



## GENOCIDE AMONG THE FLOWERS: SEYMOUR KAFTAN'S PONARY PAINTINGS



*“There are roads leading to Ponary-but there is no road back”*

– Kazimierz Sakowicz

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EXHIBIT CURATED AND TEXT WRITTEN BY:

RABBI ISIDORO AIZENBERG, *Scholar-in-Residence*

DR. ARTHUR FLUG, *Executive Director*

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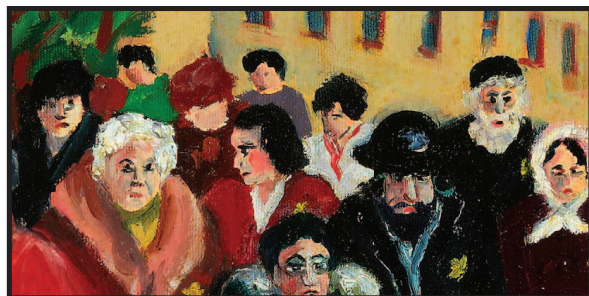
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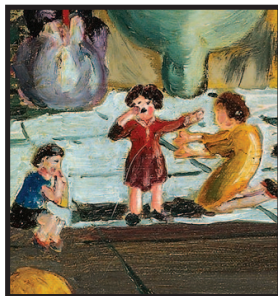
**T**HIS EXHIBIT TELLS THE STORY OF VILNIUS' JEWS starting with the Nazi invasion, and including the Ponary tragedy. It does so through the visual images recorded by Seymour Kaftan—born Szepsel Kaftanjski—in 26 oil paintings. A Holocaust survivor—he was 15 years old when the Nazis invaded his hometown—Kaftan documented his personal ordeal, depicting the horrors of Nazi brutality, the loss of his entire family, and his own survival. Kaftan, like so many other survivors, did not share his horrible experiences even with his immediate family. Then, in the 1960's, without any prompting, he began to pour out his memories on canvas. Basically self taught in the use of oil, acrylic, copper and sheet metals, Kaftan later studied fine art at the City University of New York. He signed his work using his Yiddish name "Szepsel." Convinced that his English was poor, Kaftan, with the help of a friend whose English he judged to be better than his own, saw to it that short texts would accompany each of the paintings, helping to illuminate his artwork.

Kaftan's unique graphic testimony is complemented by black-and-white images of the Ponary grounds as well as texts from the Ponary Diary by Kazimierz Sakowicz. Sakowicz was a Pole who lived together with his wife in a frame cottage in Ponary's woods, next to the murder grounds, becoming an eyewitness to the atrocities. His diary, originally written in Polish, "is a unique document, without parallel in the chronicles of the Holocaust. It stands as a bystander's view of the activities of the Nazi extermination machine" (Yitzhak Arad in the "Preface" to the Diary) in Ponary, leaving a key testimony against the Nazi cover up that attempted to hide the crimes committed there.



KAZIMIERZ SAKOWICZ  
PONARY DIARY, 1941-1943

*For generations before its liquidation during World War II, the Jewish community of Wilno was a major center of Jewish secular and religious culture; world Jewry referred to the city as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” (About 72,000 Jews lived in the city before the war). From the second half of the eighteenth century Wilno was part of tsarist Russia. Then in 1920 it came under Polish control, until September 19, 1939, when the Red Army occupied the city.*



The district was then transferred to Lithuanian control. The Lithuanians changed the city’s name to Vilnius, declaring it as its capital. On June 22, 1941, the Nazi army invaded Vilnius. Three days later Jewish properties were confiscated and prominent Jews were murdered. On July 4, all Jews were ordered to wear the yellow star.

In Ponary, a summer resort, about six and a half miles outside Vilnius, in the midst of pristine forests full of flowers and wild berries, the Nazis established one of their infamous, gruesome, and industrial-like murder grounds for Jews. No concentration camp was set up, no gas chambers, no crematoriums. Ponary was different. Here, tens of thousands of Jews were trucked in, brought by train and bus, or simply forced to walk—in order to be shot and buried upon arrival.

