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This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Danguole Gabis on December 10, 2015 in West Tisbury, Massachusetts on Martha's Vineyard. Thank you very, very much, Mrs. Gabis, for agreeing to speak with us today, for agreeing to share your story, your experiences and in this way help us understand how the awful things that happened during World War II and the Holocaust occurred, how it affected ordinary people.

I will start with from the very beginning and ask you about your life, about your family, about pre-war years, about your experiences, about how your family was affected. And we'll go from there. Can you tell me-- one of the simplest questions is, what was your name when you were born?

My name is Danguole Gabis.

Mm-hmm. What was your maiden name?

Puronaite.

Puronaite.

Uh-huh.

So you were born Danguole Puronaite?

Danguole Puronaite.

Did you have a middle name?

I was born in Kaunas, and [LITHUANIAN] 1929, August.

What was the day in August in 1929?

August 7.

August 7, 1929.

[LITHUANIAN]

All right. And Kaunas, you mean Kaunas, Lithuania. Is that correct?

Kaunas in Lithuania, yes.

All right. Did you grow up in Kaunas?

No. My father worked at that time for the Lithuanian border police. And they were just visiting Kaunas. And after I was born, they moved somewhere. I'm not sure. But they left Kaunas. [SPEAKING LITHUANIAN]

All right, why don't we say that in English? You said your memories from Lithuania are having lived in Zeimelis.

Zeimelis [LITHUANIAN]--

Excuse me for a second.

--and also visiting my uncles on their farms.

I see. We'll get there. I wanted to hear about all of that. But first, I'd like to know a few other basic questions. So we

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know your date of birth was August 7, 1929.

Yes.

You were born Danguole Puronaite. And you were born in Kaunas. Can you tell me, did you have brothers and sisters?

I had brother and sister. My brother was born-- they are both younger.

So you're the oldest.

I am the oldest child in the family, yes.

OK. Who was born after you?

My brother.

What was his name? Or what is his name?

Romualdas.

Oh, his name was Romualdas Puronas then?

Uh-huh. Romualdas Puronas.

And what year was he born?

[LITHUANIAN]

You don't remember very accurately.

No.

OK.

He was three years younger than I. So it would be '32.

OK. And then your sister was born.

She was the very youngest one. She just turned 79.

OK.

So she was about seven years younger than I am.

So she was born '35, '36?

Uh-huh.

All right.

And I think-- I don't know where my brother was born. My sister I think was born in Zeimelis.

OK. And what's her name?

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Gerda.

Gerda.

Gerda Puronaite.

OK. Let's talk about your parents a little bit. Tell me about your mother. What was her-- what was her first name and her maiden name?

Ona.

Ona was her first name?

Ona Martinaviciute. Her maiden name was Martinaviciute.

OK. And your father's name was?

Pranas Puronas.

All right. Tell me a little bit about your mother's family and what you know of it.

I know very little of my mother's family. We never lived anywhere close to them. And my connections were with my father's family but not my mother's.

OK. So did you ever-- you never knew any aunts or uncles or grandparents or anything?

Not on my mother's side.

OK.

I knew that her mother was dead. And, actually, when I-- I had met her sister, who lived at one point in Kaunas. And my father and I went to Kaunas when I was probably seven, eight years old. And we stayed at my aunt Julie's.

So her name was Yulia.

Yulia. Mm-hmm. I do not know her last name. She was divorced. She was divorced. She had two sons, I believe. And I knew one of her two sons, who was a priest.

I see.

And he came to visit me here on the island, on Martha's Vineyard, yes. He had come to Martha's Vineyard to visit me. He is now dead.

I see. I see. But he was, in truth, your first cousin.

Yes.

And so you met his mother one time when you were a seven-year-old girl.

Yes.

And then you met him only when he came to Martha's Vineyard.

I met him here in United States. And I don't quite remember now when I met him first. But he did come to United

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States. I met him when I was in Chicago.

Oh, I see. I see.

And at one point, he was a priest in Oklahoma, I believe, somewhere. And I remember taking a train to go there-- we lived in Chicago then-- to visit him.

I see.

And he had come to visit me here on the island. And I also-- my aunt, who took care of us after my mother was deported, my father's sister, had a small house in New Jersey, and I visited her there. And he was there, too. He came to visit her, too. I don't know where from.

OK. So we will talk about some of these events that you mentioned in a little bit. Right now, I'd like to-- I'd like to find out more about your family, the background of your family.

[PHONE RINGS]

So you would like to know--

More about your mother's family. So if you'd never met them--

I don't know much about my-- as I say, I do not know much about my mother's family.

Did she ever tell you anything about it?

She told me that she was very fond of her father, but she did not think much of her mother. But I haven't met either of them, either one of them.

Did she talk about her own childhood, her own youth?

She told me that she was sent-- she went to school. She finished high school, gymnasium. And they lived somewhere around Panevezys, I believe.

Uh-huh, Panevezys, which is one of the larger cities or towns, shall we say, in Lithuania, one of the five largest.

Uh-huh, uh-huh. But not in this city because they were on the farms.

OK. Was it a well-to-do family?

Was fairly well-to-do family.

Uh-huh. You knew that?

She had-- she had a couple brothers and two sisters. I think there were five in her family.

OK.

One of the sisters had married very well, the one who lived in Kaunas but divorced. Then she had another sister-- I don't remember her name now-- who was a nun for a while and then left the--

The order.

--monastery and married. And from what I understand, it was not a good marriage. But at one point, we visited them.

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Mm-hmm.

I don't know much, not much.

So tell me. It sounds unusual. She comes from such a large family, and she has siblings, many siblings. How did it come about that you didn't have much contact with them?

We didn't live close by. And remember, at that time, to get together was not as easy. I mean, you had to take a train, expense, where to stay, even if you stay with the family. And we had, my family-- my mother had me, and she had another baby, who died a little-- he was still a little baby. I have no memory of him.

Then she had my brother, who lived. Then she had-- I think there was another child that died. And then she had my sister. And also my father continued to work on the Lithuanian border, usually, my memory is, working on the Latvian border with Lithuania. And my mother then, at one point when we lived in Zeimelis, she worked in the library.

We'll come to that. That's interesting. It shows she had enough education that she would be working in a library, which is unusual in those times for young women and girls to do so.

I think most of her family were well-educated.

I see. OK.

All of them.

OK. Now let's turn to your father's family. You say his name was Pranas Puronas.

Uh-huh.

And what part of Lithuania did they come from, did he come from?

They were farmers. And they had-- the family had-- his mother had 12 children.

Oh, my.

His mother could neither read nor write. Family thought that my father was very bright, and they send him to school.

What part of Lithuania were they from?

They lived-- let me see-- Plunge.

Uh-huh, Plunge. So they were--

Somewhere in that area. Aukstaitija.

Well, that's Zemaitija. Plunge is Zemaitija.

Zemaitija.

Yeah. So Plunge is also very close to the Latvian border. It is in the northwest corner of Lithuania.

No. My father's education at that point had nothing to do with the borders.

OK.

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They were all farmers, and not large farms but small farms.

Were they well-to-do as well, your father's family?

They did OK, but they were not a wealthy family.

Did you ever visit your grandmother--

Yes.

--who had the 12 children in her own home?

Yes. But by then, I mean, my father was married, and I went there sometime since summer to stay with my grandmother and my uncles. One of the uncles had my grandmother living with him. Another one had his farm not too far away. You could walk there. And my uncle Danielius, I spent time with him.

And he was your father's brother.

Yes.

So of the 12 children that your paternal grandmother had, did all of them survive?

Eight survived.

Four died in infancy?

Yes. OK.

That's what I hear.

OK.

That's what I was told. Eight survived. I know that one emigrated to South America. And actually, my sister had been in touch with him.

Oh.

But he's dead now.

OK.

And the rest of them lived in Lithuania. I don't know all of them. I never met all of them, but I met quite a few.

I'd like to find out more of what it was like when you would visit them in the summertime on your grandmother's farm or your uncle's farm where she lived. Can you paint a picture for me what the house would be like, how much land they had? Describe it.

I don't know how much land, but it was not a big land. Hectares.

OK, it was in hectares.

Yes. And it was-- I really can't tell. Nobody told me. I did not discuss that kind of thing.

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Of course.

But it was a mother's house. It had a big oven in the kitchen where you baked bread. You put it inside and bake brick loaves of bread. There were other buildings. There was an-- there was a-- where the animals woke up.

The barn.

The barn. There was another building where the grain was stored and also had a bedroom there that was used in summer. There was a-- most of the living went on in the kitchen in the main room with benches around a large table and benches by the table. And the day meals were served there. During the day, the family had servants who worked in their fields, never in the house, in the fields.

How many other rooms were in the house? Or was it--

No. OK, there was this big room where the big stove was. And there was a smaller room. It's almost like a cool room where they kept smoked meats and things. Then there was a hallway and led into the other part of the house where there was a very lovely bedroom.

OK.

There was a bed in the hallway. There was a bed in that first large room. So I would say there were probably three rooms.

And all the family lived in those?

All the family lived in there. But when I met them, when I went there, there was only my uncle, his wife, my grandmother.

I see.

The others were off. They had gotten their land portions.

I see.

The farm was divided. The large farm was divided. They had their own land, their own houses, and they went away.

But did they all grow up in this house? All of those surviving children?

I assume so.

OK.

I assume so, that the eight of them grew up there.

And was your father amongst the youngest or the oldest?

He was not the youngest, and he was not the oldest.

OK.

I think he was somewhere in the middle.

OK.

I know he had a younger brother. Danielius was his younger brother. He had an older sister, Ona. His brother Peter was older. His brother Paul was younger. He married a woman from not the same village, a bit farther away, who apparently had no brothers and who inherited her parents' farm and property. And Paul married her. And in such way, he--

Became a larger--

--became larger farmer. One of my brother's sisters, Marita, whom I knew very well because I met her when I went back to Lithuania after the wars, married a man who turned out to be a drunk.

Ah. So this is one of your father's sisters.

Yes.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--all my father's siblings.

I see.

Marita was the youngest.

I see. Did you know your paternal grandfather?

No. He died. He was dead. When I started coming to the farms, he was dead.

OK. Did you--

I never met him.

Did you like going to the farm in the summertime?

Yes. Mm-hmm.

What is it that was the most fun for a little girl to be on that farm?

I liked-- everybody was very nice to me, people who were working there on the farm in the summer. I had a great deal of freedom to go through the fields and see them mowing the hay and then raking the hay, playing in the hay piles.

Did your brother and sister go with you?

Yes.

So it would be the three of you.

It would be three of us. Sometimes I will go just with my brother because my sister was too small, and my mother didn't want to leave her.

OK. But in some ways, this was both a relief for your parents that they were able to have a little bit of a break from raising children.

I don't know. It was never put that way to us.

Ah. How was it put to you? How was it put--

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Just simply, do you want to go to see your--

Your grandparent.

Yeah.

Yeah, your grandma.

--your grandmother and go to the farm? And we say, yes, I want to go to the farm. And we were taken.

What was your grandmother like? What was her name?

Barbora.

Barbora.

Mm-hmm. Yucite.

Yucite.

Yeah.

Barbora Yucite. Did you like her?

I liked her very much. She was a lovely woman.

Yeah?

She was very kind, very loving. I remember her saying that-- talking about me, that I would be such a pretty girl, except my dresses were way too short.

[LAUGHS]

Because in the villages then even little girls wore dresses practically below their knee, and my dress barely covered my butt.

[LAUGHTER]

So my dresses were too short.

