



*Shooting is heard from the forest...* Ponary, the murder site of the Jews of Vilna and the surrounding area, was situated 10 km (6 miles) south of Vilna on the road to Grodno. Before the war it was a forested area used for holidays and recreation. Vilna residents used to go there for their summer holidays and to gather berries and mushrooms. The site was chosen for murder due to its proximity to the train track and also because there were pits 12-23m (39-75 feet) wide and 5-8m (16-26 feet) deep. There were high embankments with ditches between the pits, which had been dug by the Soviets in 1940 as a planned emergency fuel store.

From June 1941 until July 1944 over 75,000 people were murdered in Ponary, most of whom were Jewish; the others were Soviet prisoners of war and local opponents to the Nazi regime. The victims were brought to the murder site on foot, by motor vehicles and by train in groups of tens, hundreds and thousands. There, they were shot and buried.

The following diary entries were written by Polish journalist Kazimierz Sakowicz who witnessed some of these atrocities from his home in the village of Ponary. He did not survive the war, dying in July 1944.

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**11th July, 1941.** Lovely weather. It's hot out; there are white clouds and a gentle breeze. Shooting can be heard from the forest. Presumably from training. The shooting started at 4pm. Then I was informed that many Jews were transported to the forest via the road to Grodno and were then shot. This was the first day of executions. A depressing feeling. The shooting stopped at about eight in the evening.

*For the Germans 300 Jews are 300 enemies of humanity. For the Lithuanians 300 Jews are 300 pairs of shoes, trousers and clothes.*

**July 23, 1941.** A nice day. About 500 people are transported. Executions until late. . . Since July 14 [the victims] have been stripped to their underwear. Brisk business in clothing. Wagons from the village of Gorale near the Grodzienka [railroad] crossing. The barn--the central clothing depot, from which the clothes are carried away at the end after they have been packed into sacks. Brisk business. They buy clothes for 100 rubles and find 500 rubles sewn into them.

**August 1941.** Shooting August 1 and 2, groups of more than 300 each. . . The clothes are carried away after 9 in the evening, so that nobody will see. . . He [Kiejzik-- ] fakes inspections--'search for weapons'--and carries away clothing and other things. For the Germans 300 Jews are 300 enemies of humanity; for the Lithuanians they are 300 pairs of shoes, trousers, and the like.

**August 11, 1941.** The passenger car NV-370 had two amused Lithuanian 'ladies' (dames) in the company of a certain 'gentleman' who were on a day excursion to see the executions. After the shootings they returned; I did not see sadness on their faces.

**October 25, 1941.** The weather was exceedingly beautiful; sunshine. At the same time, the first volleys of gunfire reverberated in the forest. Women and children transported from Lukiszki since 7 in the morning by two trucks (NN4003 and 4005) were also shot. An interesting thing is that when the trucks returned from the forest, the Lithuanian soldiers sitting inside were already dividing the possessions among themselves.

**November 21, 1941.** Again, women and children, (a few) men. During the time the murders are carried out volleys of gunfire sound in the forest. A Shaulist [Lithuanians who manned the firing squads at Ponary] with a rifle left the base and on the road (it was market day--Friday) he began to sell women's clothing: a few topcoats, dresses, and galoshes. He sold the last pair of coats, navy blue and brown, for 120 (one hundred and twenty) rubles and as a 'bonus' he also threw in a pair of galoshes. When one of the peasants (Waclaw Tankun of Stary Miedzyrzecz) asked whether he would still sell [him something for his wife], the shaulist replied, 'Let them wait' and he would 'choose' a Jewish woman exactly her size.



#### ABOUT THE PHOTO

One of the pits at Ponary that was prepared for fuel storage but which was used for the murder of Jews from Vilna and the surrounding area. Yad Vashem Photo Archives 1798/15

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Sakowicz, K. (2005). *Ponary Diary, 1941-1943: A bystander's account of a mass murder.* (Y. Arad, Ed.). Yale University Press.