AUGUST 3, 1941

## “The sidewalk is prohibited for us. They left us the gutter...”

Many of the titles Kaftan chose for his paintings are quotes from ghetto songs composed in Yiddish, such as this one by Leyb Rosenthal (1916-1945) from his “Tsu Eyns, Tsvey, Dray,” (“It’s One, Two, Three”) which the artist incorporated into the fabric of his work.

In addition to other restrictive measures following the Gestapo’s take over of Vilnius, Jews were forbidden to walk on the sidewalks, only in a single line in the gutter. The background wall includes several signs bearing the Nazi eagle: “Juden Farboten,” and “Achtung Juden.” (“Jews are prohibited,” “Attention Jews.”) But the sign in the center of the wall was placed by the Polish National Radical Camp Falanga and admonishes: “Do not buy from Jews.” This call was aimed at Jews trying to sell valuables for cash in order to survive. (Falanga, inspired by the Spanish fascist political party, was largely based on university campuses. It advocated a ‘Catholic totalitarianism’ and a policy of anti-Semitism, launching attacks on Jewish students and businesses.)



JULY 17-AUGUST 30, 1941

## “We were led like sheep to the slaughter”

Note Kaftan’s recollection of the bright yellow walls and the red roofed houses of his Vilnius. In contrast, he painted the black uniformed Gestapo soldiers aided by their Lithuanian cohorts also dressed in German uniforms. Both systematically herded Jewish men, women and children, who ended up in Ponary for execution. (The title of this painting is also a line from the Rosenthal song mentioned in the previous painting.)

Originally, the Nazis told Jews that they were being temporarily relocated and that they should take whatever they could carry with them. As soon as they vacated their dwellings, their non-Jewish neighbors vandalized whatever they had left behind. Jews were crushed into the ghettos.



