

GURECKAS, Algimantas

English

The interviewee introduces himself as Algimantas Gureckas, born on June 2, 1923, in Tauragė Lithuania; mentions being an only child; tells about his father's and mother's (Petras and Marija) background; discusses his family's international outlook; talks about his hometown and about the town that his family moved to for a few years before moving back to Tauragė; discusses the friendly relations between the Lithuanians, Germans, Russians, Jews, Catholics, and Protestants who lived in the town before World War II; remembers seeing somewhat of a change when Hitler came into power because the Germans became more hostile; highlights how Klaipėda was a port town near Tauragė which was a part of Prussia before World War I which Germany wanted to get back from Lithuania; mentions the relatively large Jewish population in the area.

He describes his close-knit family and how they openly discussed various religions and religious issues, and how they did not demonstrate any hostility towards Jews; explains how his mother and father did not like the Poles and how they took it personally when the Polish army invaded Lithuania, especially Vilnius, as they both worked there when they were younger; recalls moving to Panevėžys when he was in the equivalent of middle school; tells about his high school years, how the school was very good but he was not a good student so he was forced to repeat his fifth year, which was acceptable since he started the first grade a year earlier than normal; discusses the relations between national groups in Panevėžys and about the presence of a Polish community unlike in Klaipėda; remembers having suspicions that the Poles did not want Lithuania to exist partly because the relations between the Lithuanian and Polish gymnasiums were not great; says that there were no relations between the Lithuanian schools and the Jewish schools.

He recalls the Poles giving an ultimatum to the Lithuanians that they should engage in diplomatic relations with Poland which the Lithuanians begrudgingly accepted in 1938; remembers this affecting him very much as Poland was trying to assert its dominance over a smaller country, although he personally thought that Lithuania would never be able to regain Vilnius, its capital; explains how his family was politically engaged and was committed to the Lithuanian national idea as after experiencing Tsarist and Polish oppression people felt that the country's independent status was precarious; tells how there were more negative feelings against Poland than the Soviet Union because the Soviet Union was supporting Lithuania's claims to Vilnius against Poland and it was the only real power supporting Lithuania, and even though his family did not support the Communist regime, they did not believe it was a threat.

He recalls the Germans demanding and occupying the Klaipėda area in 1939, and with that he came into contact with the Lithuanians and Jewish refugees; claims that there was not a real sense of an integrated society in Lithuania, that each ethnic group took care of its own; tells how he met a girl who worked in Klaipėda who told him about the things that the Nazis did to try to dominate the area; remembers that his personal life did not change at all until the summer of 1939 after diplomatic ties had been reestablished between Poland and Lithuania and Vilnius was

granted to Lithuania and he went on a class trip to Vilnius which made a great positive impression on him; talks about rising tensions during the summer of 1939 that were evident in Vilnius but not at his home in Panevėžys (less than 135, or 85 miles, away); describes how it was becoming evident in Vilnius that they would not give up to the Germans; comments how before his trip to Vilnius, he was skeptical of Lithuanian claims to the city as its capital afterwards was convinced of the legitimacy of those claims; recalls everyone wanting to know what Vilnius was like once he returned from that trip.

He remembers a week before the September 1, 1939 invasion hearing about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact from people at school, and how it showed that the Soviet Union was not going to make a stand to protect Lithuania; recalls everyone following what was going on, how German superiority became clear and it was obvious that they were more prepared than the Poles; comments how the President of Lithuania and his school director thought that the Germans were not going to win the war because they were overreaching as they had in World War I; tells how as things progressed in the early fall of 1939 that commerce was affected as some Lithuanian ships hit mines in the Baltic Sea, and there were concerns about whether Lithuania could remain neutral with all this going on and then everything changed when Poland was attacked; describes how the Soviets then started to invade, and some Polish refugees came to Lithuania; comments on how after the invasion the Poles were not seen as enemies and people became more sympathetic towards them.

