United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Arvydas Kliore
February 18, 2013
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Arvydas Kliore, conducted by Ina Navazelskis on February 18, 2013 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Sherman Oaks, CA and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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ARVYDAS KLIORE
February 18, 2013

Question: This is a **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with Mr. **Arvydas Kliore**, on February 18th, 2013, in **Sherman Oaks**, **California**. And Mr. **Kliore**, thank you very much for agreeing to speak with us today.

Answer: My pleasure.

Q: Can you – we'll be-begin at the beginning. Can you tell me when you were born, where you were born, a little bit about your family, who were your parents, if you had any siblings.

A: I was born in **Kaunas**, **Lithuania** in 1935, and my father was from the **Aukštaitija** region, from a small village –

Q: Called?

A: – near ki – i-it's **Buteniai**.

Q: **Buteniai**, which is near **Krekenava**, and – and the – th-that – the next bigger city, I guess. And it's between **Kedaynyay** and **Panevėžys** somewhere. And his father was the village carpenter, and also he worked on – I remember he worked on the organ of the church in **Padagai**, which is a kind of historic church because it was one of the flashpoints of the 1905 revolt against the tsar, and has since then become a famous church in preserving liturgical items during the Soviet era. And I've been there a couple of times, and this in fact is where my grandfather, his father is buried.

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Q: Was your dad also a carpenter?

A: No.

Q: No. What was – what was his profession?

A: My father was – he – he went – he was the first, of course, member of the family to be – to go to higher education, he went to the teacher's college and then onto the university in **Kaunas**, and he became a teacher. So his – his profession was teacher, although you know later he became more of an administrator and inspector of schools, and then he – he was official at – in the Ministry of Education for some time. Now, my mother was also a teacher, in fact, she was born in **Slovakia [indecipherable]**. And she grew up there, but then went to **Kaunas** a-at the teacher's college and th – also university. We – we go to **[indecipherable]**. Also became a teacher and in fact that's how they met, they were teaching in the same place in – in **[indecipherable]** in **Lithuania**, and that's when they got married.

Q: Can you remember the dates of their births? That is, were they born after 1900?

A: Oh yes, they – they were born – ma-ma – my mother was born in 1908, and my father 1910.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah. And of course, they're – they're both passed on now.

Q: And did you have brothers and sisters?

A: Yes, I have one twin sister.

Q: You're a twin?

A: Twin, yes. And she lives in **Florida**.

Q: What's her name?

A: **Ramute**(ph) – **Ramune**(ph).

Q: **Ramune**(ph).

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah, uh-huh. And –

A: Yeah, so we – we get together, of course, you know, in the – fortunately she does not look like I do.

Q: Oh come now, oh come now.

A: Not identical.

Q: Tell me – tell me what your earliest memories are.

A: Well, you know, it's – it's hard to talk about the earliest memories, because I don't – there are memories which come and go. No really permanent memories, but in fact, I do remember things at – after the Soviet – during the Soviet occupation we were in – in, the first Soviet occupation, we lived in **Kaunas**, and then we moved to **Vilnius**, where my father worked at the Ministry of Education.

Q: Under the Soviet occupation?

A: No, this was at – after the Germans moved in and we – it's – became possible to go to **Vilnius** after that, yeah. Before then it was Polish and you know –

Q: I'm going to step back a little bit and get our – get some dates established.

A: Okay.

Q: I'll still go back to – I wanted to dwell a little bit on pre-war. So I understand that it's hard to say, which was my first memory and which was my second. But as a child, do you have any memories before any war, before any occupation? Just something personal from your home life, from school perhaps, or children or parents?

A: Well, I do – I have very few memories of **Kaunas** for instance. But do – during the latter part of – of my parents' life i-in **Kaunas**, we lived in **Panemunė**, which is like a suburb of **Kaunas**. And I remember that, we lived in a – rented a – a – a house there, and there was – I remember there was a little park there with newly planted conifer trees. And there was a statue of – was an **[indecipherable]**. And I remember that – that – that – that the trees were about the same size as the height of the statue. And of course, when I came back there 40 or 50 years later, the trees were as high as the sky and the statue was about this tall –

Q: Yeah.

