CHAPTER 4

The German Occupation of Lithuania

On 22 June 1941, at 3.15 a.m. in a beautiful clear summer night, the war began in Kaunas. Heavy Luftwaffe bombings were heard in different parts of the city, and especially towards the Aleksotas airfield. Explosions and fires illuminated the sky above the city. Later in the morning, despite the radio broadcasts, Irena still did not fully realize what was happening, but she heard the explosions and saw the fear of the people.

Irena, alone at home, was naturally frightened, but after a moment of panic reacted as usual with courage and determination.

On the very same day, in 1812, Napoleon had crossed the Niemen and entered Russia. News spread that at the time of the Kaun bombardments, further south, in violation of the Hitler-Stalin pact, over 4 million soldiers of the Axis powers had crossed the borders of the USSR along a line stretching 2,900 kilometres. This was the largest invasion in the history of warfare.1 Encountering practically no resistance from the disorganized Soviet troops, the Wehrmacht progressed rapidly through the heart of Belorussia. Within a couple of days, they had reached the Baltic region. These invading Nazi combat units were immediately followed by the infamous ‘Einsatzgruppen’ – numbering approximately 1000 men each – whose official task was to eliminate the so-called ‘Judeo-Bolshevik intelligentsia’; in other words, communists and Jews.

Almost immediately following these events, political arrests and massacres of civilians started to take place in different towns in Lithuania. Responsible for these unpredictable acts were well-organized groups of Lithuanian insurgents, seemingly coming from nowhere and sometimes wearing khaki army uniforms.

Heavy fighting took place simultaneously between the retreating Soviet troops and the insurgents. Casualties were numerous on both sides. During a visit to her mother in the hospital, Irena remembers being struck by the large number of wounded Soviet soldiers lying everywhere, including in the corridors of the building. She recalls trying to help the nurses to take care of them.

On the very day of the invasion, a large-scale national uprising master-minded by the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF)2 against the retreating Red Army began in Kaunas. A provisional government was formed on 23 June 1941.

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1 In addition to troops, Operation Barbarossa involved 600,000 motor vehicles and 750,000 horses.
2 Lithuanian Activist Front, created in Berlin on 11 November 1940 by Kazys Škirpa (1895–1979), the radical nationalist Lithuanian ambassador to the German Reich.
under the leadership of literature professor Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis, Ambassador Kazys Škirpa being prevented from leaving Berlin by the authorities. The activists, having taken control of the Kaunas radio station, declared the re-establishment of the country’s independence and the formation of a provisional Lithuanian national government.

The rebels gradually took control of certain government offices, police stations, warehouses, and other significant buildings, trying at the same time to restore order in the streets. The national tricolour flag of independent Lithuania was again flown everywhere in the city. Although the Soviets were still there, many Lithuanians somewhat naively believed that the country was now free again for good!

Almost immediately, however, a new pro-Nazi press appeared in the kiosks and the radio started broadcasting strange programmes. According to these media, the Jews were responsible for the invasion of Lithuania by the Soviet Union because they were all either communists or allies of the communists. Getting rid of these parasites was thus a patriotic duty. This was also, the radio suggested, a way of gaining the respect of the arriving German ‘liberators’. The situation was not unlike that in 1915, many people said!

A proclamation by the LAF addressed to the Lithuanian people stated among other things that:

*All local communists and other traitors to the country shall be arrested at once. None of them will succeed in escaping punishment for their deeds. Traitors will be pardoned, only if they succeed in proving that they have done away with at least one Jew.*

Of course, Irena was not aware of this proclamation, but noticed that ‘spontaneous’ individual street killings of Jews ‘allied to the communists’ were beginning in various places in the city.

Monday 23 June marked the beginning of the official Soviet withdrawal from Kaunas. Irena, who was then looking after her mother in the hospital, retains a vivid memory of this day. She particularly remembers seeing from the hospital window a young Lithuanian man waving a national flag. Minutes later he was shot and wounded and brought into the hospital. The Soviet tanks surrounding the building immediately turned their guns towards the building, while the Russian patients in the hospital shouted to the tank crews: “bratsy (brothers) do not shoot, we are here!”

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3 Article 16 of the LAF program ‘revoked’ the right of Jews to live in Lithuania.
4 Faitelson, 30.