[INAUDIBLE]. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Tomas Venclova on September 30, 2018 in Vilnius, Lithuania. Thank you very much, Mr. Venclova, for agreeing to speak with us today to share both your life story, your thoughts, and something about what you might have seen during World War II as the Holocaust developed and evolved in this country.

I understand you were quite young at that time. But I'm sure you'll be able to tell us about those first memories as well as what the other generations, the older generations were involved in. Right now, I will start with the most basic questions. And the first one is could you tell me the date of your birth?

I was born on September 11, 1937.

Where were you born?

In Klaipeda, a Lithuanian city on the Baltic Sea.

What was it called in another language?

In German, it's called Memel.

I see.

Even today, some German speaking people use this name, Memel. But officially, for many years, it's called Klaipeda, the Lithuanian name.

OK. And can you tell me, was your name at birth the same as it is today?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Tomas Venclova, as simple as that.

OK.

Tomas Andrius Venclova, I have two first names. But I virtually never used the second one.

Is the second name your baptismal name or not.

That I even don't know, probably yes. Probably both names are the baptismal names.

OK. And were you the only child in your family?

Yes, unfortunately, the only one child in the family.

OK. And let's talk about your parents a little bit. What was your father's name?

My father names but his name was Antanas Venclova.

Do you know when he was born? He was born in 1906.

And your mother?

My mother was born in 1911.

And what was her name?

Her name was Eliza Rackauskaite.

Eliza Rackauskaite.

Rackauskaite. Her father was Merkelis Racauskas. He taught classical languages at the Kaunas University.

Ah. And was that how it was known at the time, Kaunas University?

Well, yes. It was called Kaunas University or the University of Vytautas the Great--

OK.

--the name which is used also today.

OK. And were your parents from the same region where you were born? Were they from Klaipeda?

No. My father was born in south Lithuania in the peasant family, close to the Polish border, by the way. And my mother was born in the Ukraine.

Oh, really?

Yes. Because our grandfather, Merkelis Racauskas, a professor of Greek and Latin, of classical philology, he graduated from Odessa University during the tsarist period. In that period, Lithuanians were not allowed to work in their native regions. Only somewhere in Russia, or in other parts of Russian Empire, let us put it this way.

And he worked in Ukraine as a high school teacher of Greek and Latin. And my mother was born in the city of Belgrade, which now belongs to Ukraine. And at that time, it was part of the Russian Empire in 1911.

Can you tell me, two things I would like to spell out so that we would have it for the future. One is the first name of your grandfather, your mother's father. You mentioned it. But I can't really understand it. It's Merkelis?

Merkelis or Melchior.

Melchior?

Melchior--

It's like the biblical name--

Melchior is a biblical, a Catholic name, and the name of one of the three Magi who greeted Jesus Christ in-- yes, in his cradle. But in Lithuania, it's sometimes spelled Melkeris.

So that would be M-E-L-K-E-R-I-S?

M like--

Mary?

--Mary. E-R-K-E-L-I-S.

E-L-I-S, Merkelis. Merkelis. OK. Now I understand. And so last name, Racauskas-- and I will spell it, which would be RA-C, with a C-H sound?

Yes.

A-U-S-K-A-S. Racauskas.

I think that's true. He was of a impoverished noble family. His first language was Polish, not Lithuanian. Because Lithuanian nobility mainly spoke Polish.

But he knew Lithuanian also from his early childhood. And later, he opted for the Lithuanian citizenship and for the Lithuanian nationality and switched his language to Lithuanian.

So did you know your grandfather?

Oh, yes.

You did. And so if he was from that nobility--

Yes.

--what part of Lithuania would that have been from?

He was born in so-called Zemaitija.

OK. Samogitia.

Samogitia. And this is not very far from Klaipeda, Memel. But it never belonged to Germany.

OK.

It belonged to the Russian Empire. It is known of a different dialect, the Zemaitijan dialect differs from standard Lithuanian more or less like Portuguese differs from Spanish.

Yes, that's true.

[LAUGHTER]

Sometimes you even cannot understand Zemaitijans speaking.

Yeah.

And he was born there, in the northern part of Zemaitija, or Samogitia. And so in 1886, I believe, in 1886. And later graduated from Odessa University and became a professor in Kaunas and later in Vilnius.

But then, your mother was born while he was a teacher in Ukraine? And now my second spelling, which is the name of the town she was born in. I didn't quite get it. It sounded like Belgrade.