Ah. What kind of a person? She was very kind to you. Was she also somebody who was like the family matriarch? Was she the person who--

Not exactly. I mean, they respected her. And she was very much involved in the work in the kitchen, the making that cheeses, the probably smoking the meats. And the family was quite religious, and they would go to church. We would go to church on Sundays, not every Sunday, though. I don't remember. And she was-- she wore long clothes. She wore a kerchief on her head, tied under her chin.

The white kerchief that so many used to wear?

Not necessarily white.

Not necessarily.

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Not necessarily white. But I remember that if they went to church, and that would be going to church-- where would that be? Palevene.

Palevene. Was that sort of like a small little village that had a church in it?

Small little town. Maybe a couple stores, the church, the house where the priest lived. [LITHUANIAN]--

That's right.

--in Lithuanian.

That's right.

And they had-- that's about all. But I had sweet memories that on summer-- some saint's day or what, everybody would bring food. And after the services, they would gathered in the grounds around the church and sit and eat. And they would have very good sweet cheese that I loved made from milk that was not soured.

Ooh, ooh.

And actually, one of my uncles married a town woman.

From this town?

From this little town. Mm-hmm.

OK.

She was a seamstress.

Did she lengthen your dresses?

She went from farm to farm and sewed.

I see.

Mm-hmm. And my uncle-- one of my-- my uncle Danielius, my youngest uncle, married her.

OK.

I forget her name.

OK. And--

It was a good-- it was not a rich life, but it was a good life, I think, all in all.

It sounds very nice. It sounds very warm.

Yes. The family was very close. They visited on the holidays. They visited each other and other farms. And it was a good time. I mean. My father, as I say, was sent to school, and then he went to the 1918 Lithuanian independence. He fought with the Lithuanians army, the partisans. And then he worked-- he was in the army, and then he was-- so he did not farm.

So was he the only one from all the children who were sent to have more of an education?

Yes. However, they all could read and write.

Except Grandma.

Except Grandma.

OK.

Though she carried a prayer book to the church all the time, though she couldn't read it.

Oh.

I remembered a pretty flower garden that she had.

Mm-hmm. Did you help her either in the garden or with preparing any of the foods that you mentioned?

I did not work.

You played.

I played. I was so little to do anything. Not even wash dishes. I was not asked to do anything. I would just run around with my brother. My brother, though he was three years younger, was a tall boy, and I was not big. So we were like twins. We spend a lot of time together.

That sounds idyllic for a child.

Yes, it was a very easy life. Few demands.

Yeah.

When we read in town, I quickly-- after I learned how to read, I loved to read. And since then, later on when I was now nine-- eight, nine, I used to take books out of the library since my mother ended up working in the library there in Skapiskis.

OK.

In Zeimelis, actually. In Zeimelis. I would go and take books out. And sometimes I would take books out that were not appropriate to my age, and I would read them, hiding.

Oh, really?

Yeah.

Do you remember any of the books that were so not appropriate?

Romances, some kind of romances. That's all I remember.

Yeah. Well, they're much more interesting because they're forbidden as well.

Yeah, yeah. But I read-- and I remembered another thing that I used to do. I liked very much Karl May. Do you know Karl May?

Tell us who Karl May is. I have heard of him mentioned.

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He is a German writer.

OK.

And he wrote books about American Indians, though he had never been in America or seen a live Indian in his life. But he wrote about-- what did he write-- about Winnetou, one of the-- he glorified American Indians.

So he was translated into Lithuanian.

He was translated into Lithuanian. He was quite popular. And I read the books, I remember. We used to play Indians.

Did you? Well, it's interesting because a whole generation of people-- I have heard him mentioned before by some of the people I've interviewed who are from Germany. And they would remember Karl May, reading him as they were growing up as well. And we never heard of-- here in the United States, it was not part of our childhood, not part of the books that we would remember.

Let's turn a little bit now to your father and your mother. You say your father was fighting in the 1918 war for independence. Is that right?

That's what I understand. 1915, 1918. He was very nationalistic. The whole family was nationalistic.

Your father's family.

Yeah. Yeah.

It was a value for them.

They weren't marching anywhere, but they certainly--

How would you-- when someone says someone is nationalistic, different images come to mind. How would it express itself?

OK. They liked the fact that there were Lithuanian schools, that the children were taught Lithuanian reading and writing. Because I don't know if you know it, but under the tsar's occupation, it was forbidden to print books in Lithuanian.

And they all remembered this then.

I remembered the stories about it. I mean, it was before my time. But I remembered people talking about stories about it, that you had-- and we were even taught it, explained to us that they used to print books in Lithuanian across the border in Prussia and smuggle them into Lithuania. And that's how they had books, Lithuanian books in their villages.

I see.

And you could be punished very severely by the tsar's agents if they found out that you had Lithuanian books. So there was this feeling that now they cannot tell us. We have our own books, our own government. I don't think anybody was too interested in how the government ran or what was happening. Their lives concentrated on their farm, on their families, on the weather.

Because it affects the farm.

Yeah.

Yeah.

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That's it. But as they say, they would not have-- they would never have welcomed any foreign country taking Lithuania over.

Well, some people will call that patriotic, not necessarily nationalist, that definition of it, that people find themselves to be patriots of their own country and willing to defend it.

Well, defend it. It's interesting how it happened from what I remember. Again, keeping in mind that I was now talking about the first thing that happened was the Russians coming in.

Are we talking now about World War II or World War I?

Two.

OK.

In 1918, Lithuania became separate. The tsars were defeated. Now I'm talking because I learned about it, not because it was much discussed in my family, because that was way before.

Got it.

Nobody would sit down and-- we didn't have TV or radios. We did have a radio. Nobody listened to it much, except operas. But what I learned later on, after the communists took over Russia government and then stopped a war, Lithuanians declared independence.

We're talking 1917, 1918.

1917, 1918. 1918. And my father fought then to get everybody out of Lithuania. He was in the army then.

So what year was he born? Do you remember?

Hmm?

What year was your father born?

What year was my father born? I don't know.

You don't know.

I don't know.

Do you know how old--

He must have been then-- he must have been then in his early 20s.

So in 1917, 1918.

Uh-huh.

OK. So he would have been born in the 1890s.

Probably.

OK. OK. And tell me a little bit about, how did your parents meet? Do you know about this?

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I have heard about it. I don't know quite how it happened. But my mother used to tell stories that they met somewhere not where the farms were.

OK.

Not in Zeimelis. Somewhere-- I'm trying to remember where it could have been. Panevezys maybe or Kupiskis. Anyway, my father showed up there. My mother in lived in that area, and she actually was dating somebody. And that friend of hers was not-- she found out he was cheating on her. Again, my mother tells the story. And so she got mad at him and mad at my father to spite him.

So your father was a rebound.

He was a rebound, and it was not a happy marriage.

Oh.

It was not a happy marriage.

In what ways?

Well, my mother felt that my father never accomplished much, that he was not ambitious enough, that he was sort of happy-go-lucky person and that she made a mistake marrying him.

Did you children used to hear that?

She would talk about it to her friends. And I would hear that.

I see.

She did not talk about it to me or any of us children. But she would talk to her friends about it sometimes. And that's how I heard about it.

Did they argue?

Yes, they argued. What did they argue about? Money. I think my father probably had a relationship with somebody. And my mother just simply did not have much respect for my father.

Ooh.

It just was not a happy couple.

Was the atmosphere then much different in your home?

It was not happy atmosphere in my house, no.

So it's a big contrast to when you would go spend the summer in your grandmother and uncle's--

Yes.

OK.

They do not abuse each other openly, or in front of us, there was not much arguing. But it just was-- I think in some ways, my father loved my mother. But he just never measured up to her expectations.

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Now, you described what she thought of him. How would you characterize your parents' personalities?

He was-- my father was easy going, I would say. And I think he really loved my mother. It's just that she did not really love him, and he could just not measure up to what she expected of him.

That's pretty harsh. That's pretty harsh.

Yeah. So it was not a happy marriage. And they were both very caring as far as we were concerned, the children.

Were you closer to one or to the other?

I think as a little girl, I probably leaned more towards my mother, but not really, because they were wise enough to never in front of us bring their troubles, bring their disputes, and try to tell us, oh, he's not good or she's not good. They never did that.

OK. So it would be what you had overheard and just the general sense.

That's what I overhear, that he is not ambitious enough, that he's not really supporting his family the way he should, that he's not working hard enough. Mostly, that was coming from my mother. I never, ever heard my father talking against my mother, never.

What kind of personality did your mother have?

My mother?

Yeah.

Hard.

Really?

[LITHUANIAN]

How did that express itself?

Well, my father was much more open and loving and fun, where I don't remember my mother playing with us so much. I mean, she made sure that we looked as good as possible. When you see that photograph, we are wearing beautiful red velvet outfits with my brother.

I remember the-- they both expected me to do well in school when I started going to school. But I would say my mother was not very affectionate, whereas my father was. My father was not much of a disciplinary person. And he was not much of a-- he was very easygoing.

So in some ways, all of this fell to your mother.

Yes.

She had to do all of the hard work.

Yes. Yes. She did.

Tell me--

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And she got that-- she got that job. She did not work all the time, as I remember. But she did get a job running that library because they did need the income.

Got it. Tell me how that library looked. Can you describe the building?

The library?

Uh-huh.

Sure. I loved the library. I still love libraries, though I can't read now without my machine. And it was on a corner of street and market square. In the middle of the town, there was a square where they would hold market days. They would have a market day. And farmers from the area would come and sell eggs. They sometimes had animals to sell to other farmers, even horses. And they would sell all kinds of fun produce, garden stuff.

And on that square-- I mean, on that open place, there was a Jewish bakery on one side, I remember. And on the other side on the corner was the library. Steps in, one story, my mother's desk there, and bookcases in the room. I don't think there was no second floor.

OK, so it was a one room library.

Yeah. But fairly large room. I mean, like the whole floor.

OK.

And you took the books out, you brought it to the desk, and how she marked them, maybe wrote it in by hand that so-and-so took this book.

OK.

And I think so, because I would take them out whenever I decided to go and browse around. So that was my accent. And I remember I would ask my mother to give me $0.10. And I would go to the Jewish bakery and buy a sweet.

Oh. Did you have a favorite sweet?

I know exactly what kind of a sweet.

[LAUGHS]

It's made from what we call now gingerbread. But it was made in the shape of a mushroom. And it had icing on top. And that's what I would get. That was my sweet. And it was-- it was very easy life. There was no other buildings in town. But I remember down away from there was a very nice Lutheran church.

You're talking about Zeimelis now?

Yes.

And Zeimelis, can you place it for me geographically? You said it was close to the Latvian border.

Yes.

And would it have been in Samogitia, Zemaitija? Or would it have been in Aukstaitija?

I think it was farther west. I think it must be Aukstaitija.

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You think it's Aukstaitija? OK, we'll eventually take a look on the map and see.

Yeah, uh-huh.

Was it a large town?

No, small town.

OK.

When I started reading, really continued reading as an adult, and started reading Chekhov, it reminded me of some of Chekhov's stories.

Really?

Yeah.

Your town, Zeimelis.

Yeah. Little provincial town. Was nothing there. Had a train station. But that was about it. I mean, there were no-- the big cats in the town were the mayor. I used to play with the daughter, mayor's daughter, now and then. And I used to go to her house to play, too, and she had a very fancy house.

And then there was the chief of police. The wife of the chief of police was my sister's godmother. And I remember one Christmas, she gave my sister this beautiful doll that had eyes that closed up. And I never had anything like that. So I was very jealous.

Aw. Aw.

I was very jealous of my sister to begin with.

And why is that?

Because everybody said, oh, what a beautiful child. Oh my gosh. And up to then, everybody said I was beautiful. [LAUGHS] My sister arrived. Suddenly, she was beautiful.