A: – so that's one thing I remember. Another thing is, when I got my **[indecipherable]** exercised a little bit when I threw a rock at the bus that carried my father back from work or – **Kaunas**.

Q: Did you get in trouble?

A: Yeah, he saw it, and **[indecipherable]**

Q: When you were – when you and your sister were born, did your mother then stay home and take care of you, or did she continue work as a teacher?

A: Well, she did work as a teacher at the time when I remember. I mean, I don't think I remember anything before I was about five years old, or so.

Q: Do you remember the Soviets coming into **Lithuania** in 1940? Do you have any memories of that?

A: I don't – I don't recall seeing them come into **Lithuania**, but they were there, you know, and I – I don't think – I don't recall seeing them actually, you know, any soldiers or officials or any – cause we lived in the suburbs there then. I don't recall ever being in **Kaunas** itself, you know. Yeah.

Q: Let's move then to **Vilnius**. You say your father moved to **Vilnius** at what point?

A: Well, it's hard for me to say because I – I'm not quite sure.

Q: Okay.

A: But I know that it was slightly before the outbreak of the war, and – and you know –

Q: Okay, so –

A: – and – and the German occupation.

Q: Oh, it was before then. It was before then.

A: Because one thing – yeah, one – one thing I do remember is the German army parading down **Gediminas Prospect** in **Vilnius**, we were there already.

Q: Okay.

A: But I also remember, now that you've jogged my memory, that I went to pre-school or school, first grade in **Vilnius**, and we had to draw red stars and – and you know, **Stalin's** picture and things like that. So that obviously was during the Russian occupation, yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: So we were there already during that – the Russian occupation.

Q: Okay. Do you remember where you lived in **Vilnius**, what it looked like?

A: Yes, I – I – I do, because, course we lived there until 1944.

Q: Okay.

A: And it was in **Tilto Gatvė** number 12, which is, know, a block or so, couple of blocks from the **Cathedral Square**, the center.

Q: It's the center of the city.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Okay. And what kind of a place was that? Was it an apartment, was it a house?

A: It was an apartment, and it was one of those things typical of **Vilnius**. This was not in the old town, it was in the – what's called the new town, which is probably 200 years old anyway. And it has a courtyard, and it looked like an apartment building from the outside, and you walk in through a little gate, and there's a courtyard. And so, our apartment, we walked through the courtyard, up some stairs, and – but our windows were out to the street.

Q: Ah, to **Gediminas** or to **Tilto** Street?

A: **Tilto** Street, yeah.

Q: Uh-huh, so that's a small street.

A: Yeah, it's –

Q: Yeah.

A: And it had a lot of great little houses, most of which are gone now, but they were still there when we were there.

Q: You – you say that you remember seeing the German soldiers marching into **Vilnius**, right?

A: Well, I don't think it was marching, I guess there were just – there was a parade, I guess, aft-after they do – marched in. But I don't remember them marching in. I do remember when the war began, I was walking down **Tilto Gatvė**, and coming home from somewhere with my mother, and we heard like a muffled explosion somewhere. And I guess that was a German bomb being dropped somewhere. But there weren't too many of them, they didn't, you know, mash up the city too well. But then the Polish woman, remember running by yelling, **paniczka**(ph), **paniczka**(ph), **wojna**, which, you know –

Q: And what does that mean?

A: That means, **paniczka**(ph) means like lady, lady, it-it's war, you know.

Q: Yeah.

A: And so that – that's what it sounded, but I don't remember – there were no acts of war in the city itself. The Germans just, you know, moved in and that the extent of it.

Q: Do you have any memories of how the atmosphere in your home changed? Did your parents look nervous, did they seem –

A: Well, I mean, everybody was nervous throughout this whole period. And I do remember that there was a lot of social activity, that they would go together, you know, and have parties, and you know, talk and why my – my father never used to

smoke, well then he started smoking with his friends, because they were – they were always nervous and not certain of what – what was going to happen.