No, Bolgrad.

Bolgrad.

B-O-L-G-R-A-D.

And about where in the Ukraine would it be? It's very close to the so-called Moldova Republic. But it does not belong to Moldova Republic. It belongs to Ukraine. But it is next to the border, almost a border city.

And did she have brothers and sisters, your mother?

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Yes. She got a brother and a sister. Her brother was a photographer and a photographer artist, artistic photographer, so to speak. And later, he emigrated and he died in the United States.

What was his name?

Vytautas.

Racauskas?

Racauskas.

OK.

Well, he shortened-- in the United States, he shortened his last name to Rachkus He lived in the city of Toledo.

In Ohio?

In Ohio, yes. I met him even during my emigration years.

So he was still alive in the 1970s and 1980s?

Yes. He was still alive at that time. He was more or less of the age I am now. But pretty alive and kicking, I would say.

And what about her sister?

Yeah, her sister was Maria.

Uh huh.

Maria Rackauskaite. And she was a painter. She was one of the better Lithuanian painters of the 20th century and post-Impressionist.

Oh, wow.

She studied in Paris. And her paintings are in many Lithuanian museums. Considered classical heritage of Lithuanian art. I also have several of her paintings in my private possession.

Well, it sounds like your mother's family was very much what the Russians would call intelligent, intelligentsia.

Yes.

Yeah.

Yes, that's true.

OK. Let's turn a little bit to your father. And you said he came from a farming family, a peasant family?

My father came from a peasant family of moderate means. But they were not poor. But they got about 15 hectares of land and they were pretty successful. His father was literate. It was rather an exception in Lithuania at that time.

Yes.

And read books and newspapers and so on and even kept a sort of a small library in his hut, in his peasant hut.

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Well, that's pretty impressive.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And my father-- he died. My grandfather, peasant grandfather died during the World War I of typhus--

OK.

--a rather young man at that time. And my father entered the Kaunas University and graduated from Kaunas University.

In what?

He studied Lithuanian literature but also French literature. And his, well, not PhD thesis. I would say that was probably-- how do you say it in English?

Well, say it in Lithuanian. What would it have been in either the tsarist time or the Lithuanian time?

Diplominis darbas.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

A master's degree, probably. A master's degree.

His diploma-- his work for his diploma is the direct translation.

His master's diploma, well, that was less than PhD, but still a--

Substantial?

--substantial achievement at that time. It was about symbolism. He compared French symbolists and Lithuanian symbolists. He knew Verlaine, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, such poets and also Lithuanian symbolists, part of whom were his teachers, by the way. There was a very famous symbolist poet, Mykolaitis-Putinas, who was at the same time, my father's teacher at the university.

Tell me, now, was he the only son, was he the only child in the family?

No. As many peasant families, it was extensive. He had five surviving brothers and three surviving sisters.

That mean more were born, but they didn't survive.

Yeah. Well, yes. Well, don't-- five surviving, four surviving brothers. The fifth one was he himself.

Got it. So five boys and three girls?

Yes.

Where was he in the line of children? Was he the oldest, the youngest, somewhere in the middle?

He was in the-- yes, in the very middle. He was the third.

Did you know your aunts and uncles from your father's side?

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Yes.

Can you name them for me?

The first was Pijus, who became a schoolteacher and emigrated and died in Chicago.

OK.

I also met him in Chicago before his death, yes, in the late '70s.

Now when he emigrated, would have that been in the early part of the 20th century or later?

No. He emigrated in 1944, as many Lithuanians did at that time.

So Pijus.

Pijus. He was the oldest one.

Then--

The oldest among surviving children.

OK.

I don't know, unfortunately, even the names of the children who did not survive.

That's OK.

Then the second one was Juozas.

Juozas.

Juozas, who was village elder in his part of Lithuania. And as such, he was arrested with the Soviets after the World War II, sent to Kazakhstan to the mine. And he died while working in that mine.

So he was deported?

He was deported?

He was deported. And just for English speaking, people will say Pijus means pious in--

Yes.

--English? And Juozas means Joseph?

Yes.

OK.

The third child was my father, who was Antanas. In English, it would be Anthony.

OK. Now you said that Juozas was the village elder. And tell me, what village would this have been? Do you know?

The village he lived in was Trempiniai.

Klempiniai?

No, Trempiniai. T-R-E-M-P-I-N-I-A-I.

OK. And where would that be?