[LAUGHS] The nerve. The nerve.

Yeah, the nerve. Exactly. So who is she, this little, bitty thing?

Yeah.

So actually, it took us a very long time, though she-- when she was growing up, she said she adored me.

Really?

She said, I would think, if only I could be like Danga.

Oh. Well, see, that's the memories that children have and the urges, you know? The little ones always want to be with the bigger ones. Yeah.

And the bigger ones don't want [? them. ?]

No.

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Now, as I say, I got along with my brother just fine. But my sister did not count. I didn't even see her, if I could avoid it. [LAUGHS]

Well, she had this doll.

Yeah, she had this doll. Yeah. Yeah.

You mentioned the Jewish bakery where you would get some sweets. And that brings me to a question that I had. In Plunge, when you would visit your-- well, it was outside of Plunge-- when you would visit your grandmother Barbara and your father's family, was it all Lithuanian, or were there other peoples?

Ah, it wasn't Plunge. It was Palevenele.

Palevenele.

Yeah.

OK, is that close to Plunge or not?

No.

OK.

No.

So I was wrong in thinking Plunge at all. So it's Palevenele.

Plunge was where my mother's family-- some of her family lived. But no, we were Palevenele.

Palevenele. OK. And so were there any Jewish people in Palevenele?

There could have been. Zeimelis had some Jewish people.

Uh-huh. More than just the bakery.

More than just the bakery, yes. How many, I don't know. I do remember that there used to be some kind of Jewish holidays, and they would all go wrapped in some garments to the river. There was a river that ran through town. We children were talking that-- I don't know. Children stories went-- nobody really-- I mean, I did not believe. I don't know who believed. But there were stories that the Jews used the blood of Christian children for their baking at a holiday, some holiday.

OK, so those were the types of-- when Jews were talked about, that was something that you remember--

The kids.

--the kids would say. The kids would say.

Kids gossiping. My family did not really had prejudices. But there was a kind of a separate feeling. I think somebody arrived in that town, and he had a position as a banker maybe or even a lawyer. And I remember my mother said, well, I-- she had a dinner party, and she had this man included meet her friends. And she said, and I served pork. She said, I did not know he was Jewish. I served pork. Butt she said, well, he ate it.

OK. OK.

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I mean, my family as such, I did not hear them saying anything bad about Jews.

Did they have interaction--

But they were separate. They really-- some of them did not speak Lithuanian, or they knew just enough to run the store.

Were there more stores than just the bakery?

Yes, there were. There was a butcher store. I don't think that was run by Jews. There was some kind of dry grocery store, because I remember my mother used to send me there to buy her cigarettes.

She smoked?

She smoked. Yeah, she smoked. And I don't think there was really much more. If you wanted clothes made, you got yard goods, and you went to the seamstress, and she made it for you.

And this was a Jewish seamstress--

No.

--or Lithuanian?

No.

OK. And you say there was also a Lutheran Church in this town, in Zeimelis. So were there many Protestants there?

There must have been Protestants there. And there was a Lithuanian church. And probably there was a Jewish temple, but I did not know about it.

When you say you, we had a Lutheran Church, did that mean they were not Lithuanian speaking? It was also either Latvian or German or something?

I had so very little to do with Jewish families. I did have a Jewish girlfriend for a while--

You did?

--who was in school. I think she was a little older than I was.

OK. Do you remember her name?

And I don't remember her name. I don't think we were friends for too long a time. But I do remember going to her house, which was so much nicer than mine, and it smelled funny. It did not smell like my house. And it probably was garlic.

Ah.

Spices that we did not use. We lived in rented apartments in Zeimelis. We did not have a house. We lived in an attractive rented apartment, and then we left that I think when the Russians came. I don't-- something went on in the family. I don't know. But we moved out of there and moved in sort of very rundown place, I would even say.

OK.

That's where we-- there was like a small stable in the back of our yard. There was no grass around.

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In your rented places, did you have running water and electricity and so on? I want to get a sense of how modern the town was.

There was electricity.

You had a radio, you told me, yes?

We had a radio. There were telephones. There was a train station.

Did you have telephone in your home?

Yes, mm-hmm.

OK.

There was-- at least for a while, we did. And we hardly ever used it. I couldn't call anybody, I think. The farms did not have telephones. Post office, police office. And, to me, the police seemed to be-- chief of police seemed to be much bigger shot than my father.

I don't know why. I think maybe they lived somewhat better than my family. I don't think they had any children. The townspeople basically had their friendships in their own social class. They had their jobs. There were no demonstrations of any kind.

No political demonstrations.

No. Except on February 18, I think, was the day of independence.

16th.

That there would be a parade. My father would be dressed in his uniform and maybe even carried a sword. I don't remember. But it was definitely-- that schools would be closed, and there would be speeches and very often cold and miserable. But that was about all. And then, people also were connected to their churches.

Did your family go to church? Your father and mother?

We went sometimes.

Got it.

We were not a very religious family. Sometimes-- all the children were baptized. I was prepared to go to communion, first communion. And I remember my mother had a very pretty white dress made for me, but no sleeves. Just little straps, flowers. But there was no celebration at home at all for that. And my father did not live with us anymore.

Oh, so did your parents--

My father at one point-- I can't quite remember-- got a job somewhere else. That must have been when the Russians came or maybe even before that. But he moved out into an adjoining town and had a job there. And he would come and visit us. But my mother was basically in charge of the family and pretty much probably of family finances. So he did go in [LITHUANIAN] my understanding was.

It sounds like a separation.

Yeah, kind of. And then as far as the town goes, there were no cars. Everybody would come in winter with sleighs,

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horses and sleighs. And we kids would love to run after the sleighs, get hold of the back of the sleigh, and go for the ride, which was very dangerous because you could fall down and be trampled by other horses. So you were not allowed to do it. You had to sneak out to do it. And was very safe. I was never afraid that somebody will steal something from me or beat me up or what.

Did people talk about political things? Did they talk about what was--

I am sure that some of them did. Nobody talked in my family much about political things.

What was your father's job when he was border police? What did that involve?

That involved, as all borders have, patrols, at least at that time. I'm sure they do now. And he was in charge of a stretch of a border, in charge of the patrols. I guess he would ride out. He had a beautiful horse. I remember that. Lila was her name.

And he would ride out there and check on the patrols, I suppose. I think now and down, maybe every six months or once a year, some kind of a superiors would arrive, and he had prison documents. I remember it because my mother would fill these documents out for him at the last minute so everything looked OK. That's what I understood.

OK.

But he didn't have to be out there anywhere every day, all day, or what.

Did he have an office?

No. He didn't have any office.

OK, so there was no place-- there wasn't a place he had to go to every day to go to work.

No, no.

OK.

No.

So before he found a job in another town, he hung around the house?

Mm-hmm. Or he was away inspecting the borders.

OK. Did you ever join him doing that?

No. But I remembered him bringing-- in spring bringing a packet made of birch bark full with first wild strawberries.

Oh, that must have been nice.

Tiny little strawberries. They are [? framboise. ?]

Mm-hmm. How do you say that in Lithuanian?

[LITHUANIAN]

I've had them myself. They're quite delicious. They're quite delicious.

[LITHUANIAN]

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Yeah. When you used to visit your grandmother, how did you get there?

Horses. Someone from the farm would come and pick us up.

Mm-hmm. And then bring you there.

That's the way they picked us up. When my mother-- I mean, my father came to Zeimelis, showed up in Zeimelis-- because from what I hear, there were rumors that he's ran away, and he was afraid that they will-- family will be punished. So he showed up. And then there were rumors going on that things are not going to be good. Something's going to happen. So--

You're talking now at what point? Still--

'38.

'38 or '39?

'38.

Really? So when he was living far away-- not far away, in the adjoining town, but separately--

Yeah.

--there were rumors going on that things were not going to be good?

The Russians were there.

Oh, so that's already when the Russians were there.

Yeah. The Russians were-- the communist regime was already there. I can tell you about what I know about them.

OK, let's break just for a second. OK. So let's-- you started to talk about the Soviet occupation. And before we get into what happened during it, I'd like to step back just before and ask about, when did things change and how did things change?

That is, here you live in independent Lithuania. By 1938, you were already a nine-year-old girl. And August 7, if you were born in 1938, you'd be nine. And August 7, 1939, you'd be 10. And in late August of '39 is when Hitler and Stalin signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Right, right. Right.

And I'm sure that nobody-- but I'm leading you here. Maybe it's true that people did know about it. But from what I have heard, most people didn't know about this pact that they had signed.

I have no idea because, as I say, we did not discuss family-- in my family politics. Or I think in-- I am sure that some people who followed knew about it. But we did not listen to the radio. We had no information, and I never heard about anything. I just knew that the Russians took over Lithuania and that our President Smetona ran away. And there was some kind of-- some gossip going around. No fight, nothing. He just left, which was a disgrace.

OK. So--

There were even some little song snaps made about Smetona running away.

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Do you remember any of them?

No, I don't remember that. I remember another one, but I don't remember that one. I remember about both German and Russian.

Tell me.

[SPEAKING LITHUANIAN]

[LAUGHS] One--

[SPEAKING LITHUANIAN]

One is yet black as the devil. One is red like a dog. I don't need any Berlin. I don't need Moscow. Is that right?

Yes.

Yeah. So that was something that was--

That was already when the Germans came in.

I see. OK.

But first, we have to deal with the Russians. So what I heard about Russian occupation, I had not-- in Zeimelis, I haven't seen any police or, I mean, soldiers coming in or anything. The library was running like it did before. No change.

What about school?

Huh?

What about school?

Schools were running. However, they brought in an organization called [INAUDIBLE] pioneers.

OK. So did your teachers change? Did new teachers come in?

No, the same teachers. And I think there could have been classes about communism and how the common man was-- there were probably some people in town who liked the idea that it was everybody's going to be equal type of a thing. But I don't know.

I do know that the farmers were very, very concerned because they were required by the government now to deliver so much food, grains of all kinds, maybe even animals to the government, for which they got paid but very little. So slowly, depending how much land you had, it looked like slowly you will have to sell it, to leave it because you will not be able to have enough to deliver to the government.

And after that, they would start building koljoses. Koljoses is a farm that the land belongs to the state, and everybody works there for the state. So that was going along. But as far as my life or, I would say, my mother's life did not change. She still worked in the library. I still went to school.

Your father still did his job?

My father just was nowhere to be seen. I don't even know if he had a job of any sort.

He just wasn't there.

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He wasn't there. I do remember that once he showed up just to make sure that everybody saw him, that he was still alive, and then disappear again. And then just before that huge deportation was staged, he came home. And I have a feeling that the people knew or sensed or heard something that something is going to happen. So my father or my mother-- I'm not sure who-- got in touch with my uncles, and they came, and they picked us three up.

The children.

All the children. All three of us. And took us out into the farms.

OK, before we get there, though, before we get there, when the occupation happens, it comes in stages. August '39, right after your birthday, is when the pact is signed. Later on in the fall, the first Soviet troops are stationed in Lithuania. That may be going in different places, not in Zeimelis.

That's going on somewhere. But it's just never-- as far as I'm concerned, a child in that small town, I did not hear people talking much about it or the change from one to another. It seemed to me that people just-- I just knew-- what I knew of it was that Smetona, the president, left and that now it's the Russian government. The communists--

Government.

--are here.

OK. But different things happened. And I want to find out-- as I'm saying these things, I'm wanting to find out if any of this triggers anything for Zeimelis. And that is--

No.

--after the army has its soldiers based, then you talked about the requisitioning and the taxes that the farmers had to pay.

I don't even remember seeing any army.