Q: And his job in **Vilnius** had been – can you tell us a little bit about that?

A: Well, he was – like I said that – at – at – at first he was ins-inspector of schools, where he would go inspect and file reports on various schools that he was – somebody who I guess oversaw the hiring and promotion of teachers. And then at a va – at the la – last position he had, he was a director or deputy director for special and vocational education.

Q: I guess the reason why I come back to this is that during the first Soviet occupation, teachers were particularly targeted for deportation by the Soviets.

A: Yes.

Q: And so I'm surprised that they weren't on this – that they weren't targeted in this way, that he continued having some sort of job in the educational sphere.

A: Yeah, I – and in fact, he – he took advantage of – of, I guess the Soviet occupation to move into **Vilnius** because before that it was Polish, and there was no such possibility. But I guess a lot of opportunities for people to work in **Vilnius** became available just before or during the Soviet occupa – first Soviet occupation.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: Yeah.

Q: Well, I realize that the period of time that we're talking about with you, really will start from 1941 til 1944. And at that time you were between six and 10 years old?

A: Right, right. Well, nine to –

Q: Okay. Nine, 10 years old. So how – do you remember ho-how life changed? I mean, you saw – you had an image of – of German soldiers marching in a parade in town, you have an image and a memory of a Polish lady ran – running and – and saying –

A: Yeah, the war is –

Q: – the war is here. What were some of the other images, some of the other fragments of memories that you have from the very first days?

A: Well, the first – it's hard to say because na – we lived in this little street, away from – only about a block away from a main street.

Q: Right.

A: But as far as a – a four or five year old, six year old child is concerned, it might be la – two miles away, because you'd never get out there anyway. So, I didn't see very much of – I do remember, before the Germans came of – I was walking again with the – well, we – either my mother or my ma – her mother, my grandmother would take me for walks, you know, in **Vilnius**, and before the Russians left, I saw

some – right around **Cathedral Square**, there – there – there were a few trucks passed with – loaded with people and with Russian soldiers with bayonets standing in the corners of the truck. And I later found out those were the people who were being deported to **Siberia,** being taken to the railway station.

Q: Did you ever walk – remember walking around in the real old town, which would have been the Jewish quarter of **Vilnius**?

A: Yes, we – we do that all the time. My grandmother would take me to the old churches, she was a devout Catholic and she would go – I remember there was – I think it was the Dominican church, there was a stairway that the supplicants walked up underneath.

Q: Yeah.

A: And they had little relics of saints' blood or something like that and that they kissed it and so on. And I remembered that – her doing that, and in fact I – I was able to see that at one of our visits, you know, l-lately, about, you know, five, six years ago. They're rebuilding the whole thing and I actually got to see the same staircase, only now it looked a lot smaller than it did before.

Q: Did you notice – I mean, since many of the churches were interspersed with where the synagogue was, where the narrow streets in the old town were, where there were Jewish peddlers in places. Did you notice these things? Did you notice

any part of the Jewish life that was going around? You were a child, of course, but was that something that –

A: No, I – I don't specifically recall, you know, seeing the – the – the Jewish life or the peddlers or the – the stores. I – I – I guess we didn't go into that section very much. We went, I guess, near the **Cathedral Square** and the wa – or the **Saint Anne's** church and the Dominican church was in these areas.

Q: Did you know of anything, even at that young age, that there are people who are Jews? Did your parents talk about anything like that at home? Do you remember?

A: Well, I don't recall we were specifically talking about that, until later, when the Holocaust started and I remember once my father saying to the Germans, we're offering, you know, for those who collaborate, you know, with them, offering the chance to be the first ones into the apartments of the Jews that they – that they deport to the ghetto.

Q: So he mentioned that at home, huh?

A: Yes, and apparently some people were taking it, you know, cause otherwise they wouldn't be talking about that. But my father was as – as poor as a church mouse, but he never do – did anything like that.

