Kovno

(in Lithuanian, Kaunas; in Polish, Kowno), city in Lithuania. In 1939 about 40,000 Jews lived in Kovno.

Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941; Kovno was occupied on June 24. Even before the Germans entered the city, antisemitic Lithuanians went on wild killing sprees directed against the Jews. When the Germans arrived, they took charge of the killings. Thousands of Jews were transferred to locations outside the city, including the Seventh Fort, which was one of a chain of forts built around Kovno during the nineteenth century. The Jews brought there were brutally abused and then shot by the Lithuanian guards. In all, some 10,000 Jews were murdered within the first six weeks of the Germans' arrival.

Soon, the Germans established a civilian administration, which issued a series of anti-Jewish decrees. The Jews were given one month to move into a ghetto. When the ghetto was closed off from the outside world in August 1941, it contained 29,670 Jews. During the next 10 weeks 3,000 Jews were murdered. The Germans staged a mass killing operation---the "big *aktion*"--- on October 28, during which 9,000 Jews were taken to the Ninth Fort and murdered. Life in the ghetto, including much cultural activity, was administered by the *Judenraete* under Dr. Elchanan Elkes.

Until March 1944, relative quiet reigned in Kovno. However, the quiet was shattered on March 27th, 1944 when 1,800 babies, children, and old people were dragged out of their homes and murdered. At that time, underground groups increased their resistance activities. A joint body of Zionists and Communists, the General Jewish Fighting Organization, worked on an escape plan. In all, some 350 Kovno Jews escaped the ghetto to join the Partisans.

In early July 1944, as the Soviet army drew near, the Germans began transferring the Jews of Kovno to concentration camps in Germany. Many Jews tried to hide; the Germans literally smoked them out with grenades and firebombs, and some 2,000 Jews died. About 4,000 Jews were taken to camps in Germany, where they were joined by Kovno Jews who had been detained in camps in Estonia.

Kovno was liberated on August 1, 1944. At the war's end, almost 2,000 Kovno Jews had survived.