OK.

In Zeimelis.

Was there a change in the police chief, a change in the mayor?

There must have been.

Was there anybody who lost their business, let's say a little store, or that it no longer--

Not that I knew of.

OK.

Not that I knew of. I don't think they had market days anymore.

OK.

I think these were stopped. I also-- I remember my mother talking that it was getting more and more difficult to, let say, get meat.

OK.

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Or other shortages--

Started to--

--I heard about in the stores.

Do you remember the following summer? Not even a year had gone by. But I think it was June or July. The new communist government voted to be included in the Soviet Union.

No.

So none of that was something that affected you in Zeimelis.

If something happened, it happened. But it was just--

OK.

I think there must have been newspapers around. But I certainly was way too small to read any of them. And nobody in my family read any of them. And there were no changes in town as such.

OK.

So for us, no matter who sat there, it did not--

Make a difference.

Yes. There was a patriotic feeling that they wanted-- But that was straight from the beginning, I think. It was right from the beginning, as soon as Smetona left.

What was the patriotic feeling?

Want independence. Do not want the Russians here, or anybody. Want to be independent. And people felt sad there was-- it was as-- what I have heard talking and what my mother talked about-- were unhappy that Lithuania was no longer independent.

OK.

And was part of Russia.

OK.

Actually, the communists, there must have been some communists in town as there were communists everywhere at that time in Lithuania. And they probably were happy. But there were no flag raising or big parades or, hurray, we are now part of Soviet Union or not. None of them happened. None of it.

So here you are, just over a year and a half later, August-- I mean, excuse me, September-- the fall of '39 is when the troops are staged. July of 1940 is when there's the annexation into the Soviet Union. And almost a full year before this time that you're talking about of people feeling like something's going to happen and your uncles come-- I'm just putting a date to this-- your uncle come and take you--

It was just before the deportations started.

OK.

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That's when-- I mean, I personally, nobody told me anything about it and did not discuss anything or talked in front of me about it. But I was told later on that my family felt something is going to happen, that something-- and that other people knew that something is going to happen. So my mother decided to send us out.

Got it. So then--

And she did not want to go herself because she did not want to leave the apartment and whatever we had because there would have been no-- though she did not sleep at home anymore.

Really? And why would she be frightened that she couldn't sleep at home?

Because people were afraid of the Soviets.

OK, so even though life really hadn't changed much--

No. Yeah.

--and things went on, there was a sense of insecurity.

Now, because they also felt that the war would be coming. There were rumors about a war coming. I believe there were also rumors that-- I mean, the Russians or the Soviets started demanding more and more from the farmers. They probably demanded something from the stores, store owners, or other people. It just-- obviously that the population was feeling uneasy and uncertain of what was going to happen.

Do you--

But definitely, definitely did not like the Russians. Hated the idea of them coming.

Do you remember leaving Zeimelis then with your uncle?

Yeah.

What do you remember from that?

Leaving? They came from their farm with a horse and buggy and a cart and just said, you are going-- my mother said, you are going to go to the farms, which was not so unusual for us because we went every summer, practically every summer there anyway. So we did.

Yeah, so this was like in late May, early June, something--

June.

It was in June.

Because it was-- schools were closed.

So it was June 1941, yes?

'38.

I think the deportations-- '38 Lithuania was still independent.

Well, when did the war start with Germany?

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June 1941.

You mean the Russian-German war started--

In June 1941.

1949. So the Germans did not come to Lithuania until '49?

No, until '41. So that's when it started.

Yeah.

The Russian-German war started in June 1941. And the deportations happened the same month.

So when did deportations start?

June 14, 1941. And a week later--

Oh, yeah, '41. Yes, yes. '41. A week later, the war started.

Yes, yes.

Yes, I remember now.

Yes.

The week later, the war started. Yes. So we were taken out to the farms. So I think the population felt that some-- there were rumors. There were probably spies. There were some kind of information floating around that the Soviets will be pushed out, and the Germans will come and push the Soviets out, and everybody felt-- I think most people probably felt, oh, well, that's good. Let's get rid of the Soviets. At least the Germans are religious. So that was it.

So when they took us to the farm, I did not think anything of it. Now, I tell, though, one thing. Once we got there, after staying with my uncles for about a week, we were taken away from my uncles. Our uncles distributed the three of us to different farmers around.

Family members or not?

No, not even family members. I don't know where my brother was or my sister. I know that I was with some people who I could have met, but they were not family members. And I just stayed there, and I did not know why. I thought maybe because the war was coming. Because at one point, the family had even a kind of earth tunnel built or something that you could go in if the bombs start falling, if they start shooting around.

Do you remember anything about this family that you were with?

No, don't remember. I don't even remember their name.

OK.

But they were kind to me. They were good to me. They did not-- they did not tell me what was going on. They just said my brother was somewhere else. I wanted to be with my brother and sister, mainly my brother.

Yeah.

And I just didn't.

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So that was the one unusual thing. It was not unusual that you would go with your uncles to the farms, but it was unusual that you'd be split up.

That we were taken from my uncles to the different farms. And then at one point, when the Germans came, we were taken to another farm, another uncle. And finally, we were-- all three of us got together again.

Do you remember about how long a time span that was?

No. I mean, the same summer.

The same summer.

Yeah, in a few weeks probably. Or at the most, a month.

OK. That's all we-- that's all we really need to understand what's going on. So, and what goes on with your mother and your father? What happened with them?

Wherever my father was, from what I understand, he had joined the Lithuanian partisans and fought the Russians leaving Lithuania, chased them, helped them chased them out. My mother was deported. That's why we were-- that's why they thought that something was going on, going to happen. And that's why we were sent to the farms. And after she was deported, we were sent to different farmers. And then after Russians left and the Germans came, they found my-- my uncles found out that my mother was deported. And how I found out--

Tell me.

--my aunt and my godmother, my father's older sister, Ona, we were going to some adjacent farm where I had left something there or some-- for some reason, we were walking. We were walking little paths through the farmland, and someone was working on the land. I don't know. My aunt knew him.

And they start to talk. And they start to talk, and the man said, I hear that Puronaiene was taken away. And my aunt said, shh, don't say anything, because I did not know. And then when we walked away, I asked her, I said, what happened? And then she told me that my mother was deported.

Did she know the circumstances of your mother--

She knew-- the only thing I was told, that the Russians took my mother. Deported. That's all I knew. I never went back to Zeimelis.

Ever?

No.

I have gone to Zeimelis-- did I go to Zeimelis? I don't think so. My sister had gone back, had gone back to find the same apartment, the last apartment that we stayed in. She said the brick stove that we used was still there.

So this must have been decades later.

Oh, yeah.

A long time later.

Now, from United States.

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Did you see your mother again?

Hmm?

Did you ever see your mother again?

Yes.

When?

I saw her-- she came to United States. We got her out. She came 49 years ago.

So that means it would have been 1965?

Somehow, we found out that she was back in Lithuania. Somehow, there were some relatives or people from the same village here in United States. And they have seen my father and us because we were in New Jersey for a little while. And they have written to their friends, their family in Lithuania, telling them, well, we saw Puronas and his family here in--

United States.

--in United States. And they told my mother. That's how she found out that we were alive. Because when she came to Lithuania, they did not know if we were alive or dead. And then she managed through-- because my aunt was writing letters to Lithuania, through family members, she found our addresses in United States. And I was living then in Chicago.

Were you already married yourself?

I was married. I had my third child.

So this must have been the mid-1960s.

Yeah. Yeah.

So it would have been at least 25 years later. When she came to the United--

She came to United States, yes.

And did she stay in the United States?

She died in United States, yeah. She stayed. She stayed first with my sister in Chicago. And Stanley and I and our children-- no, David was not born yet. I saw her for the first time again in-- 49 years ago. But we first heard from her, I had two children. I did not have David. So she wrote to us, and I wrote to her. And then Gerda and I kept sending presents to her. She lived in-- where did she live? Plunge.

Maybe that's how we know of Plunge.

Yeah.

She lived in Plunge.

Yes. She lived in Plunge. And Gerda and I kept sending-- we were-- at the beginning was very difficult to send anything. You had to send through some kind of organization that was connected with the Soviet regime that would allow the stuff to go in. We send basically yard goods of all kinds so she could trade them for food. She had acquired a

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tiny house in that town that belonged actually to my aunt, to Ona, my father's sister. She acquired that house. And she would request all kinds of very fancy goods. So we would send it to her, and she would exchange them. She worked also in a parish, I think, there as a head cook or something. I don't know.

In Plunge?

Yeah. But she basically lived off what we sent her. And she started bribing the authorities, trying to apply for a visa to get out and go to United States.

Your parents never divorced.

No. No.

When she came to the United States, did she ever tell you the details of how she got deported?

How she lived in the-- when she was deported?

Everything from the last time you had seen her to when--

Some. Some. She arrived in Chicago. I then lived in Columbia, Missouri. And I came to Chicago with my three children and stayed at my sister's. My brother came in. He lived then in Kansas, I think in Kansas already, and his wife. And we all went to the airport to meet her. I remember it was-- must have been close to Christmas.

I stayed there for a while, and then I went to the apartment because my baby was sick, and I couldn't stay out there. I had to go to the apartment. So this is what my sisters told me. She said, when she got out of the plane, we somehow-- all of us recognized her. But we also knew that once she was able to fly out of Russia and fly to Switzerland, that once she got to Switzerland, we knew she was safe.

So what she told about the camps, she said actually, first, she was kept in prison and was interrogated and was badly beaten up. And they wanted to get names of other partisans, partisans that were involved. And she said she didn't tell them anything.

So she then ended in camps way out the Altai mountains. And it was very difficult. She had had at one point some training as a nurse. So for a while, she actually helped out in one camp as a nurse, and she caught TB. She almost died.

And then they worked in the fields, and she said sometimes that peasants from the area would leave packages of food in the fields for them, for the prisoners, because they knew they were starving. She said by that time, a cat appeared in the camp. We knew that we lived much better because nobody ate the cat.

I can't imagine what that must have been like for you, for her.

Hmm?

I said, I can't imagine what that must have been like--

Yeah.

--for any of you.

Yeah. Yeah. And of course, she did not get anything-- didn't hear anything from us about her family. And then she served 15 years, as she was required apparently. Her punishment was to serve 15 years. So she did.

And then they said, that authorities told her that she can stay if she wants to and work as a nurse, and they will pay her. But she said no, she wanted to go back home. And so she went back to Lithuania.

So if she was there for 15 years, that means it would have been 1956 that she would have been released from her servitude--

Yeah.

--and went back to Lithuania in the mid-'50s or right after that.

Right after that. She went directly to Lithuania and stayed in Plunge because her sister-- one of her sisters lived there or close by. And anyway, she was given housing.

By your father's sister.

By her own sister.

OK, by her own sister.

Yeah.

By her own sister. So her own sister took her in. And when she came to the United States, who did she live with?

She lives with my sister.

Gerda.

With Gerda, yes, in Chicago. And to describe my mother, she was very thin, somewhat gray. And I mean, she was emaciated. She was very thin. Gerda took her to the doctors, and they said, well, if we did not know that she's living with you, we would think that she was being starved. But she was not happy. I think what she missed, she missed having her own place. She did not like living with Gerda. She did not like living with me.

Did she ever live with your father again?

She lived at the end with my father, and she died in-- with my father and my brother. My brother had both of them. And she went there because she lived in Chicago with my sister. And my sister, they had bought a house in Park Ridge, the same house that they are in now.

And she had broken her hip, and she could not climb the stairs. And there was no way for her to sleep downstairs. So my brother took her because they had a one floor house, sort of little shack in Kansas.