Q: What a – did you ever see any Jews when you were a child in **Vilnius**?

A: I must have, but I – I just don't have a recollection of wha – of what they looked like, except for one incident which does stick in my mind.

Q: Tell us about that incident.

A: Yeah. And this was something that has really etched in my memory, because I do – I don't remember very much from that time period, but this one of our walks in the city. And I guess we were walking somewhere.

Q: Who were you with?

A: Pardon?

Q: Who were you with?

A: With my mother.

Q: Okay.

A: And whether I'm – and we were walking down some streets in the old town, and at this time I guess the Jewish people were still not locked up in the ghetto, but they had to wear a yellow Star of **David** on – on their clothing. And at that – by this time they could not – they were not allowed by the Germans to walk on the sidewalks, they had to walk in the street. And we were walking along and I saw this German soldier run up to this elderly lady with a gi – with a yellow star on her clothing, and strike her with the – with his rifle butt. And it turns out like wi – he was doing it because she was walking on the sidewalk. And I remember very clearly I – I – I –

it's not something that you see all the time, and my mother getting very upset. She started to yell at that soldier, you know, how can you be doing this to an old lady, and crying. And so that's something that I – a-an act, or a – a – a real act of violence against a Jewish person, and by – apparently it was some kind of a guard that walking around the streets, taking care of, insuring that nobody was walking on the sidewalk when they're not supposed to, you know?

Q: Did he turn on your mother, did he pay attention to your mother?

A: Yes.

Q: What did he do?

A: Well, I – I just stay with her, I asked here what's going on, and this – she said that these people are like beasts, you know, the – who would be doing that, you know, to defenseless old people?

Q: But did the guard hear your mother and then turn his attention to her?

A: No, he didn't, he just said something in German, probably something that's like stay out of it or something, but I didn't understand it, you know. But he didn't do anything to my mother.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. Did you walk on afterwards?

A: Yes.

Q: Yes. And did your – did any explanation or further conversation about this happen at home?

A: Well, I – I – I suppose there was, but I don't recall, you know, what happened at home. The – my mother probably told my father what was going on and they talked about it, but I don't have that – that recollection.

Q: Yeah. What – did your neighborhood change after the German occupation on **Tilto** Street?

A: Well, we don't – we didn't – our neighborhood, you know, the people who lived in that – in the apartments facing that courtyard probably were the same people.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah. The only thing that I learned later, th – much later, while my mother was still alive here in the **United States,** is that the building in the middle of the courtyard – it was a couple of – series of small buildings within the courtyard, which were quite old and I think they're designated as historical monuments now. Anyway, she told me that during the Holocaust, during the shooting of Jews in **Paneriai**, those houses were used to – to store – to – to – I guess to – to house some of the shooters. And – and she said that you know, every morning they would take them out there you know, with trucks. And then in the – in the evening they would – they would bring them back, and they all would, you know, stumble and fall out

of the truck completely drunk, with bottles of vodka in their – in their hands, and apparently that –

Q: And the neighbors –

A: – that's – that's who they were, they – they – apparently th-these were people that, I think they were called the – the **Ypatingas Burys**, a special, you know, troop who did the shooting.

Q: Okay.

A: And where they got was people, and they were all young hooligans, hoods –

Q: Were they German?

A: No, they – they were Polish and Lithuanian and they were local – they were local people from **Vilnius** who obviously were doing it to be able to get their hands on all the vodka that they want. And they would start drinking in the morning and – and – and not – and not finish until they were passed out at night, I'm guess that's – that's how they did it, you know.

Q: Did your mother – did you have conversations – now this takes place in the **United States** when you're already older and so on. Did you have more extensive conversations with her about these things, about these topics?

A: Well she – she didn't like to talk about that very much, but of course she was very much aware of what was going on there and – but I don't know if she really

knew exactly what was going on there because this was not something like a public record, but of course everybody knew what was happening to the Jews of **Vilnius**.