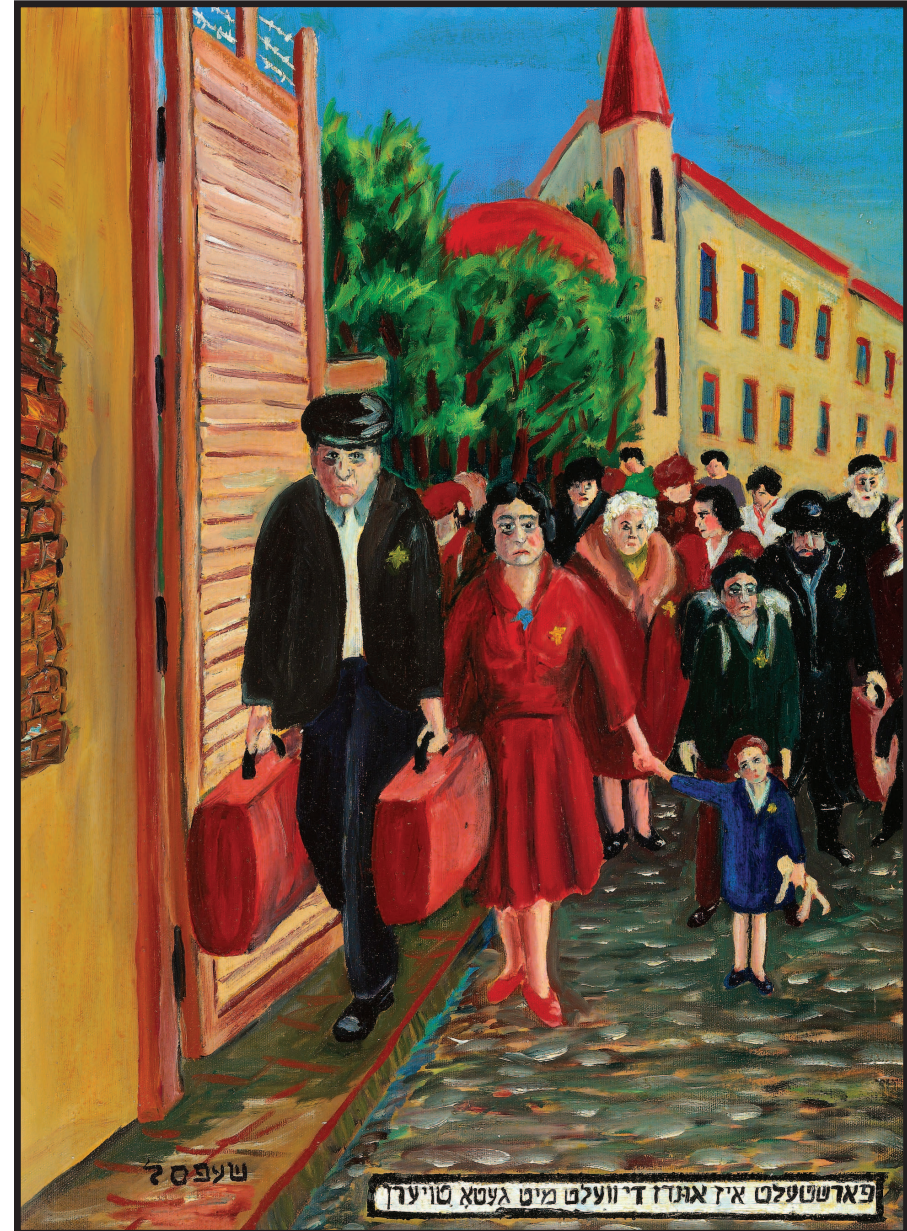
JULY 11, 1941  
PONARY DIARY, P. 12

*Quite nice weather, warm, white clouds, windy, some shots from the forest. It is about 4 p.m.; the shots last an hour or two. I discover that many Jews have been “transported” to the forest. And suddenly they shoot them. An oppressive, overwhelming impression. The shots quiet down after 8 in the evening; later, there are no volleys but rather individual shots. The number of Jews who passed through was 200. Executions continued on the following days: July 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19, a Saturday. A group (5 people) of Jews goes to the post for shovels. It turns out that they are going to bury those shot yesterday.*

SEPTEMBER 6, 1941

## “The world is shut out for us by ghetto walls”

Twenty nine thousand Jews were crammed into nine city blocks. That formed “Ghetto #1.” Kaftan recalls how he, his parents, and his sister entered the ghetto through the only entrance on Rudnicki Street. With the gate locked from the outside, the Lithuanian storm troopers surrounded the ghetto.







## Ghetto Apartments



Several families were crammed into one small apartment with no sanitary facilities. The toilets were in the yard, one large room with stalls for men and women. Tablecloths and sheets were strung up to create a minimal sense of privacy. Rich and poor shared whatever limited space was available. Some apartments, such as the one Kaftan painted, had tile stoves that could be heated with coal or wood. When coal was unavailable, scraps of wood were gathered from bombed-out buildings.

SS and Lithuanian soldiers would carry out constant raids throughout the ghetto in a process of thinning out the Jewish population.

## “There are roads leading to Ponary-but there is no road back”

The Jews for whom there was no more room in the ghetto were led to Ponary. Thousands of men, women, and children were doomed.



TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1941  
PONARY DIARY, P. 28

*Wind. A strong rain, cold, clouds. Along the road a passenger car comes, followed by two trucks carrying Jews. On the road there was a long procession of people. There were, as it turns out, 4,000, exclusively women and many babies. When they entered the road to the forest, they understood what awaited them and shouted, “Save us!” Infants in diapers, in arms, etc.*

*Eighty Lithuanians did the shooting. They shot while they were drunk. Before the shooting they tortured men and women horribly. They took many valuables. Lithuanian women came for the clothing.*

## “Ghetto I’ll never forget you!”

While Jews inside the ghetto were made to govern themselves, the Gestapo held full overall control. It established a special “Gate Police”—portrayed in the painting—to keep Jews returning from work outside the ghetto from bringing in anything prohibited, such as food. People were searched by the police, and when food was found, it was confiscated. Women and men made themselves special girdles in order to smuggle in food that they managed to buy from Gentiles.

Note the sign in Yiddish on top of the door at right “Fire Police.” Scribbled on the bottom right wall are the words: “Brothers avenge yourselves.”

