

PANERIAI

THE SILENT FOREST IN LITHUANIA THAT BECAME A SITE OF MASS MURDERS AND IT ISN'T EASY READING

GRAPHIC PICTURES END OF ARTICLE

A PART OF THE NAZI'S FINAL SOLUTION- THAT DIDN'T MAKE THE HEADLINES

Apr 29, 2018

330



An excavated pit used to cremate corpses

War History Online proudly presents this Guest Piece from Suzanne Make. Suzanne recounts the tragic story of the site of terrible events at Ponary, now Paneriai in modern-day Lithuania. The pit was where inhabitants of the Vilnius ghetto, mental patients, medical staff, and children were killed.

Near the small, rural village of Paneriai, near Vilnius in Lithuania is a memorial park in the forest where a path leads you through the trees past several monuments to victims of the Holocaust. Polish and Lithuanian Jews died here, as did many Soviet prisoners of war, while also Romanis and Polish academics; lawyers, priests, doctors, teachers, and professors were brought here.

The path leads you past the so-called 'murder pits', because it is amongst these trees that, between 1941 and 1943, up to one hundred thousand innocent people were forced to strip naked and mowed down by rifle and machine-gun fire. The pits, former fuel tanks, were then used to burn the corpses. They were later exhumed in an attempt to destroy evidence of these Nazi atrocities.

A small pile of painted pebbles is a stark reminder of a visit by pilgrims, family members, and maybe those who have lost loved ones.



Stones bearing names of Jewish victims at Paneriai

It is believed that more than ninety-five percent of the Jewish population of Vilnius was eradicated during the Holocaust, as part of the Nazis' Final Solution.

Kazimierz Sakowicz was a local Polish man who lived in a cottage in the forest with his wife. A journalist by trade, who had studied law, he was an eyewitness to this systematic slaughter of innocent people daily. When he saw what was happening in the forest he began to write a diary, logging the accounts of what he was witnessing.



The memorial for Polish victims who were murdered here.

This was a dangerous thing to do. He was taking a huge risk and would have been aware of the consequences to both himself and his family if discovered. So Sakowicz wrote his accounts on scraps of paper that he then hid in various locations including bottles buried in the ground. I have to wonder why he did this and if he ever contemplated for a moment how important these documents would become after the Second World War.

Sakowicz was methodical in his writing. He documented the number of people executed, how they were mistreated, and how they died, describing the events in great detail with meticulous descriptions of the barbarity of the perpetrators.



You will find several monuments and the remains of pits where the victims were killed and burned.

Some of his diary entries are, indeed, graphic and very harrowing to read.

September 1941 he wrote 'A small child was found in the forest near the pit, playing in the sand. He was thrown into the pit and shot. In another case, an infant was torn from the breast it was sucking and shot.'

November 19th, 1941: 'More than two hundred women and children were brought. It was cold. They had no bullets. They took the little ones from their mothers and killed them with rifle butts.'

August 9th, 1943: 'This never happened before. They brought six Jews with a bow saw and, pointing to the locks lying on the ground, ordered them to saw. When the saw got halfway through an explosion occurred. It appears that this was an experiment, with explosives placed inside the poles. So perished six Jews. They were simply ripped apart.'

April 1943: 'A woman, with a child in her arms, runs to escape. A Lithuanian hits her on the head with a rifle butt. The woman falls. The Lithuanian seizes the child and carries him by the leg. He throws him in the pit.' The perpetrators were not just SS Einsatzgruppen but also local Lithuanian collaborators, or Shaulists

Sakowicz was discovered wounded in the woods on July 5th, 1944, and died soon after. He had been riding his bicycle from Vilnius to Ponary. Was some of his diary found by the Nazis? Were they concerned about what he had witnessed? We will never know. He is buried in Vilnius.



The memorial for Jewish victims.



Memorial for the Soviet victims.



Vilnius Jews who survived made efforts to preserve the memory of the Holocaust victims in Paneriai.

After the War, his papers were discovered and handed over to the authorities. They were subsequently published as a book written in Polish. A German version followed and in 2005 it was translated into English.

The book is called *Ponary Diary 1941-1943: A Bystander's Account of a Mass Murder*. Sakowicz died unaware of the important legacy he had left behind. He was a brave man.



Panerial Memorial Museum.



Between July 1941 and July 1944, approximately 70,000 people of whom over half were Jewish were murdered at this site.

I feel no peace walking through the blood-soaked soil of this dark forest. The trees feel foreboding, they are silent witnesses to the horrors of wartime Europe.

