

Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, Nerijus Šepetys. *Meninė kūryba Kauno gete: tikrovės reprezentacijos klausimai / Art Creation in the Kaunas Ghetto: Issues of the Representation of Reality*. Kaunas: M.K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, 2025. 331 p. ISBN 978-609-8234-45-9

This bilingual Lithuanian-English book is based on the catalogue of the exhibition ‘Kaunas Ghetto: Reality and Memory’, which took place at the Historical Presidential Palace of the Republic of Lithuania in Kaunas from 20 June to 1 September 2024. The exhibition was organised in collaboration with the Faculty of History of Vilnius University, the M.K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, and the Lithuanian State Central Archive. It presented several years of research by the art historian Giedrė Jankevičiūtė and the historian Nerijus Šepetys on artistic life in the Kaunas Ghetto. In addition to the catalogue of works, documents and artefacts collected from Lithuanian museums and archival institutions, as well as the National Archives of the Czech Republic, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem, the book includes two articles by Šepetys on the history of the ghetto, and two articles by Jankevičiūtė on artistic production and artists in the ghetto. The publication opens with the timeline of the Kaunas Ghetto, and closes with appendices containing autobiographical texts by and about the artists who were imprisoned in the ghetto, mainly related to Esther Lurie, written in 1940 and 1941 and in the postwar years. They have been translated from Yiddish and Hebrew by Akvilė Grigoravičiūtė, and then into English by Aušra Simonavičiūtė (who is also the English translator of the entire publication). The last piece in the appendix, Raya Kruk’s memories of the ghetto, has been translated from German by Šepetys, and has not been translated into English.

The study by Šepetys and Jankevičiūtė is a continuation of their earlier research on the Second World War, and presents several important arguments.¹ Firstly, it draws on a variety of sources, as is evidenced by

¹ G. Jankevičiūtė, *Po raudonąją žvaigždę: Lietuvos dailė 1940-1941 m.* (Vilnius, 2011); eds. G. Jankevičiūtė, R. Žukienė *The Art of Identity and Memory: Toward a Cultural History of the Two World Wars in Lithuania* (Boston, 2016); N. Šepetys, *Post-Secularity of the Holocaust. Between Criticism and Understanding* (Vilnius, 2023).

the long list of acknowledgements to the contributors, to gather works, documents and artefacts that are related in one way or another to art, its technical application, and the lives of artists in the Kaunas Ghetto. This is how the drawings of ghetto children by Jacob Lipschitz (1903–1945), the portraits and scenes of ghetto life, including executions, by Josef Schlesinger (1919–1993), and a single watercolour by the teenager Ben-Zion (Nolik) Schmidt (1925–1944), depicting the urgent move from one part of the ghetto to another, all come under the spotlight of the present research, as well as Esther Lurie's (1913–1998) postwar reconstructions of drawings recording ghetto life, or photographs of works created in the ghetto but later lost. The works are accompanied by examples of ghetto graphic design, including hand-drawn and printed documents, prisoner identity cards, armbands and programmes for events such as concerts performed by the Kaunas (Vilijampolė) Ghetto Police Orchestra. There are also drawings and diagrams by Peter (Fritz) Gadiele (1910–1971). Notably, some of the photographs by Zvi Kadushin (1910–1997) were taken after the war ended. These photographs depict the undocumented life in the ghetto, and, alongside the reconstructions of works created in the ghetto, challenge the temporality of 'the war that ended'.

Secondly, the collection invites us to consider the methods and the vocabulary for describing the life of art and artists in the Kaunas Ghetto. Although the authors of the book describe this as 'art creation', it is clear that they are also interested in the role of artists, their survival strategies, and the possibilities open to them, as well as those whose work has not survived. They also consider the hierarchy of art types and styles in the specific context of the ghetto. Reflecting on the relationship between ghetto photography and drawings at the time of their creation, some of which were commissioned by the Council of Elders, and in contemporary museum practice, Jankevičiūtė argues that despite their detailed nature, the photographs were accompanied by a delayed temporality. They were often printed much later, and remained unknown by their contemporaries, often not existing in physical form. By contrast, works of art, however small or unremarkable, retained a physical connection to their environment. 'Details such as the material, technique, fixed (unchanging) format, thickness, weight, texture, colour, and signs of wear or damage are invaluable for understanding and reconstructing the conditions – and sometimes the precise circumstances – of the artifact's creation, which in its turn helps us to reduce the distance between "then" and "now"' (p. 70). The surviving evidence, sparse as it is, shows that, to the extent that the members of the Council of Elders were responsible for

commissioning art and providing jobs at the Graphic or Toy Workshop, they preferred a more realistic style. For example, Jankevičiūtė notes that Černė Percikovaitė (1912–1941/1942), an Expressionist, was not offered jobs, whereas Lurie and Lipschitz, who adapted their style to some extent, were (pp. 122–123). At the same time, the stories of artists from the ghetto encourage us to consider what constitutes ‘good art’, worthy of a place in national art history.

Thirdly, this book links the question ‘How should the history of ghetto art be written?’ to the equally challenging question ‘How should the story of the ghetto be told?’ The focus here is on the emergence and functioning of the ghetto, as is discussed in Šepetys’ articles. Their starting point is the image of the Kaunas Ghetto as a result of narratives that emerged and overlapped at different times through different mediators and told from different perspectives (e.g. guilt). Bearing this in mind, Šepetys explores how the creation and operation of the ghetto were perceived at the time by the occupying authorities and Kaunas Jews. He concludes that the Kaunas Jews did not see a connection between the creation of the ghetto and the persecution of Jews in Europe, and that they had reasons to view the ghetto as a solution to their particular situation: ‘In other words, while the creation of the ghetto was externally shaped and determined by Nazi policies of persecution and extermination, it could also be understood as a social product of the Jewish community itself and should be examined accordingly’ (p. 32). Following an early suggestion by another Kaunas Ghetto prisoner, the sociologist Samuel (Shmuel) Gringauz (in 1950), Šepetys applies the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ to ghetto narratives, as well as the distinction between *external rule* and *internal autonomy* to the behaviour and relationships in the ghetto.² The manifestations of this distinction, however limited and transient the internal autonomy of the ghetto may be, are the subject of Šepetys’ second article.

Highlighting the subjectivity and agency of ghetto artists, community leaders or inhabitants seems to be a fruitful and still lacking line of research, not only during the period of the Nazi occupation, but also under the conditions of the subsequent Soviet regime.

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² S. Gringauz, ‘Some Methodological Problems in the Study of the Ghetto’, *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 12, No 1 (1950), pp. 65–72.