The Yiddish title of this work is a line written in the Vilnius ghetto by Kasriel Broydo (1907-1945), from his poem “Ghetto.”



OCTOBER 1, 1941

## “Hear O Israel!” Yom Kippur Action



On Yom Kippur morning, while most Jews were in the synagogue, hundreds of Lithuanian SS, led by German officers, invaded Ghettos 1 and 2, dragging men, women and children from the synagogues and destroying everything holy to Jews. Note in the center of the painting a Jew dressed in a kittel, a white traditional robe worn on the holiday, his hands raised due to a gun pointed at him, while a Torah scroll and prayer books are desecrated next to him. A total of 3,900 Jews were taken to Ponary on that day.

In an entry dated October 1941, Sakowicz briefly recorded in his diary: “Shootings on October 2, 3, 16, 21, 25 and 27.”

AUGUST 6, 1943  
“Grabbers”

“Chafoones” or Grabbers, is the Yiddish title of this work. It refers to the Lithuanian “Grabbers,” led by the SS, who grabbed men for work in the Vaivara (northeast Estonia) concentration camp. Some 20,000 Jews from Latvia and from the Lithuanian ghettos of Vilna and Kovno were brought here, before being sent to labor camps. The prisoners were subject to selections every two weeks, as a result of which many were murdered, while others died from SS beatings.

Kaftan’s father was grabbed on this day and that is when he saw him for the last time.



## Ghetto Orphans

Many children were orphaned and left behind in the ghetto after their parents were taken away for slave labor, concentration camps or to be shot near the mass graves at Ponary. The orphans clustered together in search of comfort, living in bombed-out buildings and scavenging for food and clothing.



## Hiding place “Maline” under the apartment of Mr. Gens

“Maline” is a Yiddish word referring to a hideout, especially in a German ghetto during World War II. In this painting, Kaftan brings to life such a hideout, where he lived together with his mother and sister and another 100 people. It was built in nine months by two engineers, under the apartment of Mr. Gens, the Jewish chief of the Nazi appointed ghetto police. It had running water, electricity, sanitary facilities, medicine and dry foodstuff.

The entrance was sealed. After a month, air became scarce. The food was getting moldy and people walked around in their underwear. Two people died and were buried in a corner of the Maline.

As the lack-of-air situation grew worse, it was decided to dig a tunnel under the foundation in order to let air in, and also to try to get food supplies in. Kaftan and his good friend Motke (both seen on the right in an adjacent room) dug the tunnel. They succeeded and wound up in a basement of German Street #2.



On November 10, 1943 a man walked out of the hideout and didn't return. On the 11th, all of a sudden, an SS officer came through the tunnel followed by Lithuanian police, ordering everyone out. The Maline lasted from September 23 until November 11.



## Mother and Child

During routine raids on the ghettos, men and women were rounded up for work in concentration camps or the murder ground in Ponary. Young mothers with small children found themselves in a particularly painful predicament. If a mother refused to abandon her child, she was automatically doomed and sent to Ponary. Since the Nazis didn't want to waste a bullet on a child, they either threw the child into the pit and buried it alive, or smashed its head on a stone or tree trunk and then threw it into the pit. Thus, young mothers risked their lives to sneak out of the ghetto in order to leave their babies on church steps or to hand their infants over to Christian families for safe keeping. If the mother was found by the Gestapo in such a situation, they would both be shot.

PONARY DIARY, P. 77 *A woman with a child in her arms with 2 small girls hanging unto her dress: a Lithuanian begins to beat them mercilessly with a club. The Jewish woman, like a madwoman, runs to the pit, followed by her two little girls. Three shots are fired.*



## “We are taken to the Gestapo”

Taken from the Maline, the Jews, walking in twos surrounded by the Lithuanian police, were taken to the Gestapo headquarters. Kaftan recalls his mother and sister walking ahead, while he and Motke walked behind them.



## “Left—for Ponary, to the right—work”

Once inside the prison section, the Jews were told to form a single line. As they walked toward the cells, an SS officer kept pointing: who to the left, and who to the right. All able-bodied men and women went to the right. Women and children and elderly people went to the left. Kaftan's mother and sister went to the left and that was the last time he saw them.