This is the south of Lithuania, next to the contemporary Polish border, four kilometers from Poland.

So in other words, where your whole family comes from--

Yes.

--would have been this place?

My father was also born in the village of Trempiniai.

Trempiniai.

But Juozas, or Joseph, remained in that village and even became a village elder.

All right. So then after your father, after Antanas, who comes next?

After Antanas, Pranas, which means "Francis."

Yes.

And he was a doctor. And he died after the war of appendicitis.

I see.

At that time, there was no penicillin in Lithuania. They could not help him. And he died after much suffering.

So that means World War II?

That means after World War II. He stayed in Lithuania. He still worked in his field. But he caught appendicitis and died.

OK.

In 1946 or '47, I believe.

OK.

Then the last one was Kazys, or Casimir, Kazys who was an engineer in Kaunas. And during the Soviet period, he worked as an engineer for many years. And died, I think, in the '70s or '80s, but already after I have immigrated.

And then, what about your aunts? There were three girls.

There were three girls. Both-- sorry. All three married peasants and remained in their native land, although in different villages.

OK. What were their names, their first names?

The first was Constancia.

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Constance.

Constance. The second was Isabella. The third one was Agota.

Agota would be "Agatha?"

Yes, Agatha.

So Isabel, Constance, and Agatha. So all of these sound like very Christian names.

Oh, yes. They were Christian names.

Was your grandfather's family very religious, do you think, the family your father was born into?

I think that my grandfather was rather indifferent. Yes. Maybe I am mistaken, but I think that he was rather different. But his wife, as usually peasant women in Lithuania at the time, was religious.

I remember my grandmother. She survived the war and lived in her native part for many years. And yes, she was religious.

What was her name, her first name?

Her name was Elzbieta.

Elzbieta?

Elzbieta, which means "Elizabeth."

And do you remember what her maiden name might have been?

Her maiden name was Veliviute

Veliviute

Yes. I see. And was she from around that area as well?

She was from around that area, but probably around 40 to 50 kilometers from my grandfather's village.

Well, as you're telling me about your father's siblings, your aunts and uncles, it sounds like there was a great leap between having been born into a farming family and then going on to higher education, not just for one but for several of them.

Yes.

You know? Was education something that was very valued in the family as far as you know?

Yes, of course, education in Lithuania meant social mobility, definitely. And so at least four, yes, at least four of the five brothers, but no sisters, became educated. And as I have said, one of them was an engineer, the other one was a doctor. And the third one was a schoolteacher. And my father was also a high school teacher.

Oh, was he?

Yes. He was for many years in the independent Lithuania, he was a high school teacher.

Yes. Yes. Yes. You mentioned that. Excuse me. I thought about your grandfather. No, it's your father who was the high school teacher. And he studied at Vytautas Magnus University?

Yes.

And finished in literature, Lithuanian literature and French literature?

He graduated, yes, as a specialist, mainly in Lithuanian literature, but his second specialty was French literature. He spoke good French, good German, but almost no English.

Now what about your mother's side of the family? Do if they were very religious people?

My grandfather, who was a professor of classical philosophy, was the so-called free thinker. That means that he was not only indifferent towards religion, but rather skeptical towards it.

OK.

He did not emphasize it. For example, he taught at the department of theology.

Did he really?

Yes. Because he taught gospel Greek for the students studying philology.

Well, that's interesting.

The gospel Greek-- he always used to say that gospel Greek is very easy. It's much easier than Plato or, let us say, Homer.

OK.

But he made his living by teaching Greek, not only in the department of theology, but I think also in the department of philology.

OK.

And my grandmother, yes, she was religious.

She was religious.

She was religious, yes.

What was her first name, on your mother's side, your grandmother?

She was of mixed Polish and Ukrainian origin. She was born in Ukraine. Her last name was Latynska.

Latynska.

Latynska. It's an interesting story. Because when giving an interview in Poland, I mentioned her name. And then I got a phone call from a person whose name was Marek Latynski.

He asked me, was your grandmother's name Elena, Helena, Ellen? I said yes. So in this case, she's my aunt. And Marek Latynski. Was a visible person in Poland. For some time, he was the head of a Polish Radio Liberty.

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No kidding.

Yes. No kidding.

And we made friends.

OK.

He was much older than myself. Now he is, unfortunately, he is deceased. He has deceased.

But his family still lives in Poland. And we are on very friendly terms with that family. But they are our relatives.

That's right. They're distant relatives.

They're distant relatives, yes.

