

# FROM NAZI SLAVE LABOUR CAMP TO SOVIET DEATH CELL

## Jews the main target of drive against "speculators"

By EMANUEL LITVINOFF

Some months ago, on February 10, 1962, history of a kind was made in the Soviet Union. For the first time since the death of Stalin a woman was sentenced to be executed. She was Batya Reznitsky, a Jewess, ordered to be shot for currency speculation.

At the time of writing, more than 55 per cent of those sentenced to death by Soviet courts for economic offences have been Jews, some 36 or 38 persons out of a total of 64, but the case of Mrs Reznitsky is singular not only because of her sex.

One knows little, if anything, about the others. They have names but not identities. The Soviet press has advertised their crimes, their nationality and their sentences, but in such a way as if dossiers, not human beings were facing the firing squad. Batya Reznitsky is the first of these unfortunates to emerge from anonymity, through a sister living in New York, and what one learns of her history is bound to deepen misgivings about the motives of those who brought her to trial.

She was born, the third of eight children, in Mariampol, Lithuania, to the wife of a carpenter's labourer. Two older sisters emigrated to New York and were followed after the war by a younger sister who survived imprisonment in a concentration camp. Two brothers went to Palestine and now live on an Israeli kibbutz.

In 1932 Batya married Aron Reznitsky and settled in the town of Vilkovishki, Lithuania. Her husband, also of Jewish proletarian origin, was self-educated and qualified as a lawyer but, in the absence of opportunities to practise, earned his living as a travelling salesman. Later they moved to the town of Shavli and had two daughters, Judith, born in 1934, and Rivka, in 1938.

### Children executed

Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 and Lithuania was occupied by the Nazis. There was a shameful degree of collaboration by elements of the local population in the anti-Jewish measures that were immediately instituted. Jews were herded into the ghetto of Shavli and driven to work as slave-labourers in factories and agriculture. In 1942, the Nazis conducted their infamous "children's action" in the Shavli ghetto.

All the Jewish children were rounded up and shot in the presence of their parents. Mothers and fathers begged the executioners to kill them instead of the children, or to kill them together with their children. Presumably, such clemency could not be granted on account of an administrative impediment and survivors say that many parents were permanently deranged by the experience. Batya Reznitsky and her husband saw Judith, 8, and Rivka, 4, die in this way. One can reasonably assume that it deeply affected their lives.

In the summer of 1943, the Nazis decided to wipe out the remaining Jews in the Shavli ghetto. At the time, the Reznitskys were employed as slave-workers in a leather factory. News of the Nazi plan reached the Jews in the factory and the Reznitskys escaped with a group of them into the woods, where they were fortunate enough to be protected by a kind-hearted Lithuanian peasant who concealed them in a bunker deep in the woods and smuggled food to them at night.

They remained buried in this hiding place for a whole year, until the summer of 1944, when the Red Army liberated Lithuania. Batya Reznitsky's widowed mother and a young brother, together with all her husband's close relatives, were meanwhile killed in the mass executions that took place elsewhere.

### Escape attempt

When they returned to Shavli, it was no longer a place of habitation but a cemetery, with scarcely a person they knew left alive. Perhaps as an act of faith, or of defiance, they decided to have another child. Early in 1946, Batya gave birth to a girl but the baby died in infancy. In a letter to her sister in New York about that time she writes despondently that life in Lithuania has become insupportable for them, too many bitter memories, too many harrowing reminders. Even when she went shopping in the market place the sight of peasants wrapping their groceries in pages torn out of holy Jewish books moved her to grief.

The Reznitskys now began to think only of how they could leave the country and join Batya's brother on their kibbutz in Israel. To do so was, of course, illegal, but that year of 1946, after the death of their infant, they joined a group of 45 desperate

Jews who hoped to cross the border into Poland by lorry. They were caught by Soviet frontier guards and put on trial.

Batya Reznitsky was sentenced to three years in Siberia, her husband, Aron, to five. They served their sentences in separate prison camps. On her release Batya returned to Vilnius and worked as a domestic servant while waiting for Aron to return two years later. The couple had still not given up hope of emigrating to Israel and sought through whatever legal channels were available to obtain permission to do so from the authorities. This permission was withheld. The next major event in the lives of the Reznitskys was their arrest as currency dealers, trial, and the death sentence.

### Priests accused

Briefly, the case came about in the following way: a report appeared in the Soviet press accusing two Catholic priests in Lithuania of smuggling foreign currency to Lithuanian expatriates in Canada via a ring of Jewish speculators. The two priests were later tried for embezzling building materials from other Lithuanian priests, "former Nazi accomplices who found refuge in the United States." There was some mention at their trial of contacts with a Jewish foreign currency speculator, Mrs Zismanovich, but this aspect of the case played only a minor part in the proceedings. One priest was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment, the other to four; their property was confiscated.

About two weeks later, on January 31, 1962, six men and two women went on trial before a large audience in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. There was a kind of flamboyance in the proceedings, which lasted ten days, with accounts of jubilant Lithuanians applauding the prosecution and deriding the defence in what from the very beginning was popularly known as "the Jewish trial." The defendants were all Jews, they were said to have conducted illegal transactions on the premises of the Vilnius synagogue, and the local rabbi was alleged to have acted as arbiter when differences arose between them.

In his opening address the prosecutor made much of the fact that Batya Reznitsky and her husband had been imprisoned for illegally attempting to leave the Soviet Union and, according to a report in "Le Figaro," Mrs Reznitsky replied with courage and dignity that she had not wished to remain in a country where hate-mongers and pogromists enjoyed immunity and where the murderers of Jews were treated leniently or allowed to walk in freedom.

### Husband shot

All the accused were found guilty of systematic currency transactions amounting to 13 million roubles and four of them, including Batya Reznitsky and her husband, Aron, were ordered to be shot. The others received long terms of imprisonment. On April 4, 1962, the Vilnius newspaper "Sovetskaya Litva" reported that the three men had died at the hands of the firing squad; nothing is yet known of Mrs Reznitsky's fate. Either she is still alive or the manner of her death is too shocking for publication in the Soviet press.

The Vilnius "Jewish trial," like other trials in Leningrad, Moscow, Kirghizia, Georgia, Byelorussia, and the Ukraine, where Jews feature as the principal miscreants, raises many questions that go unanswered in the moralising accounts published in the Soviet press. Why is the Jewish religion so often implicated? When non-Jews are associated with Jews in the charges, why are the Jews specifically singled out as the major offenders both in newspaper reports and in the severity of their sentences?

They are described as "weeds," "scum," "parasites," "leeches," "monsters," and "swindlers," but what kind of people are they? Was Batya Reznitsky's brutal sentence partly influenced by her illegal effort to leave the Soviet Union? Would not her terrible sufferings at the hands of the Nazis, let alone her sex, entitle her to clemency in a civilised court of justice? The questions go unanswered, but the tragedy of Batya Reznitsky cannot fail to disturb the conscience.



Mrs Batya Reznitsky