# Ponary

With European borders shifting in the 1920s and 30s, the Vilnius area, including Ponary, was taken over from Poland by the Soviets in September 1939, and, after a month, transferred to Lithuania. After the annexation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union in June 1940, the Soviets began constructing an oil storage facility near Ponary. The project was never completed, as the area was occupied by Nazi Germany in 1941. The pits that the Soviets dug were 18 feet deep and 75 feet in diameter. The walls were made of stone. The Nazis found good use for these pits: Jews and others condemned to die were lined up against the edge of the hole and shot. The bodies would just roll down.

Another fate awaited Kaftan. He recalls being trucked to Ponary together with other Jews, assuming that they, too, would be shot. Instead they were told to pick up wooden logs and to carry them to a certain spot. They were guarded by drunken Lithuanian SS.

Sakowicz, too, referred often to drunken Lithuanians: **That evening, the Lithuanians went drinking...on the next day as well.**" (P. 89)



PONARY DIARY, *Monday, April 5, 1943: At last the train arrived from Wilno. They [the Gestapo] open four freight cars and order the Jews to get out, 5-6 people in a row. They move. The Jews are nervous, but they go. The first group in front of the pit is ordered to undress. Weeping, groaning, pleading, falling to the feet of the Lithuanians and Germans, who kick them and shoot the most importunate. But after they have been beaten, they undress about ten meters from the pit. All of them disappear in the pit.*



This is another view of the Ponary mass grave where Vilnius ghetto Jews were executed.

What Kaftan so vividly memorialized many years later in his artwork is reinforced by black-and-white photos of the time. Here is a view of an unfinished fuel tank that the artist portrayed in his painting.





These two additional photos reflect Kaftan's recollection of Jews standing at the edge of the pits in the Ponary forest before being shot and thrown into them.

## “H.K.P. Subotch #37—the Affordable Houses”

During his third day at work in Ponary, Kaftan was told by an SS man that he was going to work at H.K.P. (Haares Krafftfahr Park) as a mechanic. H.K.P. was a large shop for auto mechanics, engineers, electricians, blacksmiths, canvas makers and carpenters—serving the Nazi war campaign. The workers selected to work at H.K.P. lived with their families in two seven-story buildings on Subotch Street #37. These buildings were originally built by the Vilnius Jewish community as “Affordable Housing” for poor Jewish families. After these families were rounded up and sent to their death at Ponary, the Nazis resettled the apartments with H.K.P. workers. A fence was built around the housing complex placing Ukrainian SS men to guard the place. The Jewish workers were taken daily to the H.K.P. camp by truck, a one-hour ride away.



## H.K.P. “Panzerke”

Kaftan was forced to work specifically at H.K.P. Panzerke, located in the midst of a huge military base outside Vilnius. The camp was under the jurisdiction of the German army, but the guards outside were Ukrainian SS. Being single and with no family, Kaftan was put in a barrack for single men built in the back of the shop. Together with 200 other men, he was locked in every night.





## Converting Gasoline Engines to Natural Gas

This painting depicts a rather cumbersome apparatus. This was a Russian “Zis” truck. Kaftan and his co-workers were assigned to convert “Zis” gasoline engines into natural gas. Many years later, he recalled with utmost precision not only the look of the trucks, but also the mechanism devised to obtain the natural gas.

On certain occasions, Kaftan had to drive into Vilnius with German mechanics for parts and supplies. At the depot he chanced to talk to some Poles working there who told them that the Russians were getting closer. They also pointed out that a lot of smoke was coming from the direction of Ponary every day, accompanied by a terrible stench.

PONARY DIARY, *Today the whole day the remnants of the clothes [of murdered Jews forced to undress before being shot] scattered about the forest were burned, a great smell of burned wool.*



## July 1, 1944

On that morning, the people who came from the city did not arrive. Toward the end of the day the Jewish workers were assembled and told by an officer that the Russians broke through the front, and that while the German personnel had to evacuate, the prisoners would be picked up on the next day by the Gestapo.

