their lives ..."³⁹

It is noteworthy that, in isolated cases, Lithuanians agreed to accept a child but, following the children's difficulties and lack of adjustment, returned them to their parents in the ghetto. For example, Gideon Shub recounts in his memoir that his sister Amia, who was born in the ghetto, was taken to a Lithuanian family, but her couriers were forced to return her to the ghetto.⁴⁰

In the period following the Children's *Aktion*, women who were still concealing their pregnancies, despite the decree against births, understood that, from then on, there would be no chance of keeping the babies alive after birth. Only at this stage, as described by Yerushalmi, did women in advanced pregnancy plead with the medical staff to help them give birth and to kill the newborns:

[i]n addition to our humiliations and demoralizations, we must also shoulder the punishment of being the murderers of our children ... in those dark days, there were three women in the final weeks of pregnancy. The wretched women were unable to hide from the constant inspections. They found nowhere to conceal themselves nor their newborns. In greatest despair, the women begged the doctors and *Aeltestenrat* members to induce premature births and to kill their babies ...⁴¹

He described the tragic dilemmas facing the leaders, physicians, and decision makers:

[w]e are living in a nightmare and cannot think reasonably. We are acting on impulse and living by our instincts, but it is doubtful if we are functioning properly. We are knocking on the doors of all Lithuanians of influence, begging for the lives of our children and for our own dull, broken lives. We have forgotten that only two years ago, those people ... behaved in the exact same

38 Pick, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter*, 195.

39 Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli*, 312.

40 Gideon Shub, *Shuv Beshvil Hahayim* [Back to Life] (Ra'anana: Docustory, 2011), 56–60, in Hebrew.

41 Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli*, 315.

way as the Ukrainians and the SS today. They have the blood of 250,000 of our brothers on their conscience ... Would it be better for us, the last remnant of the Lithuanian group, to die a martyr's death rather than humiliate ourselves in front of our murderers? ... Or should we cling on to life with all our strength, in any way, so that we can tell the world what they did to us?⁴²

These horrifying testimonies are reinforced by Dr Pick's diary. He recounts two cases of infanticide, when he was forced to participate in the killing of babies, as requested by their mothers, and to prevent the danger hovering over the entire ghetto. The incident occurred on 10 December 1943:

[s]ome aspects of our accursed lives will never be erased and can scarcely be believed: How civilized people with high moral principles descended so far that we have now become destroyers and murderers. The edict prohibiting births in the ghetto still stands. And despite the danger that such incidents pose for the entire ghetto, several deliveries did occur: normal, living babies were born, to women who refused to terminate their pregnancies in time.⁴³

Pick provides an honest and painful description of the tragedy:

[w]e carry out this repulsive mission by injecting them with powerful toxins. The life it fell to me to end was a phenomenon without precedent in the medical literature. The child survived without food, without a drop of water or milk for seven days! Dr. Burstein and I administered injections of morphine and heroin, in quantities sufficient to kill several adults! How tenacious is life! How powerfully does it resist all attempts to cut it short in its first days! I would never have believed that an infant, barely arrived in this world, would cling to life so powerfully. Nothing in the medical literature describes or explains it. After all, who would starve a child for seven or eight days? After injecting morphine and scopolamine, on the seventh day they injected him with heroin, and he expired. Thus they forced us to act as angels of death, as murderers ...⁴⁴

As apparent from the documentation left by the ghetto inhabitants, coping with this decree was one of the most difficult challenges. A look at how the German regime's administration and dynamics developed in the ghetto can shed light on the methods of coping with the decree against births. Four periods can be identified in the life of the Lithuanian ghettos. The characteristics of each period affected how the ghetto inhabitants coped with the decree against births.⁴⁵

The first period – from the occupation and establishment of the ghettos in the summer of 1941 until the announcement of the decree in February 1942, that is, six months in the ghetto in which there was still no need to cope with the harsh decree.

The second period – from the date that the decree was announced until the date it came into force, that is, from February 1942 to August 1942, seven months in which the threat of the decree hung over the ghetto. This was an intermediate stage. During these first two periods, childbirth in the ghetto was still permitted.

42 Ibid.

43 Pick, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter*, 229.

44 Ibid.

45 On coping with the decree against births in the Šiauliai Ghetto, see Offer, "Refua Verof'im Begeto Shavli", 85–86. On the different stages in the life of the Šiauliai Ghetto, see Itzikas, *Korot Geto Shavli; Encyclopedia of the Ghettos*.

The third period – from the date that the decree was enforced until the Vilnius Ghetto was liquidated and the Kovno and Šiauliai ghettos were turned into concentration camps, that is, from August 1942 to September 1943. Namely, a period of about one year fraught with tension and dread, which posed a variety of challenges: abortions, contraception, clandestine births, smuggling babies outside of the ghetto, and more.

The fourth period – from the ghettos' conversion to concentration camps until their liquidation, that is, from September 1943 to July 1944. At this stage, the SS were directly in control, the Children's Aktion was carried out while the parents were at work. By the time they returned, their children had been abducted and deported for extermination.⁴⁶ Under these circumstances, women who were concealing their pregnancies understood the hopelessness of giving birth and sustaining a child. During this period alone, isolated cases of the killing of babies at their mothers' request were reported. According to Yerushalmi, three such cases occurred in the Šiauliai ghetto.⁴⁷

These distinct stages clearly indicate the attempt to cope with and resist the decree against births, despite the near impossibility to do so. Documentation from the ghetto period reports that several women emphatically refused to comply with the decree and preserved their pregnancies in secret and in peril, until they were defeated by the harshening of the ghetto conditions and its conversion into a concentration camp.