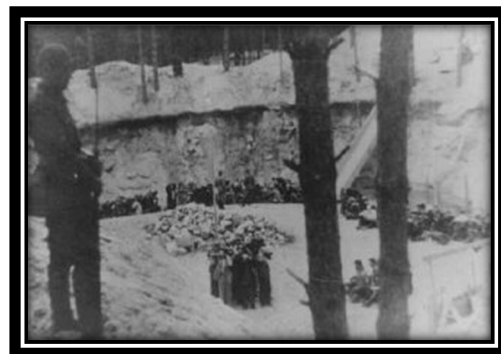
Unlike the peaceful Commonwealth war cemeteries of Northern France and Belgium, this is a somber place where people were brought against their will and systematically executed en masse. Entire families - Men, women, children, and babies were simply annihilated. Stamped out. Erased from history. There are no resting places. No carefully tended graves. No rows of colorful flowerbeds. Just ghosts.

You can feel the ghosts.

CAUTION – GRAPHIC PICTURES



Jews lined up at the execution pit in Ponary



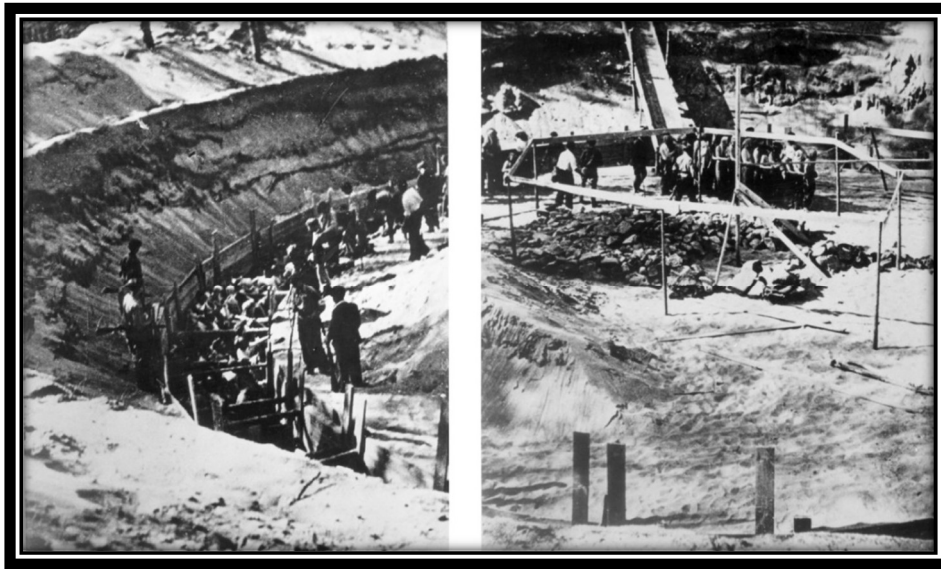
Lithuanians stood guard over the prisoners to kill



Ponary dead lying in the dirt 1943



The Killing Pit at Ponary



One of six Ponary murder pits in which victims were shot (July 1941). Note the ramp leading down and the group of men (RIGHT SIDE) forced to wear hoods.



A Soviet plaque at Ponary mentions the "Soviet Citizens murdered at Ponary. No mention of Jewish Identity.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION



Dina Baitler, age seven, was brought to the forest of Ponary outside of the city of Vilna, Lithuania together with thousands of other Jews.

From morning till night, the Jews were lined up and shot into pits located in the forest.

Although wounded, Dina miraculously managed to escape. In her testimony here Dina describes here the horrors that took place that day in Ponary. Her eyewitness testimony ensures that the mass murder that took place will not be forgotten or denied.

SEE HER STORY: *Copy and paste the below link into your browser:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEWPx5dfj8w>

PART TWO

ESCAPE TUNNEL, DUG BY HAND, IS FOUND AT HOLOCAUST MASSACRE SITE IN LITHUANIA



Jewish forced laborers dug a tunnel from this holding pit near Vilnius, Lithuania, into the surrounding forest.

A team of archaeologists and mapmakers say they have uncovered a forgotten tunnel that 80 Jews dug largely by hand as they tried to escape from a Nazi extermination site in Lithuania about 70 years ago.

The Lithuanian site, Ponary, holds mass burial pits and graves where up to 100,000 people were killed and their bodies dumped or burned during the Holocaust.

Using radar and radio waves to scan beneath the ground, the researchers found the tunnel, a 100-foot passageway between five and nine feet below the surface, the team announced on Wednesday.

A previous attempt made by a different team in 2004 to find the underground structure had only located its mouth, which was subsequently left unmarked. The new finding traces the tunnel from entrance to exit and provides evidence to support survivor accounts of the harrowing effort to escape the holding pit.

“What we were able to do was not only solve one of the greatest mysteries and escape stories of the Holocaust,” said Richard Freund, an archaeologist from the University of Hartford in Connecticut and one of the team leaders. “We were also able to unravel one of the biggest problems they have with a site like this: How many burial pits are there?”

Archaeologists and geoscientists announced the discovery of a 100-foot-long tunnel made by Jewish prisoners during the Holocaust to escape an extermination site in Lithuania.