“We knew what the Gestapo would do to us. We’ll be shot,” recalled Kaftan many years later. A daring plan was devised. After everybody went back to the barracks, he and seven others hid in the shop. They cut out part of the window bars with a torch, removed the yellow stars of David from their breasts, put dirt on their faces, and picked up shovels. They looked outside and noticed how the Ukrainian guards were busy packing. They climbed out and walked in twos toward the gate.



## Leaving the Camp

As the group approached the gate, two German guards were on duty. They looked at them, but seeing no stars of David, they opened the gate. They walked toward the city. (In his painting, Kaftan noted in Yiddish “tzoo ayns, tzway, dray,” that is, the marching order “one, two, three,” echoing the poem by Rosenthal of the same title that he quoted in an earlier painting). As soon as they were out of sight, they turned toward the forest. For several days, Kaftan and a few of the other escapees hid in the midst of the corn and wheat fields. They would sneak into some vegetable gardens, grabbing some vegetables to eat.

On July 12, 1944, the shelling of Vilnius began, and on the next day Russian soldiers entered Vilnius. Kaftan met up with some Jewish partisans and other Jews that came out of hiding. He later learned that on July 3, ten days before the liberation, all the Jews from H.K.P. and “Panzerke” were liquidated.



# My Best Surprise

The Yiddish title of this painting is a line from Hersh Glick's well-known "Hymn of the Partisans" written in the Vilnius ghetto: "The hour we were longing for has arrived. We are here!"

One of the first joys Kaftan encountered following liberation was meeting up with his friend Motke. They hugged, kissed, and had stories to share.



## Motke's Horrible Story

Motke had a macabre and tragic story to tell. While Kaftan left for the H.K.P., he and 70 other men stayed behind in Ponary. They were assembled and chained by their legs. A specialist had been sent from Berlin whose specialty was mass murder and how to cover it up. He divided the men into groups and each was assigned a specific task: to uncover the graves; to pull the corpses and put them on the side; so-called “dentists” had to inspect the corpses, and if they had gold teeth, pull them out and hand them over to an SS officer; to pick up loose bones and body parts. Corpse carriers transported bodies to the stacks; stack builders assembled wood for maximum efficiency; fire masters had to make sure that everybody was completely burned. Ashes were sifted for gold and precious stones.

The people who got sick from their work were shot. On April 15, 1944, Motke and others succeeded to escaping. Most were caught and shot. Motke was fortunate to meet up with partisans in the forest.

Kaftan's painting depicts the horror of the makeshift crematorium described by Motke, where, according to German estimates, 66,000 bodies were burned.



## Monument in Ponary

Kaftan created a replica of the monument standing in the Ponary forest. The Hebrew inscription, followed by a similar text in Yiddish, pays tribute to the “memory of the 70,000 Jews from Vilnius and surrounding areas that were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, and then burned here, in Ponary, from 1941-1944.”

In all, more than 100,000 people were murdered in Ponary, most of them Jews. Out of a total of 72,000 Vilnius Jews, 4,000 survived.



## Monument in H.K.P. Vilnius

Another memorial that Kaftan recorded is one that was placed at the site of the H.K.P. The Yiddish inscription reads: “For eternal remembrance of the 2,200 Jewish men, women, and children from the H.K.P. who were murdered by the Nazis murderers and their collaborators on July 3, 1944.”



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TELEPHONE: 718-281-5770 + FAX: 718-631-6306 + E-MAIL: [hrc@qcc.cuny.edu](mailto:hrc@qcc.cuny.edu)  
WEBSITE: [www.qcc.cuny.edu/hrca](http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/hrca)

#### EXHIBIT CURATED BY

Rabbi Isidoro Aizenberg

#### TEXT WRITTEN BY

Rabbi Isidoro Aizenberg

#### DOCENTS AND VOLUNTEERS

Ellen Alexander    Hanne Liebmann  
Esther Katz        Linda Ramirez  
Jane Keibel        Joachim M. Schorr

#### DESIGNER / COVER ART

David Arroyo

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