

The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-1944

By Herman Kruk

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For five horrifying years in Vilna, the Vilna ghetto, and concentration camps in Estonia, Herman Kruk recorded his own experiences as well as the life and death of the Jewish community of the city symbolically called “The Jerusalem of Lithuania.” This unique chronicle includes many recovered pages of Kruk’s diaries and provides a powerful eyewitness account of the annihilation of the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. This volume includes the Yiddish edition of Kruk’s diaries, published in 1961 and translated here for the first time, as well as many widely scattered pages of the chronicles, collected here for the first time and meticulously deciphered, translated, and annotated.

Kruk describes vividly the collapse of Poland in September, 1939, life as a refugee in Vilna, the manhunt that destroyed most of Vilna Jewry in the summer of 1941, the creation of a ghetto and the persecution and self-rule of the remnants of the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” the internment of the last survivors in concentration camps in Estonia, and their brutal deaths. Kruk scribbled his final diary entry on September 17, 1944, managing to bury the small, loose pages of his manuscript just hours before he and other camp inmates were shot to death and their bodies burnt on a pyre.

Kruk’s writings illuminate the tragedy of the Vilna Jews and their courageous efforts to maintain an ideological, social, and cultural life even as their world was being destroyed. To read Kruk’s day-by-day account of the unfolding of the Holocaust is to discern the possibilities for human courage and perseverance even in the face of profound fear.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This authoritative, stunningly edited edition of Kruk's acclaimed journals, news postings and poems of life and death in the Jewish ghetto of Vilna and later in a labor camp in Estonia is as major addition to Holocaust literature and Jewish history. In 1961 a Yiddish edition of the Vilna diaries was published. This larger new edition has been painstakingly assembled from those diaries and other documents and writings by Kruk that were widely scattered and only found since the 1961 edition; Harshav has also added a wealth of new footnotes. The potency and the power of Kruk's chronicle resides in its scrupulous detailing of everyday ghetto life-what people ate and read, the self-imposed rules for how Jewish women dressed, Jewish collaborators, Christian resistance to camps and deportations, news reports from the ghetto newspaper-while consistently placing it in a broader political and social context based on reports that filter into the ghetto from the outside. Because Vilna was a center of Jewish learning and culture-it is where the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (now in New York) was founded and was the site of some of Europe's most vital Jewish libraries and schools-Kruk's elaborate delineation of the destruction of this world takes on an almost mythic quality. This lost culture resonates throughout this mesmerizing and heartbreaking book. Photos.
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Review

"[S]imply indispensable for understanding the Holocaust and the Vilna Ghetto. . . . [W]ell noted and documented so that readers can follow." -- *Choice*

A powerful addition to the literature of the Shoah. -- *Jan T. Gross, Los Angeles Times Book Review*

[A] major classic...This is one of the best books on the Holocaust-ever! -- (*David B. Rosenfield, Houston Jewish-Chronicle*)

[It] will leave. . . readers eager for the next edition. . . I couldn't get enough of this bulky masterpiece. -- *Jan T. Gross, Los Angeles Times*

Language Notes

Text: English (translation)

Original Language: Yiddish

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Loretta Tellis:

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