Dr. Freund and his colleagues, working with the PBS science series NOVA for a documentary that will be broadcast next year, also uncovered another burial pit containing the ashes of perhaps 7,000 people. *That would be the 12th burial pit identified in Ponary; officially known today as Paneriai.*

From 1941 until 1944, tens of thousands of Jews from the nearby city of Vilnius, known as the Jerusalem of Lithuania, were brought to Ponary and shot at close range. Their bodies were dumped into the pits and buried.

"I call Ponary ground zero for the Holocaust," Dr. Freund said. "For the first time, we have systematic murder being done by the Nazis and their assistants." According to Dr. Freund, the events at the site took place about six months before the Nazis started using gas chambers elsewhere for their extermination plans.

An estimated 100,000 people, including 70,000 Jews, died at Ponary. Over four years, about 150 Lithuanian collaborators killed the prisoners – usually in groups of about 10. In 1943 when it became clear the Soviets were going to take over Lithuania, the Nazis began to cover up the evidence of the mass killings. They forced a group of 80 Jews to exhume the bodies, burn them, and bury the ashes. At the time they were called the Leichenkommando, or "corpse unit," but in the years that followed they were known as the Burning Brigade.

For months, the Jewish prisoners dug up and burned bodies. One account tells of a man who identified his wife and two sisters among the corpses. The group knew that once their job was finished, they, too, would be executed, so they developed an escape plan.

About half of the group spent 76 days digging a tunnel in their holding pit by hand and with spoons, they found among the bodies. On April 15, 1944 – the last night of Passover when they knew the night would be darkest – the brigade crawled through the two-foot-square tunnel entrance and through to the forest

The noise alerted the guards, who pursued the prisoners with guns and dogs. Of the 80, 12 managed to escape; 11 of them survived the war and went on to tell their stories, according to the researchers.

Dr. Freund and his team used the information from survivors' accounts to search for the tunnel.

Rather than excavate and disturb the remains, he and his team used two noninvasive tools – electrical resistivity tomography and ground penetrating radar.

Electrical resistivity tomography is like an MRI for the ground; it provides a clear picture of the subsurface. It uses electricity to identify stones, metal, and clay as well as soil disturbances like those made by digging.

"We used the tool to pinpoint the locations where people most likely tunneled through," said Paul Bauman a geophysicist with Worley Parsons, an Australian engineering company, who handled the tomography tool. "We're highly confident we've identified exactly where the tunnel is."

With the tool, they also found a previously unknown pit which they think is the largest ever discovered in the area. They estimate that it might have contained as many as 10,000 bodies.

The other tool, the ground penetrating radar, uses FM radio waves to scan about 10 feet under the surface.

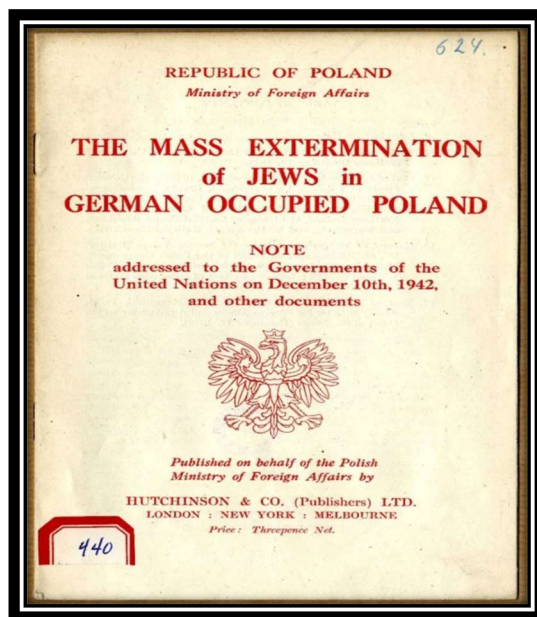
"What we are doing is using those FM radio waves that people listen to in their car and we're putting them into the ground," said Harry Jol, professor of geology and anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. "We're getting reflections off the archaeological features or landscapes in the subsurface so we can image what's happening."

The team also used the ground penetrating radar to search for the Great Synagogue of Vilnius, which was destroyed by the Nazis.

"The Holocaust is so overwhelming that we only really look at the end of the story – and that isn't the whole story," said Jon Seligman, an archaeologist with the Israel Antiquities Authority, who also led the team. "The whole story is the history of Jews who lived in this area for many, many centuries."

Before World War II, Vilnius was a bustling Jewish center with more than 100,000 people. When the Soviets took over Lithuania, they erected an elementary school over the rubble of the city's Great Synagogue. Using the radar, the team uncovered artifacts from the synagogue, including its ritual bathhouse.

“If we had never discovered the tunnel, people would have thought in another 20 years it was a myth, and they would have questioned - What do we know happened?” said Dr. Freund. “This is a great story about the way that people overcame the worst possible condition, and still had this hope that they could get out.”



DISCLAIMER

PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT EVEN THOUGH THIS INFORMATION
 HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM WHAT APPEARS TO BE AUTHENTIC WEBSITES
 I CANNOT ENSURE THAT ALL THE DATA IN THIS ARTICLE IS ACCURATE AND CORRECT.