Did you recognize anything of the mother that you knew as a child?

No. Nothing.

So was it like getting a stranger--

A complete stranger. Mm-hmm. And very unhappy woman. Very unhappy woman. No matter what you did for her and how it went, nothing really pleased her.

Do you recognize any of that from growing up? Or was the mother you knew, as hard as she was, not like that?

No, no, I don't remember that. I don't remember her. I knew that she was not a happy woman when I was growing up. But partly was sort of that she and father did not get along. But, no. I really don't remember my mother laughing, smile, or really meeting anybody with great joy.

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There was something in her character that-- of course, the deportation and the arrests and all that were difficult. But some of that inner sadness was always there. And I don't know what for. Now my father was very different.

I don't know what--

So she died in Kansas. My brother called me. It was right at New Year's. I don't remember how many years ago. But he called me, and he said that Mother had to go into the hospital. And I called her and talked with her in the hospital.

And she said, oh, I'm feeling-- I don't feel bad. She said, I'm OK. There is somebody here who can speak-- her English was not good, not very good. But she said, somebody here can speak Polish. And she knew Polish, and of course, she knew Russian. And so she said was very good. And she died next day.

How many years did she eventually live here in the United States?

Maybe 10, I think. She was 80 when she died. I know that.

Do you remember her birth date?

No.

No.

I flew out to Kansas for the burial. And now my father is dead, and my mother is dead. They are both-- and my brother is dead. And all three of them are buried in Kansas on this sweeping hill. And you can see as far as your eye goes.

Is it a good resting place?

Hmm?

Is it a good resting place?

Very good resting place. Very quiet. Very good resting place. Yeah.

Well, it sounds like when you went away in that wagon with your uncles in 1941 was when you actually lost your mother.

Yeah. Yeah.

Thank you for sharing this. I think we'll take a break now.

Yep.

All right. So before the break, we were talking about what had happened with your mother, what her destiny was. And one thing that I wanted to see if we could bring some clarity to would have been, what was the reason for her deportation? Why would she have been taken? Can you supply any explanation for that?

I do not have any specific informations. What I heard people talking about, that there were more people-- she was not the only one from the town that was taken. There were more people taken from that town, I think the mayor of the town and his family. And it's strange coincidence. One of the daughters, small daughter of that family, was staying with her grandparents in the village, and she was left.

I see.

So everybody was taken in the family but her. And she grew up and actually came to United States. And from the

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people, there was a feeling that they were trying to pick up better educated people and probably people that might have been a problem. I had never heard anything said that my mother would have been picked up because of my father. I haven't heard that at all.

Why would she then have been picked up. If not because of your father, what would be the reason?

But the thing is nobody was given any reason. They just showed up and said, you are going, period. That is my understanding. There were all these people taken from this town. And it was a massive deportation all across the country. People were taken from other cities, too, and shipped straight out to Soviet Union. And much later on, one of my uncles and his family were deported. That was during the '40s.

After the war?

Yes.

OK.

Yes. When the Russians stayed in Lithuania.

OK. So there was no-- your mother had a feeling.

There was no specific charge. It was not like somebody showed up and said, OK, you've wrote this pamphlet or you belong to this group, and that's why you will have to go.

OK.

What happened to my mother probably happened to very many people. Very often, I heard those stories that they separated small children from their parents, and some of these very tiny children were given away to Russian families to raise.

Oh, really?

I don't know if that is true. I really don't know. And as far as I was concerned, the way I found out-- I told you how I found out about it-- nobody ever explained to me why she was taken. It just that there were many other people taken.

Do you remember missing her?

I miss her terribly. Everybody-- I mean, my sister was tiny still. She was seven years-- she's seven years younger. So my sister, she said that-- she told me much later, now actually, that for a long time, she thought maybe she did something. That's why was Mother was gone.

And it's just one of these things that happened. And in a strange way, though now, of course, I would question it-- if anything like that would happen or similar, I would be questioning everywhere. But at that time, I was small. The war was going on. And nobody never asked any questions. I never asked any questions. And nobody explained to me.

So even up until the time your mother was taken, you had never seen any Soviet soldiers.

No.

No. But soon after that, there was a German attack, a Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, and now Lithuania was a part of the Soviet Union. How did that-- how did you-- do you remember that happening?

I was then not staying with any of my family. We were separated, the three children. And I was staying with some some people, and then eventually heard that the Russians left and the Germans came. And as far as I was concerned-- and the

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people around me were glad to see Germans because the Russians were beginning to confiscate the farms and impose all kinds of restrictions like that. And the times in the country became more difficult. So they thought, well, occupation-- at least some of them would say, well, at least they believe in God.

I see. I see. You remember hearing that?

Yes. I remember hearing that. However, did I tell you the little ditty that was passed around?

Tell me again. If it's the same one, we'll find out.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

OK.

[SPEAKING LITHUANIAN]

OK. It starts out with-- and it's a variation of what you told me before, which was neither Berlin nor Moscow is dear to me. For me, one is black as the devil. The other one is as brown as a dog.

Yes.

Yes. So you eventually do get reunited with your brother and your sister?

Eventually, we were all brought together, first on the farms.

OK.

On my uncle's farm, we all came together.

Was this your uncle Danielius or another uncle?

Oh, Danielius.

OK.

On my uncle Danielius' farm. And from there, my father showed up there, too.

OK.

He was there. Then I saw soldiers. I saw soldiers, I believe, in Skapiskis.

I see. German soldiers?

German soldiers, yes.

So these are the first foreign soldiers that you see.

Yes.

OK.

Yes.

And how is it that your father didn't get deported?

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He wasn't home. How was it that we were not picked up? We were not home.

I see.

Otherwise, we all would have been picked up.

I see. But your mother had also been sleeping somewhere else.

My mother was sleeping somewhere else because she also felt that something is going to happen. But she came home in early morning before going to work, I think to feed the chickens. We had chickens. And they picked her up. How did you find out about this, this detail?

Huh?

When did you find out about this detail?

My mother told us.

So that's 25 years later.

Yes.

I see. I see.

Yeah.

OK, let's go back now when you see the first soldiers, German soldiers in Skapiskis. What happened then? Your father shows up? You three children are together. Continue. What happens after that?

After that would happen, the summer was coming to the end. My father told us that we will move to Svencionys.

OK. What is Svencionys?

It's a city, a town.

OK.

And I did not know where it was or what it was, but-- and that he will be the head of the security. I had no idea what the head of the security is. So I asked him. I still remember. I asked him. I said, well, will you be a bigger boss than a chief of police? And he smiled. He said yes.

I see.

And that's all I knew about it.

So in Lithuanian, would this have been-- he would have been-- what was his title in Lithuanian? If it's head of security in English, how did he put it in Lithuanian?

In Lithuanian?

Mm-hmm.

[SPEAKING LITHUANIAN]

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And you asked him whether or not that was a high--

A bigger-- yeah.

A bigger job than [LITHUANIAN].

Yes. Uh-huh.

And he smiled and said yes.

Yes. Mm-hmm.

OK. Did he have a uniform?

No.

Oh, he never wore a uniform?

No.

He was always in plainclothes.

Yes. He wore a uniform when he was working for the Lithuanian government on the border police.

OK.

Then he wore a uniform.

OK.

But after he left Zeimelis and worked somewhere else, did not live with us, he did not wear a uniform. I also remember feeling very strange seeing him in civilian clothes.

Really?

Yes, because I was so used to seeing him in a uniform.

OK. So tell me about your first impressions of Svencionys. Where was this place? What did it look like?

I have no idea where it was. I probably could-- I knew that it was not too far from Vilnius.

OK, not from far the capital. OK.

Yes. I knew that. And we arrived. We moved into this apartment there. There was furniture. I did not know anybody. I went to school, which was not too far from the apartment where we lived. And [LITHUANIAN], that's my--

Godmother.

--godmother. And my father's older sister, who was not married and had no children, came to live with us because my mother was gone.

OK.

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And sometimes my [LITHUANIAN], my grandmother would come, too. My aunt was very religious person. And so she went to church a lot, and she took us Sundays to church. I did not have many friends. I did not know anything about the town. I did not know anybody, but met a few people in school in my class. One of my classmates sometimes would come and play with me in our house.

Was your house better than it had been in Zeimelis where you lived?

Yes.

In what way?

It had more room. And it was better furnished. We had a garden and a flower garden.

Did you rent it from somebody?

I assume so.

OK.

I don't think we owned it. Now, Rita tells me that she had gone back there looking for the house, but it was burned down.

You're saying now your daughter Rita went back to Svencionys to look for it.

For the house, but it was burned.

But it was burned down.

It wasn't there any longer.

OK. Did your father ever explain or just describe how he got this job from Zeimelis to Svencionys?

No, no.

Because it's quite distance. I mean, it's quite far across the country.

Yes, yes. And he was not working at-- well, in my mind, I assumed that we have a Lithuanian government now.

Mm-hmm. That was your assumption at the time.

Yes. That the Russians have left. And so the Germans were there in the country, but they were there to kind of protect us from Russians. And I don't remember quite, but I do think there was some quasi-Lithuanian government. How real, how unreal, or am I imagining it, I don't remember.

OK.

I remember my school that I liked. The children were friendly. I also remember that there was a Polish population in town.

Uh-huh. And was this something new for you?

That was something new to me.

OK.

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But there was a Polish population in school also. And at one point, I think there were classes in school were given in Polish.

Did you ever go to any of those classes?

No.

No.

They were discontinued. Everything was in Lithuanian. If you know Lithuanian history, that part of Lithuania, Vilnius and all around there, at one point was in Polish hands. After 1918, the Poles, they were there, and the Lithuanians could not get the land back.

So only when the-- first, the Russians, the communists came to Lithuania. They brought this country, these parts of Lithuania, back to the Lithuanian Republic then. And the Germans also had it all in the Lithuanian Republic. Actually, when my father was working in Svencionys, we have gone to Vilnius-- excuse me-- to visit with some priests that my aunt knew.

Mm-hmm. Was that the first time you were in Vilnius ever?

Yes.

And do you remember any impressions from that visit?

Churches, basically.

There are a lot of churches there.

Yes. And knowing my aunt, yes. We went to churches.

OK. So within a number of months, actually one could say rather quickly, your life really turns upside down but then gets resettled halfway across the country.

Again, if I think about it now, it's very unsettling. However, I was small. I was still very young. And I wasn't the only one who was being resettled everywhere up and down. The whole country was being resettled up and down. It was not unusual to have to move and start somewhere else. And I really didn't have a place, some [INAUDIBLE].

My mother was taken. So in Zeimelis, there was nothing for me, anybody else. And, well, the farms-- my uncles' farms were OK. But I had to go to school. So I will not have stayed in the village anyway. And I had never been there in winter. So moving to another city, another town, and another apartment wasn't something that was dramatic. The hurtful thing was that my mother wasn't there.

You missed her.

That was difficult.

Yeah.

And though I liked my aunt, I never-- somehow, in my silly, little mind, I felt that my mother was more worldly, more sophisticated.

Was she, in actuality?

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Yes, yes. Yes. And my aunt was this very religious country woman, though she was kind enough. She was a good woman.

Yes, but she wasn't your mother.

Yeah. Somehow, I had warmer memories of my grandmother. We really liked my-- were very close to my grandmother.

Yeah. Your father, did he have an office that he went to?

No. Yes, he had an office.

He had an office. Did you ever visit him there?

No. I never been there. I never went there. I never saw any Germans around, soldiers. We knew very few people in town. Actually, when I think of it, I don't remember see anybody that we knew, except people through [LITHUANIAN], from my aunt at a church. And I remember that the priest, the parish priest, would give huge, very elaborate Easter breakfasts at that parish and invite some people.