He talks about two voluntary organizations which formed when the mobilization began and how he was a member of one of them where he guarded the bridges; remembers a rumor that the Soviet Union was reclaiming Vilnius; recalls people being very concerned that the Soviets were going to establish military bases in Lithuania, especially since people knew that Estonia and Latvia were also invaded by the Soviet Union's troops so it was only a matter of time until this was to happen to Lithuania; remembers being glued to the radio when the treaty between Lithuania and the Soviet Union was signed on October 10, 1939 which defined the new boundaries between the two countries; explains how only one-quarter of the old Lithuanian lands given back to Lithuania, which was adjusted later, but most of the Lithuanian lands were given to Belarus, so it was both good and bad news; mentions how after this was the first time he saw a Soviet soldier; comments on the Lithuanians siding with the Finns' when the Soviet-Finnish Winter War began one month later; recalls a Soviet plane crashing in his town on its way back from Finland, seeing Soviet soldiers pass by his school building's window bringing pieces of the wreckage back to their military base.

He tells how it became apparent that eventually Germany would take back Klaipėda; recalls hearing from a friend that the Lithuanians were organizing an army to fight against the Germans, and since Gureckas' father fought for Lithuania, Gureckas himself decided to act in the same way and went to volunteer for the army with his friend; talks about how the officer turned the two boys down, saying that if they were needed to fight then they would be called to the army if a draft was called; talks about how when the Soviets annexed Lithuania he was in high school and joined a resistance group which was banned in universities and elsewhere but not in high schools; [Interruption]; when asked how the presence of Soviet military bases in Lithuania changed to the Soviet occupation, explains how the bases were closed territories, and how almost no one thought that the problems were leading to annexation of the country; remembers how on June 15, 1940, during his school vacation, his father told him one afternoon that the Soviets were

occupying Lithuania, and during that night the troops came to Panevėžys; recalls seeing a few tanks the next day but most of them came the night before.

He describes how that Saturday an ultimatum was given and the Soviets marched into Lithuania, and then on Sunday the first communist demonstration took place with about fifty or sixty people participating; claims that the protesters were speaking against the Smetona (independent Lithuanian) government, calling it fascist, and that most of the protesters were Jewish; tells about there being very few people walking around on the streets that day; discusses how he only knew leftists and that he did not know any “real” communists; mentions President Smetona leaving office and a new government being appointed by the communist authorities.

He discusses how the Soviets started to seem threatening around October 1939 with the introduction of the bases in Lithuania, which escalated in 1940 to people believing that Lithuania might not be able to survive as an independent country; introduces the question of which ruling power would be preferable, as he thought that German rule would be the lesser of the two evils, whereas most thought that Soviet rule was not as bad because the communists were more disorganized than the Germans and therefore are not able to control the population as effectively; remembers a lot of people getting arrested a few weeks after the annexation started, and how terror started pretty soon after that as his father and many other people lost their government jobs and more prisons were added; says that people protested against the new order by boycotting the elections for new deputies; mentions how his father got a new job as a bank teller when they returned from summer vacation; recalls a Soviet air force officer and his family lived as tenants in his parents’ house, how a Ukrainian girl, who was the officer’s au pair, told his family about the possibility of getting sent to Siberia and about the Ukrainian famine, and that they discounted her thinking she was crazy.

He comments about the Jews being happy in the fall of 1940 that the Germans did not take over; remembers how quickly Soviet terror became apparent as Soviet supporters were very loud, and this terror helped to obscure the distinctions between those who were true supporters of the new regime and those who were not; claims that Jews and Russians were split opinion-wise about the Soviet annexation as some collaborated and others did not; tells how he felt a sense of betrayal, especially of being betrayed by the Jewish community even though not all of them were supporters of the Soviet regime; remembers being liking and admiring a Jewish girl from his town, supposes that she was rounded up like the other Jews in his town, and remembers the last time he saw her and the strong impact she had upon him; [silence until interview resumes]; comments that upon reflection he thinks Lithuania as a country should have fought the war; says that the terror started when the Soviet annexation started, and that the terror added to the general sense of confusion as people did not know the details of the negotiations that were undertaken during this time; describes the general attitude in Lithuania during that time as wanting independence and not wanting to be a part of any other country; [tape change].