Q: But I mean later, after the war, when you said that when you were in the **United States**, she mentions this – this incident, that these are the soldiers and they were in the courtyard, and so on. At that time, was there more conversation? You were already in the west, you were already – you know, it was safe and – and so on. Was there more conversation about such things?

A: Well she – she was always very – a humane person. And it's obvious that it was difficult for her to talk about something as – as hag – ghastly as that, you know, where – where you know, mass killing was – was carried out. And she – she was, of course were very condemning of the – of the g-guys who were – the drunks who were shooting there, you know. But other than that, oh there was – a-and – course th-the – the whole drift was that we don't have anything to do with them, these are just extremely, you know, bad people, they were the – should stay away from them, you know.

Q: As the war progresses, you get older, you know –

A: Uh-huh

Q: – you – your grow – and so by 1944 you are how old?

A: '44, I was nine years old.

Q: Okay.

A: This was in December – in December we – we left **Vilnius** and then **Lithuania** in December of ’44, when the front was advancing toward **Vilnius**.

Q: Mm-hm. What were the rest of the war years like? Was there any other interaction with Germans that you remember? Did you ever pass the ghetto by whe – after it was established?

A: I don’t remember that. We might have, but I don’t think anybody wanted to go near the ghetto because it was full of German guards, and things were closed off with gates, and people just didn’t want to get in – near that whole thing. I do remember that I think it must have been about 1943 or so, when the Germans, I guess in response to the failure of the Lithuanian – Lithuanians to establish a – a **SS** regiment or something like that, began sending, you know, selected people to the concentration camps. People who had nationalistic, you know, inclinations and things like that. And a number of people from the ministry where my father worked were shipped off to **Stutthof**, and you know, some of them died there. And so I remember that for – for weeks, my father and – and his other colleagues, you know, switched locations where they slept every night, so that they could not be easily found if – if – cause usually when they come to arrest you they come – they don’t go to your place of work, they – they come to – when you’re sleeping in your – in

your apartment or your house, whatever. So they – they were – well, you know, scared of getting shipped off to **Stutthof** and so they – they did this. And so that was, I think it was in this se-several, in the last months of – of the German occupation with. Cause this was going on already and they were trying to avoid that.

Q: Are there – are there any other memories, fragments of memories from that time, about the war, about the occupation, about perhaps conversations that were had about these things, that – that you can recall, when you were still in **Vilnius**?

A: Well, I don't think that our parents, and of course nobody else talked to children about what they knew what was – that was going on. Now of course, they all knew what was going on, but they were not sharing this with us. Of course, I think that my mother was always, you know, aghast that this was going on, you know. And my father, you know, our – this was a time when there were epidemics now going through. There was a typh – typhus epidemic which my sister and I spent a few weeks, you know, trying to – to get to – **Deet**. And I remember that, you know, before – before the, I guess ghetto, and – and the destruction of the Jews, our family doctors were Jewish. Dr. **Gehrler**(ph) and doctor – I du – don't remember the name. And I think that – and then toward the end, I guess, they weren't – they weren't there any more, so that was, you know.

Q: Did you have any memories of who th – of these individuals? Do you remember th – how they looked?

A: I faintly remember how Dr. **Gehrler**(ph) looked, because he would come and take care of us. But I don't – don't know anything else about him or what happened to him. He obviously wound up at some – in **Paneriai** or whatever concentration camp, you know.

Q: Oh. When did your own interest in – in these events that people were so silent about, when did it start to appear?

A: It was, I think, always there, because I knew, of course by reading the inter – the na – the international press and – and some books about the Holocaust, and – and the – the – the destruction of the Jewish population of eastern **Europe**. And of course you would – could not see very much of this, or any of this in the Lithuanian press here in the **United States**, because that was like a taboo topic, you know.

Q: Why? Why do you think it was?

A: Well, I think many reasons. I think one reason was that the Lithuanians who controlled the press were themselves ashamed of what was going on. They did not want to mention it or to – to – to – to even, you know, mention it in the – in their papers. Maybe it would go away, you know, that kind of thing. Now of course, there were some who were openly anti-Semitic, who said that this was all, you

know, some nonsense that the Jews are – are spreading, you know. But that – that, I think, was the minority, most of them just didn't want to, you know, hear about it.