OK.

And I went to church a great deal and was invited with the church ceremonies.

Did you get communion, first communion? Oh, that was before already. Did you get confirmed?

Yes, in Vilnius.

In Vilnius. You got confirmation in Vilnius.

Mm-hmm.

OK. Now, in some ways, what you're describing to me sounds not unusual because up until those changes in 1939 to 1941, this was Poland. This was not Lithuania. So it was new territory for a Lithuanian administration. Were there other Lithuanians in Svencionys, or were they a minority?

Everybody spoke Lithuanian. If you went to the store or if you went to a restaurant, which we sometimes did, everybody spoke Lithuanian.

OK.

And whoever-- in school, whoever was in school with me spoke Lithuanian.

Now, you said, though, that you did know that there were Polish children in your school, and for a little while, there were classes in Polish.

Not after we came.

Oh, I see.

Before.

Before.

Before we came, they spoke-- they had Polish. But when we came there, when the Lithuanians had hold of these parts, the school was only Lithuanian.

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Did Polish children, however, attend it?

I don't know if they were Polish or not. They all spoke Lithuanian.

I see.

I did not meet anybody in school that spoke Polish.

I see. One of the reasons I ask is because in Poland itself, during German occupation, education was severely restricted for Poles, severely, in some ways, outright forbidden, and some places only up until certain grades. So maybe children went to school who were-- Polish children went to school and were able to continue school but only if they did it in Lithuanian.

Probably, because the-- from what I know, our education was not restricted in any way. But then, again, there was this-- Germans, from talks around, had something against the Slavs. And Poles were Slavs, and the Lithuanians were not. So I think we might have gotten some preferential treatment.

I see.

It's possible. Again, I just heard it as gossips sometimes among some adults.

OK.

But when we came there, didn't know anybody.

OK. Now--

And we just moved into the apartment. I was taking piano lessons.

From whom?

And I do know that as time went on, things became more difficult. For example, food became scarce.

Mm-hmm.

You could not get meat, or you got very little meat. But we had rabbits. We kept rabbits and hens and I think even geese. And I don't remember ever going to the store to shop. Whatever was bought, my aunt probably went and shopped.

So in some ways, it sounds like you were quite sheltered as children.

Yeah.

Would that be true, that you were kind of sheltered from the chores of everyday--

Yes. I never was asked to do anything. I did not have to make beds. I did not have to help in the kitchen.

And you were the oldest.

And I was the oldest, yes. No.

Was your father still as easygoing as he had been before?

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There were times where he would disappear for a couple days or so. There were times that he would be drunk.

Oh, really? Had you ever seen him drunk before?

No. There were times-- well, if he was drunk, he was loud. He talked loud. He never talked politics of any sort.

Did his manner change to you or to the others?

Towards us? No. No.

Did he--

He was always very gentle with us. And in some ways, I felt he was unusually proud of me because he thought I was very smart. And he thought that till the very end of his life, which is interesting.

It's important for a child.

Yeah, yeah.

It's very important for a child to feel that from their parent.

So Rita, my sister-- Gerda, my sister, was considered very pretty. I was definitely the smart one.

I see.

And there wasn't much shopping of any kind. I think whatever clothes we had, they were made over, changed.

Did you make any new friends in Svencionys?

I did. I had especially one girl who lived out of town. And she would sometimes after school come to my house and stay with me, and we would play.

And she was somebody you had met from school?

Yes.

Do you remember her name?

I don't remember her name.

OK.

That was also just for a short while. When I think of it now, and knowing the history of my father there, I can see that some people probably were avoiding us. I mean, that's what I read into it now. At that time, I had no idea. We were in a place where I was not familiar. I did not know the place. I did not know the people. I was in a new school. I did pretty well in school.

Well, you mention knowing now about such things. When did you find out? And what did you find out?

Rita's book.

So your daughter recently wrote a book that was published less than three months ago in September 2015.

Yeah. Yes.

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And before then, what had you known about your father's work? We'll talk about what you learned. But I want to find out what you knew.

Yeah, what I knew about him. OK, there-- let's see. How long a time was it that the Germans were there and then the Russians came back?

I think it was from '41 to '44.

Three years.

At least. Mm-hmm.

Around three years. OK. So at one point, I remember that my father was-- let's see. Yes. We left Svencionys and moved to Kupishkis because my father was arrested. I was on the farms. I and my brother were on the farms with our uncles. And my grandmother was in the apartment in Svencionys. And my uncles went and picked her up.

I think also in that period, that summer, at one point, before our uncles, before I went to our farms, we were taken out of town. Now, who took us, I don't remember. And we were placed somewhere in a very wooded place, somewhere in the woods by some family for a few weeks or a month or so. I'm not sure how long.

But then we all came together. I'm talking children. And we all left for my uncles' farms. And then while there, at the end of the summer, time came to go to school. And my uncles rented an apartment for my aunt and the three of us in Kupishkis so that we could go to school.

So it was another new school.

It was another new school. And I haven't lived in Kupishkis before. I didn't even-- I was not familiar. So I went to school there. And then when we were in Kupishkis, we heard that my father was in prison. No, before we came to Kupishkis. We were still at my uncles' farms. We heard that my father was arrested. he was in prison in Vilnius. And so my uncles found out about it. How, I don't know.

I remember thinking that it was so unfair. The Russians took my mother, and the Germans put my father in jail. And the school started. We moved to Kupishkis. And there was an break in the fall. There was some kind of a holiday. And my aunt was ready to go to Vilnius, visit our father, and I was going to go with her. And just before we left, we received information that he was released.

I see.

So he was released, he came to Kupishkis to see us, and then went to Panevezys where he was employed again.

So he never went back to Svencionys?

No.

I see.

Never went back to Svencionys.

Do you remember what month or what time, what year it was that he was arrested?

The only way-- I think after two-- I must have spent two years in a school in Svencionys.

OK.

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And it would have happened in the summer after that.

So it would be the summer of '43.

Probably, yeah.

OK. Now, when you moved to Svencionys, you mentioned that there was-- first of all, it was part of Poland. There were many Polish people.

I did not really even know that.

I know. I know.

Yeah. I just knew that there were Poles living there.

Did you see--

And I know from the history. By then, I knew, because I learned some history and geography, that Vilnius and the part around Vilnius, after 1918 was left for the Poles. But as soon as the first communist occupation took place, that part of Lithuania was put back to Lithuania.

So some could say that was something that was advantageous.

Yes. Well, advantageous. Yes, everybody-- Lithuanians felt good. We have our land back.

Mm-hmm. I see. Now, from what I understand about Svencionys, it had not only a Polish population but also a Jewish population before the war. When you went there, when you lived there, do you remember any Jewish shops? Do you remember any Jewish people? Do you remember seeing anything on the streets, anybody on the streets?

No. And if-- I mean, unless they were dressed differently or went to-- I don't remember seeing a synagogue. I did not remember hearing any Jews in the stores. Just didn't see any Jews. No Jews ever came to our house. And I don't remember seeing any Jewish children in school. But then that's not surprising because when I was in Svencioneliai, I did not know if there were any Jewish children in my school.

OK.

They would not necessarily would have announced themselves as Jewish or try to stand out.

Did you, as children, know what was happening to the Jews of the country?

No. No. I don't know. It might have been discussed among my family like my uncles and my grandmother or even my aunt who lived with us. But they never tried to tell us anything about the fate of the Jews or did we ask. Now, why didn't we ask? Perhaps we were scared.

Why would you be scared?

If people are being arrested, you are scared, if you are small and people are being arrested, especially if they were people that you knew, though I didn't know any Jews. I knew Jews in Zeimelis as store owners.

But in Svencionys, when we moved into Svencionys, I did not meet any Jews. And I mean, I know what happened. But when we arrived there, I would now think that by then, the Jews must have been rounded up and moved out of town.

OK.

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Because I know that Germans required that they wore a yellow star. Now, where did I find that out? Was it there or much later? Probably still in Lithuania. But I never saw anybody wearing it.

Did you ever see somebody wearing ribbons?

A what?

Ribbons of some kind.

No.

No.

No.

That would mark them as Jewish. No.

No.

OK.

I really don't think I met any Jews there or knew what was happening to the Jews.

Would you have ever thought at that time that your father might have had something to do with it?

No. This sounds very stupid, but I had no-- not only knew what my father's job involved.

That's not stupid. You were a child.

Yeah, well, it was security police. So there were plenty of reasons to want to be secure. I do remember an incident because it was so talked about very much at that time. There was an incident where a German-- two Germans were in a car driving somewhere not too far from Svencionys somewhere.

And they had a translator, a woman. I assumed she was a Lithuania woman. And she was connected with the partisans. I knew there were partisans in the woods. And she asks the Germans to stop the car because she needed to go to woods to relieve herself. They stopped the car, and the partisan shot them. And then she was arrested. The Germans picked her up.

And I remembered that there were some German-- Wehrmacht with the brown shirts had appeared in town, even were in our house talking to my father. And I remember my father making a remark to somebody that she would be better off dead.

And I remember then hearing something that people were shocked because of this. I remember that they picked maybe that incident or some other incident. The Germans picked up a couple men-- they were not Jews. I think they were Poles, maybe Lithuanians-- and shot them. They took them to Jewish cemetery and shot them there, though they were not Jewish.

And I remember I was very-- I was afraid. But then I don't know where they were buried or not buried or what they were shot for. But I was afraid. And then the Germans kind of disappeared again. There was not-- I did not feel a strong German presence in Svencionys. Because if you walk to school, if you walk to town, you didn't see them.

Now, did you feel safe?

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Huh?

Did you feel safe? Given what you're describing to me, that doesn't sound like an easy thing to answer.

No. You didn't. When things go like that, you don't feel safe. You don't feel safe anywhere. So there were times in my very young life where I was-- I mean, just the fact that my father was then arrested.

Did you ever find out what for?

No. One did not ask. I mean, these things were-- people were arrested. So the government, whoever they are at that point, has something against you. So they arrested you. Why? Who knows? The whole system of justice was non-existent. It was on the whim of the government that was at that time in power. That's it. They did not have to give any excuses or explanations. You could have been picked up walking down the street and hauled off.

Mm-hmm. So--

Because it happened. Look, when my mother was taken away, there were thousands of people taken away.

So it wouldn't have occurred to ask why. Is that what you're saying?

No. Didn't even occur to ask me why.

OK. Well, now--

You know what? And also then, whatever was happening to the Jews at that time, had I even known about it, that they were being arrested and hauled off, it would be just another thing happening. Another crazy thing happening. Scary.

It's a very hard life, very difficult time. It's interesting when I think about it. Heck, here I am. Wonder of wonders. I don't even lock my door. I did for a long time in my life. I did not feel safe. And then we live in DP camps.

We'll talk about this.

Yeah.

But I want to still stay with--

Stay with this period in our life.

Yeah. Now, at this point, I'll interject how it even is that we come to speak with you today. And that's by mentioning the book that your daughter wrote. Your daughter Rita Gabis wrote a book that was published two, three months ago called Guest at the Shooter's Banquet. And in it, she describes her journey to find out more about what your father's role had been during World War II in a way to find out who he was, more of who he was.

And I've read the book. And in it, I also read that you did not want to know until it was finished. You were going to read it, but not until it was finished, as to what her progress was. Am I accurate in saying that? Or were you involved in her research work?

About what, the book?

About the book, about what she was doing, about--

No, I was not at all involved.

OK.

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No. She came here once with her husband, and my sister was here. And we had one conversation where I think she was in the process of getting her book going about our life in Svencionys and what do we remember of the war and that period. And she did not feel that we gave her a very satisfactory answers, that we knew enough about it. And it's true. When you think of this, if something like that started happening here, you would be up in arms.

