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Documents place area architect's unit at massacre of Jews

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ment states that a Jonas Stelmokas, a junior lieutenant, participated in the "secret mission" from 6 a.m. Sept. 11 until 9:30 p.m. Sept. 13, 1941.

Within that period, 1,522 Jews were murdered in mass shootings at execution pits near three villages outside Kaunas, according to a Nazi SS colonel's report obtained by West German prosecutors from Soviet archives in the 1960s.

Stelmokas could not be reached by The Inquirer for comment, but he told WPTV-TV that the charges against him were fabricated by the Soviet KGB.

"I was in the Lithuanian Army at the time, and I refused an order to go back to Moscow," Stelmokas told Channel 6. "I was a deserter."

In its complaint filed in federal court in Philadelphia, the Justice Department said Stelmokas was a platoon commander in the Third Lithuanian Schutzmannschaft (Protective Detachment) Battalion, which participated in mass murders in the Kaunas region and enforced the confinement of Jews in the Nazi-created ghetto of Kaunas.

The Third Lithuanian Schutzmannschaft and the Third Auxiliary Police Service Battalion were the same unit, the complaint said.

Charging that Stelmokas both concealed information and misrepresented his background when he applied for a U.S. visa in 1949 and when he applied to become a U.S. citizen in 1954, the department moved to revoke his citizenship.

The report by the SS colonel, Karl Jager, to his superiors states that "executions" of Jews took place at three villages outside Kaunas on Sept. 11 and 12, 1941.

On Sept. 11, German and Lithuanian units murdered 70 women, 60 men and 25 children from Leipalingis and 384 women, 340 children and 229 men from Sierlajai, the report says.

The next day, the same units killed 197 Jewish women, 149 Jewish children and 68 Jewish men from Simnas, according to the Jager report, labeled "top secret" but since published in several authoritative collections of Holocaust documents.

The report specifies that 136,421 Jews were among the 1,872 people killed by the Nazis with Lithuanian assistance between July 4, 1941, and Feb. 1, 1942.

Aba Gefen, 72, chairman of the Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel, was hiding in a barn with his brother during the Simnas massacre of Sept. 12, 1941.

"I heard the shooting, I was hiding in a farmer's house," Gefen said in a telephone interview from his home in Jerusalem. "To the house came a few of those assassins. I heard them tell how they killed, what they received for their work."

The Justice Department declined to say whether the Lithuanian battalion order or the Jager report was part of its case against Stelmokas.

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Wiesenthal center's Jerusalem office, said it was "reasonable to assume that the Stelmokas unit was involved in the mass murders of Jews carried out on those days, and judging from the record at that time there were mass murders taking place in Leipalingis, Simnas and Sierlajai."

As a junior lieutenant, Stelmokas would have been the second-ranking officer in command of the killing operation in the three towns, Zuroff said.

"He's basically responsible for getting his men, giving them the orders, telling them what to do and then carrying out the orders, and then, depending on the circumstances, personal participation," said Zuroff, who coordinates Nazi war-crimes research for the Wiesenthal center.

According to historical accounts of the atrocities, the Leipalingis killings took place near the Catholic cemetery, and the Sierlajai Jews were shot and buried in large pits they had been forced to dig as canals several days earlier.

The Simnas Jews were forced into a pit and shot by Germans and Lithuanians.

Zuroff, of the Wiesenthal center, said the Third Lithuanian Battalion was active both in Kaunas and in the surrounding provinces.

"The Lithuanian security police units played an extremely active role in the mass murder of the Jews of Lithuania," Zuroff said.

About 90 percent of Lithuania's pre-World War II Jewish population of 250,000 were murdered, according to Dov Levin, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

A significant number of them were killed by Lithuanians, Zuroff said.

"It's important to understand that unlike the Jews in Western Europe, Central Europe and much of Eastern Europe, who for the most part were rounded up and deported to death camps where they were killed either in gas chambers or in gas vans, the Jews in Lithuania and other Baltic countries and Byelorussia and Ukraine were murdered on the spot, primarily by the locals who shot them to death, usually outside the towns and villages and cities," said Zuroff, who called the mass shootings "a very integral and important part of the Holocaust."

After World War II, Stelmokas studied for four years at the Baltic University in Hamburg, Germany, and received a degree in architecture in 1949, according to his 1951 application for a junior associateship in the American Institute of Architects.

That application, a copy of which was obtained by The Inquirer from records in Philadelphia, states that Stelmokas worked for the Kaunas board of health from 1941 to 1943.

According to the Justice Department complaint, Stelmokas said in his application for a U.S. visa that he had worked from 1940 to 1943 as a teacher in the Lithuanian town of Seda.

Stanley A. Geocys, a Philadelphia engineer who first met Stelmokas in 1951 when Stelmokas was president of the Philadelphia chapter of the Lithuanian Engineers and Architects Association, predicted that the charges would be proved false.

"I think the man's credentials are impeccable," Geocys said. "... As far as I'm concerned, the man had nothing to hide."

Stelmokas is the 81st person whose denaturalization or removal from the United States has been sought by the Justice Department since the office was formed in 1979.

Of those individuals, 40 have been denaturalized, and 30 have been removed from the United States. Other cases still await court resolution, and some people have died.

(continued) June 17, 1992, Stelmokas

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