Q: But why would they have a feeling of shame?

A: Because they knew that there was some – obviously they knew that there was some involvement by – by Lithuanian people, not just the Germans.

Q: I see.

A: Because when you look at – at – I-I started researching this thing on my own a long time ago. As soon as I got my degree and started working and se – then started reading books. And when the computers came out, I w – I went to the web pages of the various organizations that deal with the history of the Holocaust, and you know, find out what was going on. And after – and – **Lithuania** became independent again in '91, there was – there were publications by the – the history, a kind of, I guess history department or history institute, of various maps have to do with the history of **Lithuania**. And one of them was a map of where the executions of Jews took place in 1941. And I was amazed to see that the whole map of **Lithuania** was covered with these places, which also mentioned a number that were executed in each place.

Q: Yeah.

A: And –

Q: It's a small country.

A: Yes. And so it dawned on me then that this not something that could have been done by, you know, couple of hundred of Germans. I mean, they had to – somebody had to round up the Jews in each one of these localities, drive them – march them to the graveside, and then whoever shot them, shot them, but the – the shooters themselves did not do this, obviously.

Q: Yeah.

A: So that suggested to me that were a lot more people from the police forces of that – of the provincial police forces, who were involved. And obviously this is the case, an-and I've been trying to find out who they were. And in fact, I'm reading a book now by – just came out recently, I forgot the name, where a woman **PhD**, **Sutton**, I think was it –

Q: Mm-hm.

A: **Sutton**, yeah. And when she shows a picture of the **SS** officers with the police chiefs of the Lithuanian provinces sitting, a nice picture. And of course I – I – I – it doesn't take much – I don't have to be **Einstein** to figure out what they were talking about there, you know.

Q: Yeah. Why is this important to you?

A: Because I am Lithuanian, I was born in **Lithuania**. What happened in **Lithuania** is important to me. And I want to know the truth. I mean, it's – it's – it's kind of hard to take to – to talk about the people who – who are, you know, accomplices in something of this sort. But if that happened, I want to know about it. I want to know who these people were. Where th – where the – are th-they now. Most of them are dead, but, you know.

Q: Do you think that that curiosity, that need to know – it's more than curiosity, do you think that's shared by many people in the Lithuanian community, whether it's here in the **United States**, or there?

A: Not too many. I think a lot of them take the attitude that oh, this happened, you know, 60 years ago, forget about it, you know, it's gone, let's just go on with life. They don't care what happened.

Q: Would you – why sh – do you – I mean, this is a leading question, but, why should they care?

A: Well, any human being should be concerned about a – a – some – something that happened in which millions of innocent people were killed. And so I don't think anybody can just shake their head and – and forget about it. Unfortunately, th-things like that haven't stopped happening since then, your – you look at **Srebrenica**, and look at **Rwanda** and places like that. I mean, genocide, that goes on even now. And

I think people have to be aware of this an-and try to stop it, be at – learn from mistakes that were made, or – or they weren't mistakes, it's just a misplacement of – of priorities –

Q: Yeah.

A: – where the National Socialist Order simplistic solutions to – to complicated problems. Okay, you don't like the Jews, the Jews you think are doing something against your, you know, countrymen. So, of course, you kill them all, that's the best way to get to redress the problem. And this is exactly what they were doing in **Bosnia** and – and in **Rwanda** and places like that, and that should be something that people would no longer think about.

Q: Thank you. Thank you very much for sharing both your memories, and your thoughts, and your interest. I appreciate it.

A: Well, I'm still continuing these interests. I'll be contacting you, trying to find some more material about this.

Q: Okay, we'll be happy to help. Thank you very much. This conclu –

A: You're quite welcome.

Q: This concludes our interview with Mr. **Arvydas Kliore** on February 18, 2013.

Conclusion of Interview