Discussion about the many betrayals in Lithuania during this time period: that by the Lithuanian government as it did not fight when the Soviets demanded acquiescence, that by the Lithuanian supporters of the Soviet regime, that by Russians who lived in Lithuania who welcomed the Soviets despite the fact that they fled the Bolshevik revolution, and that by some of the Jewish people in support of the Soviet regime; after being asked about his opinion on which of the many betrayals was the worst, he responds that it was the betrayal by some of the Jewish people in their support of the Soviet regime, because he had been under the impression that the relations

between Jews and Lithuanians were good and did not know why they would be so dissatisfied as to support the communists; explains that under the Smetona government if there had been discrimination, it would have been against Poles first and foremost, and they were discriminated against for positions in the military and in state ministries only insofar as it was perceived that their loyalties laid not to Lithuania but to other outside forces; tells that Smetona's government was not in favor of anti-Semitic policies, and that he did not feel any anti-Semitism before the war except for commercial competition between Jews and non-Jews, although this was not evident in his circle.

He remembers that after the annexation began, terror increased a lot, and resistance started getting organized; recalls the start of nationalization, when Lithuanian business owners were forced to close their businesses, which contrasted with many Jewish business owners being less severely affected by this; tells how Jewish business owners were often allowed to stay on as managers of the businesses they formerly owned, while the Lithuanians could not; explains how this increased general resentment felt towards the Jewish community and how tensions began to build between different groups; talks about one morning when he suddenly sees his friends being taken from their house in a truck which was taken to the railroad station and some of his teachers also disappeared; comments about how anyone could be arrested or deported, no one knew who was safe; recalls most of the people being taken away during the night, as that was when he mostly saw trucks taking people to the train station; talks about people fearing of being sent to Siberia, so much so that even his mother became worried and starting thinking about what they would need if they were to be sent.

He recalls that at this point the Red Army was on alert and the people living in his house were rarely there at this point because they were at training camp; remembers realizing that Jews were also being deported, and people were just disappearing around him; says that many Jewish activists were acting in the deportations, and he thought they were the clear majority of those participating in the deportations outside of Russian soldiers; emphasizes that the deportations started on June 14th, and continued until about June 17th, with the German attack on the country coming on June 22nd; recalls being asleep when he awoke to a giant boom that shook his house, saw German planes coming, and thought that it was salvation as then he would not get sent to Siberia; talks about seeing German troops in town on June 26th; remembers the prisons being emptied with many of the inmates getting killed at the sugar factory or otherwise escaping, with many other people getting killed elsewhere; talks about a lot of young people being arrested in the streets, and how his mother was afraid that he was among them; comments on the prison being empty as everyone escaped, and people were also retreating.

He claims that pogroms did not start until before the German forces came, with the Germans making no non-military actions until the funeral of the doctors who were murdered and tortured by the Soviet secret police; describes how after the funeral people heard that they are taking actions against the Jews; tells how there were three men who beat up a Jewish store owner and then threw him out of his store and then told people to join them, and no one broke them up but no one joined them as well, people just walked away; says that the German propaganda was not effective in Panevėžys; discusses how even a Western journalist had a biased approach to the events in Lithuania, as a U.S. journalist had been flown in by the German government from Berlin to witness the results of the Soviet atrocities did not believe a local who said that these events were rather not Nazi, but were Soviet doings; recalls the situation escalating with revenge

killings becoming more common, and how when the German soldiers marched into town, girls were greeting them with flowers and were giving them milk; recalls people killing communists when the German troops first came in; tells how most of the people who volunteered to fight against the Germans were young people, of whom he was one of, and he took ammunition via truck to other troops, until the German soldiers came and refused to allow them to take anymore.

