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## FOREWARD

This book, presented to the reader and researcher, includes summaries of interviews conducted by Prof. Dov Levin from 1957 onward. Levin was one of the first researchers who correctly assessed the value of recording oral history as one of the primary sources for understanding the events of the twentieth century. This resource has special significance when treating material related to the Holocaust, as most of the known written sources of the time were German. It is not surprising, therefore, that Levin was one of the founders of the Oral History Division of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry, part of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where all the material listed in this publication is on file.

The content of this catalogue contains summaries of 611 interviews of people from different social environments and varied political views: from the radical, Zionist Betar movement to the Jewish Communist movement. Because the Jewish communities in the Baltic countries have been the focus of Prof. Levin's research, it is understandable that most of the interviews deal mainly with these communities.

One of the most important Jewish populations in the Baltic countries was Lithuanian Jewry. The term "Litvaks" refers to Jews not only within Lithuania's borders between the World Wars, but also to the Jewish population in the Vilna region and its surroundings. This is reflected in the number of interviews whose summaries are included here. Over sixty per cent of the interviews relate to the Litvaks. Fifteen percent treat the Jewish communities of Latvia and Estonia between the World Wars and during the Holocaust.

During the war and during the first years after its conclusion, there was great migration of the surviving remnant. Therefore, there are many interviews of survivors who reached the Soviet interior, Germany, Eretz Israel and The United States. These testimonies were conducted in the interviewee's language and many are in Yiddish, with a few in Hebrew, Russian, and even in Polish.

The changes within the Jewish communities in the Baltic countries in the wake of their annexation to the Soviet Union play a major role in many of the interviews. The Soviet authorities dismantled most of the social and political Jewish frameworks to which many of the Jews in the region belonged. Middle-class Jews, classified by the Soviets as "rich", as well as political activists were exiled by the

authorities to Siberia and Central Asia. Thus, most of them were saved from German extermination. Many interviewees described their flight to the Soviet interior when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in 1941; the Zionists among them tried to cross the border to Iran and reach Eretz Israel from there.

In many testimonies, life in the ghettos is described in detail (Kovno, Vilna, Shavli and others) as well as extensive cultural activities. Much information is given about the formation of the underground in the ghettos and the dilemma of crucial decisions about fighting in the ghetto or joining the partisan movement. Many eye-witness testimonies describe service in the national units – the Lithuanian and Latvian divisions created in the framework of the Red Army – and the special atmosphere that existed within them. Often, the complex interaction between the Jewish soldiers in these units and their Lithuanian and Latvian comrades-in-arms is described. Many of these Jewish soldiers returned to Lithuania and Latvia with their units, where they met face to face with the results of the Holocaust: the murder of their families. Here they also met Jewish partisans who fought in the forests against the Nazi occupiers.

Some of those interviewed told of their meetings with Soviet Jews, who for many years were cut off from Jewish life and were interested in hearing what was happening in the Jewish communities throughout the world.

The publication of this book will aide those who are interested in and those who research the history of Baltic Jewry between the two World Wars and especially during the Holocaust and its immediate aftermath.

Mordechai Altschuler

## INTRODUCTION

Prof. Dov Levin has made a lasting imprint on the Oral History Division (OHD) of the Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry. He was very close to founder and first director of the OHD, Dr. Geoffrey Wigoder (1923–1999); both came from the same Litvak family and shared the same enthusiasm about the potential of oral documentation. As one of the most prolific interviewers who contributed to the OHD's collection, Levin succeeded Wigoder as Head of OHD (1985–2001) and continued to consolidate the conceptual and practical methods of conducting oral histories with the utmost historical reliability.

As one of the pioneers of oral history in Israel, Prof. Dov Levin combined his awareness of being a protagonist of historical events with his experience as a social worker. His early documentation of events reflected his activities as a partisan in the forests of Lithuania, and later as a soldier in the War of Independence in Israel. His professional work as an oral historian changed with the technological advances during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He started with a heavy dictaphone with reels, and later moved on to lighter cassette tape recorders. Most of his recordings were transcribed and all the material is preserved in the archives of the OHD.

This catalogue presents to the reader the enormous contribution of Prof. Dov Levin in the field of oral history, but it is also a tribute to all the people he interviewed. While preparing this book, Levin was particularly anxious to remember all those who had shared their life experiences with him generously, and to preserve their memories for their children and grandchildren.

In order to facilitate the use of this catalogue, each entry contains the following information:

1. The number by which the interview is identified.
2. The name of the interviewee. If the same person was interviewed more than once, each interview was given a different number.
3. The number of the interview as it appears in the catalogue of the OHD. The project is marked in parenthesis: e.g. (101) 23 means interview # 23 in project 101.
4. The language in which the interview was conducted.
5. The year in which the interview was conducted.

6. Number of pages in the transcription. Interviews that were not transcribed are marked with N.T. [=no transcription]. In order to view the details of the voice recording you have to access the online catalogue (see below).
7. The abstract of the interview. Most of the interviews were summarized. Only in a few rare cases we were not able to supply an abstract.

The complete alphabetical list of the names of the interviewees, along with their identifying numbers, appears in the index.

The entries are organized in thematic order, according to the central subject in each interview. One should bear in mind, however, that this division is somewhat arbitrary, since life stories are not usually limited to one theme. In addition to the abstract, that is often too short to reflect the richness of the interviewee's story, we suggest that readers enter the online catalogue and also check the key words.

To access the catalogue you may enter the site of the OHD: <http://www.hum.huji.ac.il/english/units.php?cat=4248&incat=4246> and press the link to the Aleph Catalogue. Select your search option, and when you find the interview you are looking for, press the number on the left. The page that will open contains all the available data, including the availability of CDs and a list of key words.

The catalogue, however, is only a promotion of the "real thing": the interviews themselves. Thanks to the generous donation of the Claims Conference, all the interviews dealing with the Shoah were digitized, but are not yet accessible through the internet. The interviews – voice recordings or transcripts – may be viewed in the OHD archives ([ohd@savion.huji.ac.il](mailto:ohd@savion.huji.ac.il)).

Many people were very helpful in the preparation of this publication. Special thanks are due to Mariana Janin, for locating and classifying the interviews, to Sheila Wilensky for completing the abstracts and editing the catalogue, and to Eliahu Honig whose confidence and contribution made this publication possible.

Margalit Bejarano