The Unique Nature of the Decree Against Births in the Lithuanian Ghettos

It is noteworthy that the decree against births was not imposed in the Polish ghettos.⁴⁸ To understand why the decree was issued in the Lithuanian ghettos and not in those on Polish soil, two periods in the establishment of the ghettos must be distinguished:

1. Ghettos established in 1939 and 1940 in Poland, before the Final Solution was set in motion.
2. Ghettos established after the summer of 1941 in the German-occupied areas of the Soviet Union. At that stage, the Final Solution – the slaughter and extermination – was in full swing, but several “forced labour” ghettos were set up to serve the German army and the war effort. In these “work ghettos”, extermination was temporarily stopped until they, too, were eventually liquidated. After the massive slaughter at the end of 1941, approximately 50,000 of the 250,000 Lithuanian Jews remained and were concentrated in four ghettos: Vilnius with approximately 20,000 Jews; Kovno with approximately 17,000 Jews, Šiauliai with approximately 5,500 Jews, and Swienciany with approximately 1,500 Jews.⁴⁹

At the stage in which the Lithuanian ghettos were established, the Germans – even though they had, temporarily, left alive a young, healthy Jewish labour force –

⁴⁶ On the details of this Aktion, see Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Shavli*, 302–307.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁴⁸ If such a decree had been issued in the Warsaw or Łódź ghettos, it would have undoubtedly been mentioned in the varied documentation preserved from that period or in survivors' testimonies. However, no testimony of such a decree exists. Moreover, births, albeit few, appear in testimonies even up until the final days of both those ghettos.

⁴⁹ Dieckmann, *Medinyut Hahashmada Hanatzit*, 277–315.

imposed the decree against births. This was in accordance with the “suitable treatment” detailed in the Wannsee Conference Protocol, to ensure the extermination of all the Jews, to the very last one. In contrast, at the time of the decree against births in the Lithuanian ghettos, in August 1942,⁵⁰ the *Grossaktion* to Treblinka was at its height and the Jews of Poland were gradually being deported to extermination camps.⁵¹ Although the Łódź Ghetto was the last to be liquidated, deportations of Jews from there to the Chełmno extermination camp began in December 1941. By the end of 1942, more than 70,000 Jews had been murdered in the camp.⁵² With deportations underway at that time, a decree against births in the Polish ghettos was unnecessary.

In the largest ghetto, the Warsaw Ghetto, the teacher Abraham Lewin wrote in his diary, about a month before the *Grossaktion* in July 1942, that

[o]ne hardly sees pregnant Jewish women. In the ghetto, people die or are murdered. They are not born ... However, ... there's no rule without an exception. When you circulate in the ghetto and observe passersby carefully, sometimes you can make out a Jewish woman who's pregnant. Today I saw two such women. It left a big impression, I'd say, a tremendous impression. That the Jewish woman today, under the benighted, merciless conditions, can marshal such courage as to bring a new Jewish creature into the world and then raise him – it's heroism and great audacity. If I had the slightest poetic talent to write songs, I'd write a warm paean of praise to the pregnant woman or the young Jewish mother in the ghetto ... by virtue of these national heroes, the light of the Jews and of Judaism will not go out altogether, at least symbolically.⁵³

Conclusion

The decree against births in the Lithuanian ghettos was part of the coordination directive of the Final Solution for “suitable treatment” against the creation of a “new Jewish revival”, as stated in the Wannsee Conference Protocol. This decree reflects the Nazi evil and its antisemitic, racist, and apocalyptic concepts. The war against the Jewish women's wombs and against their unborn children was the final frontier to ensure a “Final Final Solution”. In contrast, investigating the ghetto Jews' reaction to the decree reveals the unique nature of the victims' coping strategy. The Jewish leadership in the ghetto and the medical staff addressed coping with the decree against childbirth with due gravity and did not shirk difficult decisions. Saving the lives of the ghetto inhabitants was uppermost in their minds, and ethical principles remained high on the agenda. They chose to memorialise the tragic dilemmas they faced by chronicling the events in the ghetto and presenting them before the judgment of history. Thousands of women in the Lithuanian ghettos were painfully coerced into ending their pregnancies, while continuing to bear the burden of forced labour in the ghetto. They cleaved to the value of life in the hope of surviving the war

50 The decree was issued on 5 February, and 15 August was the date set for its implementation.

51 Havi Dreifuss (Ben-Sasson), *Geto Varsha – Hasof* [Warsaw Ghetto – The End (April 1942–June 1943)] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2017), in Hebrew.

52 Michal Unger, ed., *Hageto Ha'aharon: Hahayyim Begeto Lodz 1940–1944* [The Last Ghetto: Life in the Lodz Ghetto 1940–1944] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1995), 262–268, in Hebrew.

53 Abraham Lewin, *A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto* (London: Fontana-Collins, 1988); Havi Ben-Sasson and Lea Prais, “Twilight Days: Missing Pages from Avraham Lewin's Warsaw Ghetto Diary, May–July 1942”, *Yad Vashem Studies* 33 (2005), 46–47.

and raising new families, and many of the survivors fulfilled this goal. Some women, notwithstanding the risk to their lives, did not surrender their right to motherhood and refused to succumb to the decree that demanded forced abortion. Information about the German defeat at the front gave them hope that the war would end quickly, and that they would survive and succeed in hiding their babies; some were indeed successful. The estimated loss of life due to the forced abortions and prohibition against childbirth was enormous. However, the Germans' fear that a minority would survive and establish a "new Jewish revival", as stated in the Wannsee Conference Protocol, was in fact realised despite the decree against births.

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