

Elkes, Elchanan

(1879--1944), Physician and chairman of the *Aeltestenrat* (Council of Elders) in the Kovno Ghetto in Lithuania.

From the early 1920s, Elkes chaired the internal medicine department in Kovno's Bikkur Holim Jewish Hospital; he was one of the best doctors in Lithuania and a Zionist.

The Germans attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941. They occupied Kovno on June 24 and murdered several thousand Jews. The remaining 30,000 Jews were forced into a ghetto and ordered to designate a head for the *Aeltestenrat*. Elkes became its leader on August 4. All who knew him affirmed that he was completely devoted to the Jewish cause, courageous and dignified in his dealings with the Nazis, an ethical and modest leader, and comfortable with his fellow Jews. Elkes supported the ghetto's resistance movement and helped gather supplies for the General Jewish Fighting Organization (*Yidische Algemeyne Kamf Organizatsye*, JFO).

In July 1944, the Soviet army was advancing towards Kovno. At that point, the Nazis began liquidating the ghetto and relocating its inhabitants to Germany. Elkes risked his life by approaching the commander of the ghetto, Wilhelm Goecke, to suggest that Goecke change his plan to transfer the Jews to Germany. Elkes argued that in the end, Goecke would be praised for dropping the transfer. Goecke refused Elkes' suggestion, but let him leave without punishment.

The ghetto was emptied a few days later. Elkes was sent to the Landsberg concentration camp in Germany, and put in charge of the camp's hospital hut. Elkes soon got sick, and he died on October 17, 1944. A year before, almost to the day, Elkes wrote these words to his children in England: "With my own ears I have heard the awful symphony of weeping, wailing and screaming of tens of thousands of men, women, and children, which have rent the heavens. No one throughout the ages has heard such a sound. Along with many of these martyrs I have quarreled with my Creator, and with them I cried out from a broken heart, 'Who is as silent as you, O lord.'"