But I was this young child. The country was up and down, first one invasion, then the other invasion. There was no stable government of any sort. Nobody even taught us about any government, stable or otherwise. So you just kind of stay with your family and mind your business, and you don't need to ask any questions. The rest was not up to us. The only thing I can say, it's what you hear, what you overheard.

Mm-hmm. Now since then, you've read the book. Is that correct?

Yes.

What is it that you learned that you didn't know before?

I thought she did a very good job writing the book. I thought not only she wrote a beautiful book-- she's a very good writer-- but also she did as much research as was needed. And she wrote about things that I truly believe happened.

Mm-hmm. And these things involve some very bitter and very tough and one could say brutal events.

And I can-- I expect her-- I won't say interpretation because it's not interpretation. It's a fact that was going on. And now, knowing my father as a grown person, though I always have been his favorite child, and I love him dearly, I know that he was a vain man. I don't think he was a mean man or a cruel man. But I think he was vain. And I think he could have easily fallen into a place where he will do things to promote himself.

Now, how far he would go with that, as the book says, he went pretty far, just about as far as you can go. But then, none of that was ever discussed at the household. Never. And I had no-- I really had no idea what a social-- what a chief of security would do because I never heard of that title. Never met anybody who was a chief of police-- of security police.

But as Rita writes, it did involve sending out orders to round up Jews. It did involve making sure they were brought to certain places.

And if I had stayed, let's say, in Zeimelis where I knew the Jews lived there and where they lived, now had I stayed there and known that they disappeared, I would have been more curious. Then I would have known that something is happening and what is happening.

Someone was there, and now they're gone.

Yeah, yeah, that they were arrested or taken away. The talk would be right there about it. I was in a city and town that was larger. I had never been there. I never knew there were any Jews there.

And the only thing you see from your father is that sometimes he gets drunk, that he didn't before.

Yeah, but then that's also-- my father liked to drink now and then. He never was a man who would sit down and get drunk by himself. But he would love-- he loved company. And he would go-- they would go out, and they would drink at somebody's house usually, very seldom in taverns or some such thing. Somebody's house, usually. Our house, too.

When you read-- when you read what Rita discovered, what she wrote-- she interviewed some of the Jewish survivors from Svencionys. She interviewed some of the relatives of the Poles who were shot as a reprisal for the killing of these two Germans. Did she present to you a man who was a stranger to you as a father? Or was it someone you knew, but you didn't know these things about him?

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I obviously did not know what's going on. I did not know what was going on with the Jews. And I did not know what my father's part was in it. After everything was over and I was learning history later on and I was learning what happened and thinking of my father and his place there, I can easily understand that that could have happened. It did not take me by, oh, no, my daddy would never do something like that. No.

OK. OK.

No.

We'll talk about DP life. But at this point, I want to jump ahead because there's another unusual wrinkle to this story is that after you come to the United States, you meet and you marry somebody who is Jewish.

Yeah.

Can you tell me about that, how you met, how you married?

I was his student.

Oh, really?

Yeah. Easy. Easy.

What did he teach?

Government. I couldn't have cared anything about the United States government. Never knew about any government, cared less. [LAUGHS] Stanley would tell me what will be on the test. Sort of him, you should study this and this. I would go there and think. I got Cs--

He gave you Cs?

--and a husband.

[LAUGHTER]

It wasn't bad deal.

What was the name of your husband?

Stanley.

Stanley.

Uh-huh.

Stanley was his first name.

Yeah.

Last name Gabis?

Yeah, Gabis.

Gabis.

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They were-- his grandparents came from-- somewhere from Russia or Belarus, from somewhere there. And we were married in Chicago in a little Lutheran chapel on the University of Chicago grounds because Stanley knew the minister.

And I wanted to be married in church. I did not want to go just to the town hall and sign papers. I wanted to wear a white dress and things like that, the whole works. So he said OK. So this minister said he will marry us. And they were married and--

[PHONE RINGING]

Let's cut.

Where did I put-- OK?

Yeah.

I think my father was a bit-- he would have loved to have me marry a Lithuanian. I mean, that was his choice. If it was not Lithuanian, I don't think he cared. And Stanley had no religious traditions. His mother had no religious traditions. And I did not have any Christian traditions beside-- I did have a Christmas tree up. But that was about it. And so it did not even occur to me that there is something strange that I marry a Jew.

Did you ever have any disagreements with your father because of it?

No. No.

OK.

He was very-- as I say, he would have preferred me that I married a Lithuanian-- the language, the history, the traditions. That he was a Jew and he was not a Lithuanian. He was so American that I knew more about Jewish customs than he did, really. So there was never any-- neither at his mother's house or that Stanley ever had any food restrictions or nothing.

But did you share with you what had happened, at least as far as you knew during the war, with him and what had--

He never asked me. I mean, I told him as much as he wanted to know and as much as I thought I should talk. I was living by myself in Chicago. My sister moved to Chicago also. I had some Lithuanian friends. I was going to a university there. And I was, for a while, very friendly with an Arab. I almost married him.

Oh my goodness.

[LAUGHTER]

So it just didn't--

It didn't come up.

No.

Is that what you're saying? OK. Well, there are a lot of people who have told me that after the war was over, they just didn't talk about what they had gone through. These are people who are also Jewish--

Well, you don't really-- it's not a happy time in your life. It's such a confusion. And it's such an unsettled time. In my case, my mother was gone. My very religious aunt was raising me, which I wasn't so enthralled about.

We were in Svencionys. We had to leave there and hide. Then my father was arrested. I mean, it just one thing after

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another. And you somehow plow through it all. Then we left Lithuania in a hurry, hiding.

OK, let's go back to that. Because as I said, I jumped ahead.

Yeah.

And I do want to go back to what life was like after Svencionys when your father is released and you all move to Panevezys. That's 1943, '44. We're coming to-- certainly, as far as the large picture is concerned, Germany is now losing the war. The Battle of Stalingrad has happened. They have lost that battle. They're pulling back. You're in Panevezys. What did your father do? What was his job there?

He was in Panevezys. I was not there.

Oh, I see. OK, you were still in--

I was in Kupishkis. All the three children and my aunt were in Kupishkis in an apartment there, going to school in Kupishkis.

And so what was your father doing in Panevezys?

My father had a job. I was never quite sure what kind of a job. I know he had an office somewhere, and he had-- he did not wear any uniforms. And he had a small apartment in Panevezys. And I remember going over and spending a day or two there. I had taken a train from Kupishkis to Panevezys and back. But he never told me what he was doing. He was working for something.

But you don't know whether it was for the government, whether it had anything with police or anything?

No, I wasn't sure. I knew he was not working in a store selling something. I knew it had to do something most likely with maybe the police, maybe the army or government maybe. Did not know. And meanwhile, in Kupishkis, things were going on a very even keel. Nothing important was happening. It was difficult. There were shortages. And I remember for some crazy reason, I wanted to get a little goat.

[LAUGHS]

I set my heart on getting a little goat. So guess what? My grandmother or my aunt were able to get a pound of bacon. And for that pound of bacon, I got myself a goat.

Oh my goodness.

I did. I would walk around the town with a goat. [LAUGHS]

Did you name the goat?

No, I didn't. And I would sometimes let her come into the house.

Oh my goodness.

She'd slide on the floors. And if I left her outside, sometimes if she was loose, she would climb up the sand hill, sand pile in front of a kitchen window and stand there and go [IMITATES GOAT BLEATING].

[INAUDIBLE]

She knew she was your goat.

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She was my goat, yes. And when we left, I left my goat.

Why did you leave?

Well, we ran away.

And how did that happen? Why did that happen?

Russians were coming.

Your father was there or he was--

My father was in Panevezys, but we got word that we will leave. And so my aunt, the three of us-- how did we leave Kupishkis? I guess we took a train to Panevezys.

OK.

Where did my father go? Maybe he was with us. Anyway, we ended up somewhere in the west of Lithuania, not too far from the Baltic. So near Klaipeda? Palanga?

No, no. It was farther south.

Uh-huh.

Some little-- actually, some farmers had a farm and had a house and had a place way in the woods. And my father was there. And we stayed there for several months, I think. And I remember my father would go hunting to get a deer. And my brother and I would go in the woods with him, and they would-- woods are separated in squares, I think.

Anyway, there is a path in between. And my brother would go in the woods and would go making a lot of noise to chase the deer out towards my father. And one day when we were out there, we found this package dropped, like a fairly large thing, lying in the woods--

A package wrapped?

--which looked like it had a parachute on it. So we called my father. We picked this thing up, brought it to the farm. And my father opened it up with the farmer. There was a lot of money there, deutschmarks. And apparently what it was, probably it was a drop for Russian partisans that must have been hiding in the woods. I was scared. I really was scared then, in that place. But shortly after that, divided the money, and we all loaded up a cart and left for Germany.

So was this close to the Prussian border?

Yes. We could go-- not too far.

And was it from the-- like, the Baltic Sea side, from that point, like Silale, Shiluto, or some place? No? Could it have--

We were farther away from the sea.

Was it Kybartai?

We crossed into Prussia. We crossed-- we crossed Nemunas--

River.

--in the evening. I still remember. My sister remembers me saying, oh, what a beautiful sunset over the river, that I wish

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it were not war. And the Russians really were right on our tails.

Were there many people on the roads?

There were-- after we crossed, there were a lot of people going. Actually, we had a bit of a problem crossing the bridge. Because by then, we called them the brown shirts who are crossing and were pushing people away. But we somehow happened to get-- we were able to get across. After us-- when we crossed, they already had put explosives under the bridge, and they blew the bridge up soon after we went across to slow down the Russians.

And also--

So that was my life. I don't want to think about it. [LAUGHS]

I know.

Are you wondering why people don't want to sit and remember the glorious days of my childhood? No, thank you. I will be thinking of my glorious old age and my little dog.

A sweet dog. A sweet one. But I need to ask you a few more--

Sure.

--a few more details about this because I'd like to find out about your journey westwards and--

About what?

--your journey after that. I take it you cross the bridge with a horse-driven cart. Yes?

Yeah.

And I'd like to learn more of how this journey took place.

Continued.

Continued.

I'll continue.

Thank you. [LAUGHS]

We crossed. And I remember one night, we were sleeping somewhere in the barn, in the hay. And my father wakes us up. He says, we have to move. They are shooting too close. So we got into our cart, and off we went.

Was your aunt with you, [LITHUANIAN]?

Yeah.

So she--

Yeah, Ona was with us. Yeah.

So Ona, your father, and the three children.

Yes.

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OK. So off you went.

Off we went. And by then-- I remember that day. We would see German soldiers leaving for the front. And then later on, we will see bloody German soldiers going back. And we had-- then we finally reached some town. I forget-- it was not Konigsberg. It was farther--

West?

No, farther east. And we got somewhere. There was a railroad station. Oh, we were in Gorlitz. Somehow we got there.

OK.

How, I don't know. Anyway, we got on a train. We put all our packages to be sent. And my father had decided that we will go as far south as we can so that the Russians-- when the Russians-- when the war is over, which he was certain it will be over very soon, that we would not be in the Soviet zone but then the American zone. So we did. We went all the way to Bavaria.

I see. So for the southernmost part of Germany.

Mm-hmm.

And you went by train then, from Gorlitz by train--

By train, yes. We went by train.

And did the train journey take a long time?

I don't remember. It must have taken some time. I think we-- did we sleep somewhere? We had money, remember, but nobody wanted any money by then.

No Reichsmarks. They didn't help?