He remembers an incident in which he received reports of a communist living in a house, so he went and did not see anyone in the house, but then went to the back shed and saw that a young man shot himself in the head; comments that near the young man's body was a lot of money and a note written in Yiddish, which upon translation, was found to say that he always believed in communism and now was dying for the cause; talks about how he thought that the Nazis would support a somewhat independent Lithuanian state similar to what was in place in Hungary or Slovakia, but this did not happen; recalls a little while after the Nazi occupation began seeing an old man in the corner of the police station with "Jew" written on his forehead, and he thought it was very frightening; remembers when the Germans first invaded that there was a spree of executions, the number and frequency of which dissipated rather quickly; explains how some people that he knew from school who were communists fled with the Red Army, and how no one cared when some of them returned a few weeks after the Germans took over, which is unusual because if they had been in town when the Germans first invaded they would have gotten killed; says that he heard about people in the National Guard committing atrocities and that maybe one boy from his class probably partook in the murdering of communists but he was not sure; describes a later incident in which he was in a field and saw an auxiliary policeman asked if Gureckas knew that all of the Jews from a nearby town were killed by the Germans due to accusations that they were stealing weapons and ammunition, and he proceeded to tell about a German officer who shot a doctor in the doctor's own office when he refused to vacate.

He tells about the ghetto being established relatively early and there were rules posted about various things, such as the law authorizing the creation of the ghetto, and the law telling Jews to wear the yellow star, and these rules were not written in German form and he was not sure if a Lithuanian or German signed these laws into place; talks about an organization that was established and run by women in his town, including one of his friends' mothers, that brought food to the ghetto; remembers hearing about the coming of the day of execution of the Jews two months after the Germans invaded; recalls knowing some friends who were ordered to help with the killing of Jews, and they said that they were going to flee or hide rather than do that, but in the end the German troops were able to find enough people willing to persecute the Jews so they did not force others who were not wanting to do so; talks about after learning about the plan to execute the town's Jewish population, the priest gave a sermon telling of the commandment which states "Thou shall not kill" and was quickly dismissed from his post, but continued to administer to his parishioners from his country estate a few kilometers outside of town; emphasizes seeing the trucks full of people going to the site of the killing, and how he was truly horrified but did not do anything to try to stop it as he and many others were paralyzed with horror, although there were of course some people who participated in the persecutions; discusses how the desire to get revenge against the Jews or anything like that for their collaboration with the Soviets dissipated after the ghetto was established.

He recalls a group of his friends and he went to the farm right next to the execution site where another person told them that he saw German troops drinking vodka and taking valuables out of

the victims' clothing, and a man was saying that they should not go through their clothes, and instead of discussing the matter with him they simply shot and killed him as well; tells how he worked as a person who brought the food ration cards to people and that after the Panevėžys massacre most of the people that he talked with while he was handing the cards out were in a state of shock and disgust about it, and he only found one person who supported the actions taken; describes how after this there were no Jews left in that town except for those who were hidden; says that he then attended university in Vilnius, which had two ghettos; describes how the underground press in Vilnius told about killings of Jews and about underground activities; remembers while he was studying law in Vilnius, one of his friends was working for the Lithuanian security forces against the Polish underground and ended up getting killed by the Polish underground forces; recalls that among the students in Vilnius the general opinion was one of condemnation of those who participated in executions.

Talks about being aware of the Battle of Stalingrad being a turning point in the war, and how the Germans were aware of that fact; discusses how Germany responded to this change in circumstances by establishing legions from Latvia and Estonia but the Lithuanians boycotted the legions, so in retaliation, the German authorities closed down all Lithuanian universities; describes being hospitalized with pneumonia and then got drafted into the Reich Labor Service (Reicharbeitsdienst) from the list of names recorded when he was discharged from the hospital; explains how he decided to serve rather than flee so his family would not suffer repercussions due to his decisions; says that he was a member of the resistance movement against the Nazis and how even his supervisor in the movement approved of his decision to serve; describes serving on a small island in the Baltic Sea just off the coast of Germany near the island of Rügen, and on getting released from service before his term was over for reasons unclear to himself; talks about returning to Lithuania, where a partisan army was being established in 1944 in an effort to ward off a Soviet takeover of the country; tells how he viewed the Soviet takeover of Lithuania as inevitable, so rather than fight, he decided to move to East Prussia; discusses his time working as some sort of manual laborer when the place where he was working was surrounded by the SS, and he was forced to work in the Luftwaffe in East Prussia on manual and tactical tasks; says that he then left East Prussia and continued moving westward to Munich, where he met up with his mother who arrived there earlier; talks about getting liberated by American troops at the end of the war; describes how after the war ended he stayed in Germany for a while, after which he came to the United States; talks about his life in the United States.