No. It was not worth anything. So my father arranged-- he got a job working on a farm in Bavaria, in Bad Brunn, little village in Bavaria on top of one of the hill knolls. Beautiful. I lived in-- the word slips me-- in the parish house.

OK.

There was a Lithuanian priest there because the German priest was ill, and he was in a cemetery. And his sister was a housekeeper. She was a good woman. I even slept with her in a huge, huge feather bed.

The food was scarce. There really wasn't that much. None of us were fat. And we stayed there till my father worked on the farm. You couldn't see any men. There were only very old men or little boys. All other men were out at the front.

This was Bad Brunn, you said?

Bad Brunn.

Bad Brunn. OK.

It's not far from Ingolstadt.

Ingolstadt. OK.

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Yes. And Ingolstadt is not all that far from Munich. We would hear in daytime American planes flying, lining up on top of our hill because our church was a tall church. And they would line up there and go and drop bombs on Munich.

So we stayed there till the end of the war. And the way the end of the world came for me, it was like this. I was in the garden looking for the first flowers, and I saw a Jeep driving out of-- soup kitchen there. We had our choir where we sang. We put up plays. We live a good life.

These were all refugee kids from Lithuania?

All-- they tried-- when they organized the DP camps, very cleverly, they tried to put the same nationalities together. So in that camp, there was just Lithuanians.

OK. Was there any talk in those camps of people saying, we should go back, we should go back?

No, we didn't want to go back because the Russians were there. We didn't want to go back.

Was there any pressure to go back from anybody?

There was. The Russians send some kind of a delegation where they interviewed every single one of us, asking why did we stay here and what brought us here. And we said our teachers told us, just tell them your parents came and so you went. You don't have any idea why, which we did. And they all went away. They didn't take any-- they couldn't take anybody.

I see. I see. So there was some effort made to--

Under Soviet-- yeah, they would have loved to get us back, I think. But they couldn't.

So how long did you stay at this gymnasium then in Eichstadt?

Eichstadt? I stayed there four years. And the rest of my family was in Ingolstadt. My aunt was the first one to emigrate to United States.

How did that happen?

So her connections with the church. The Catholic church provided-- you had to get some kind of an affidavit. Truman's-- Truman helped to take the refugees into United States, Truman Doctrine there. But you had to have assurances that you will have a job when you come. And my aunt, through that church, managed to come to United States, and she ended up in Jamesburg, New Jersey.

And from there, there were various possibilities. Some of us went to Canada. Some of us went to Australia. I wanted to go to Australia because it was a long ride, and I thought that would be interesting.

[LAUGHS]

But where to go.

But I ended up in United States, came on General Hershey's boat.

Oh, really?

Ship. Yes. Army ship.

Do you remember the date? Do you remember when?

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In March. Probably March 1950.

Oh, so quite a while. So you lived in Germany after the war for a good five years.

Yeah.

And was that because it took so long to be able to get permission?

I think it was-- I don't know. Maybe my father was-- I mean, I wasn't even 21. So it wasn't up to me. But my father had to get permission and had to have some kind of a job guarantee also and a permission to emigrate. And as far as I was concerned, I was in no hurry to go anywhere.

Did you finish gymnasium?

I finish gymnasium. I moved into Ingolstadt, and I lived in a camp there.

When you left for the United States, did you go with your whole family?

First, yeah, we all-- my aunt was already in United States. The three of us and my father, they stopped us in Bremerhaven. We stayed in a camp there for a while, for a little while. And then they put us on General Hershey, and we all came to United States.

Through New York Harbor?

Hmm?

Through New York Harbor?

Yes. I remember I did not know English. But I remember the cook on the boat. He was telling us, oh, you will see. You will see. When you come close to United States, you'll see this lady standing there, and she will say, welcome, welcome. [LAUGHS]

Did you see her?

No.

You didn't pass the Statue of Liberty?

No, I don't remember passing her.

Oh.

But we ended up in New York. And we waited, and we waited, and we waited with all our belongings, which were nothing. And then my aunt had asked the son of the family that she worked for-- it was actually a tavern there that she worked for, for that family in the kitchen. And she had a room there. She asked the son to come to New York and meet us. So he finally found us there and decided that we must be it. So she picked my father and the three of us up and brought us to New Jersey, to Jamesburg. And here we are.

Did you think of your mother at any of those moments when you came over? Did you think of your mother at any of that time as you were coming over?

By then, not really all that much because so many things were going on. She was not there with us. Haven't heard from her or about her for all these years by now.

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So you didn't know if she was alive or not.

Didn't know if she was alive or not. She did not know if we were alive or not either.

And how did you end up in the Midwest? Because when we spoke earlier, you mentioned being--

Oh, because I travel on my own.

Uh-huh.

I worked there. My first job was to work as a live-in maid in New Brunswick for a nice little Jewish family. They had one son, Alan, who was six. And she was pregnant again, and she keep having miscarriages. So she was advised by her doctors that she should not do anything. If she gets pregnant, she practically go to bed and stay there.

Yeah.

So they decided they have to hire somebody to live there and do work. They hired me. This young man who picked us up drove me there, and I do not know English. And when they asked him what my name was, he said Gloria.

[LAUGHS]

So I was Gloria. Oh, boy. Oh, boy.

Yeah. When did you go-- did you ever go back to Lithuania afterwards?

I went back to Lithuania when I was married already.

Yeah?

My son was 19.

So that would have been in the 1980s or so, the 1970s?

'70s, yeah.

Yeah?

Yeah, Gerda and I, we both went back. It was still under Gorbachev.

Oh, so it was the 1980s. Yes.

Uh-huh. The first time.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Did your father, when you were an adult, ever tell you anything more about his life, about his role, about what World War II was all about?

You mean when I was--

When you were-- when you were grown up, when you were already married or so.

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No. Nobody told me anything.

OK.

I didn't ask anything either.

OK. Did your children ask much about war, about what was going on? I mean, Rita eventually does because she writes the book. But before that--

No.

--as they were growing up. No?

No. I mean, I knew what happened to the Jews in Lithuania, like what happened to the Jews everywhere in Germany and in France, everywhere the Germans went. I knew that. What my father's role was in this, I had no clue.

I did not think he was working for the Germans, [LITHUANIAN], security police. Well, I did not know that was a German position. I hardly ever saw Germans around.

Yeah.

I didn't even see many Germans around in town. Very few. And when we got to Germany-- oh, I tell you one thing that probably will be interesting. When we first moved to Germany and got to Germany in the south and we were there in this-- first, we were in-- was it Mulba?

We stayed in some little hotel. And we had these [NON-ENGLISH] cards, and we could buy food in the restaurant there. But all they served, there was just watery soup basically. That's it. And so my brother and I, we'd take our marks and would march out into the villages outside. And we learned-- we wanted to buy bread. We would say [LITHUANIAN].

It was late fall, and I remember the ground would be covered with beautiful pears that just dropped off the trees. And the farmers would come out and bring big half loaves of this beautiful bread and sometimes even some smoked meat.

And we could take as many pears as we wanted. And we would want to pay with our stupid marks. And they all said, no, no. They wouldn't take any money from us. But that was something that I learned, being in Germany.

Why do you think that was? Why do you think they didn't want to take money from you?

I think they just saw two bedraggled--

Children.

Yeah. Asking for bread. They did not know if we had deutschemarks or did not have and how much it was, what were they worth, if anything, by then.

Mrs. Danga, we've talked a lot today.

Yeah.

We've covered a lot of territory.

Yeah.

Is there anything else you'd like to add to what you've said?

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That I would like to say?

Can we stop? I need the battery. I'm sorry.

I was asking, is there anything you would like to add?

Well--

[PHONE RINGS]

Yep.

It sounds-- when I tell you that, it sounds-- it's such a remarkable, big story. Actually, very ordinary. In the time that I lived, it's nothing unusual. In the places that I lived. In the places that I came from and the times that I lived. There are hundreds of stories like mine. I don't know how it all ended up for them. But I think most of us ended up somewhere in the west and had good lives.

And for myself, then I think, I had a very good life. I mean, I had some hardships and so on. When you are young, things are easy. Fortunately, I did not have any serious illnesses. And we were never wealthy, but we were never poor-poor. And the fact that I cannot see that much now, but I live here, and I have a great deal of help.

And has this early-- all these early years that are not filled with happy things and that why would one want to remember and recall them, did they influence the rest of your life in any way?

Perhaps. I think all our past influence our presents, to some extent. I don't think of it. Now and then if I am-- my brother is dead now. But then my brother was alive, we would remember. And now and then, when I'm with my sister, we sometimes talk about things. But then again, there is a seven year difference.

But now and then, we can speak about our time in Germany and how it was or how it was when we first came here to United States. That was an interesting thing, too. I mean, came here and no language. Gloria. [LAUGHS]

Gloria, yeah. [LAUGHS]

And my sister went to high school here. She finished high school here. But I don't think of my life as something extraordinary or something greatly difficult or tragic in any sense. It just what it was.

I consider myself very lucky that I am here-- the heat is coming-- that I have this house, that I am able to take care of this house, and that I know good people around me, and that Lithuania is free. I know that they probably are fighting about their government all the time. But--

Your children-- your children are half Jewish, as well as half Lithuanian.

Mm-hmm.

What would you want them to carry away?

It's their choice. Vovere is great friends now with a Jewish man, and I think they will marry this spring, coming year. She changed her name to Rachel. And I kind of think of her as Rachel. She used to be dark. She had dark, curly hair, and now it's blonde and straight, fairly fashionable.

She is nowhere as curious or interested or searching as Rita is. David is doing OK. He works from Boston University. He's saving his money so he could retire and come live on the island.

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It's a nice thought.

Yeah. And I really-- in many things that happened to me, I could have ended up God knows where. But there was a great deal of luck. I was able-- we were able to get out of Lithuania when we got out. And we were lucky enough to come to this country when we did. I had a good marriage. And ending up on this island, in this house is not bad.

Not bad at all. Not bad at all. Well, Mrs. Danga, Poina, Danguole Gabis, thank you very much for sharing your story with us today.

Oh, you're most welcome. I hope the talk will be of some use to somebody.

I am sure that it will, and we very much appreciate it. And with that, I will say this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Danguole Gabis on December 10, 2015 in West Tisbury, Massachusetts, on Martha's Vineyard. Thank you. [LAUGHS]

OK. So Mrs. Danga, please tell me, who is in this photograph?

[LITHUANIAN]

In English, please.

I am here, the oldest one, and there's my brother, Romualdas.

OK, Romualdas.

Romualdas. We called him Romutus.

OK.

And my little baby sister, Gerda.

Got it. And this was taken in which year?

1938.

'37 I think it was.

1937, Zeimelis.

OK, thank you. In Zeimelis. So Mrs. Danga, tell me, what is this?

It is a picture of my father. But I really don't remember him in this uniform. The only thing that I could say, it's probably when he was very young in Lithuania army. He wore this uniform.

OK, and the title is A Guest--

A Guest at the--

Shooter's.

--at the Shooter's Banquet.

And it's written by your daughter.

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And it is written by my daughter, Rita.

OK.

Take right.

Mm-hmm.

OK.

There.

This goes.

Good.

Dabar, wait a second.

[LITHUANIAN]

All right. Can you tell me what is this photograph of in the book?

This is a photograph of my mother. It was taken somewhere in Lithuania and sent to us-- to United States.

OK, after--

That was after she came back from Siberia--

OK.

--to Lithuania. And we were able to get in touch with her. She sent us this picture. And my sister has-- and my daughter has it.

OK. Thank you. OK, Mrs. Danga, do you know who this is a photograph of?

I don't remember that picture.

You don't remember. But it is of your father?

Yes.

OK. Thank you.

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