That's interesting. You know, what we come to. One of the reasons I like exploring this is that it tells-- it opens up a whole world before our 20th century. It tells us who people were, where they came from, what the 19th century was about, a little bit.

Yes. And so, yeah. So tell me, how did your parents meet? They come from two different worlds in some ways.

Both were students in the Kaunas Vytautas Magnus or Vytautas the Great University. And well, boys and girls meet in the university, as simple as that.

OK.

And my father fell in love. Well, maybe it's a bit too intimate to tell. But my mother was probably the most beautiful girl in Kaunas. And my father lost his gut and proposed. That was accepted. But that was a bit difficult.

Tell me why.

Because my father was an atheist and that definite freethinker, so to speak.

OK.

Which was rather an exception in Lithuania. Lithuania was a very Catholic country at that time. It still is a Catholic country, but probably less than at that time.

And it was one of the very few countries in Europe, which did not have civil marriage--

Possibilities?

--possibilities.

OK.

People could marry only at church. And well, for my mother, it was quite acceptable. At that time, she came from a family, from a Catholic family. And her mother was a believer. She also was available at that time.

But my father insisted that they must go only to the civil marriage office. Such offices existed not only in Klaipeda region. Because Klaipeda region had an autonomous set of laws, which was patterned after the German set of laws. So in Klaipeda, you could go to the civil marriage office and formalize your marriage without going to church.

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And is that what they did?

That is after long discussions, they did it. For my mother, that was a very serious decision. And so she got some problems also with her parents.

I would have thought her father would have been completely OK with it.

Yes. Well, father would be rather OK with that. But, well, he taught at the department of theology. And that endangered his career even in that department.

Did it really?

Yes. It did to some degree.

OK.

He did not lose his job. But there was a distinct possibility of that.

I see.

And the entire story became a scandal. It was discussed in the newspapers, in the press that the daughter of a professor working at a Catholic university managed to arrange a civil marriage with an atheist. That's a shame, and so on, and so on. So my mother went through a difficult period. But she was a strong lady and she survived.

Tell me, what year did they get married?

Sorry?

What year did they get married? What year?

Ah, what year, they married in 1935, two years before my birth.

So 1935, it's interesting that that would have been a scandal in those years. Because one has the impression that Lithuania was getting modern, was becoming a very sophisticated place, in very small places in Kaunas, in certain circles, and so on. But that this still would have been an issue.

Yes. At least, the Catholic press, which was influential and extensive, reacted very badly to that situation. And so well, Lithuania was, of course, modernizing at that time, but probably not in that particular area.

Yeah. Yeah.

Probably.

Yeah. So did you ever see any of those articles that were written about your parents' marriage?

No. I never saw it. But my mother told me about it.

OK. OK.

So probably-- I am not so sure. Well, probably there were some mentions, not long articles about that. But some mentions in the press. But that was enough.

Yeah, of course. For a private person, that's enough.

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Yes.

Now you mentioned that your parents or your father was an atheist, which is more than just indifference. You know? That, though, is a position towards religion.

Yes.

Did he have political views? Did your mother have political views, political points of view, political leanings?

My father was definitely a leftist, definitely a leftist. Well, at that time, such people were called fellow travelers with the communists. At that time, he was not a member of the Communist party and rather leaning towards social democracy and left in general, so to speak.

Among his friends, there were so called "S-ers" or socialist revolutionists and social democrats and so on. All those parties were banned in independent Lithuania between the wars.

You mean between 1926 and--

Yes.

OK.

And 1940, all those parties were banned.

So that would be after the first six years, or the first several years, they had been allowed to, in the early '20s, had been allowed to exist.

Yes. But that was the period of Lithuanian democracy, which lasted only eight years, from 1918 to make 1926.

OK.

Then there was a rightist coup d'etat by Antanas Smetona and the so-called authoritarian rule, which was not necessarily very toxic, but still rightist and authoritarian. That means that there was a sense of censorship. People could be arrested without much warning, so to speak, and so on, and so on.

Did that danger ever-- did that ever come close to your father, that he would be arrested? Well, some of his friends, like Kazys Boruta. At that time, he was probably his best friend, also a poet, he was arrested. And he also emigrated for some time. He was a political immigrant. And then he came back to Lithuania, was arrested, and spent some time in prison.

He emigrated to where?

Sorry?

Where did he emigrate to?

At first he emigrated to Latvia, which at that time was more democratic than Lithuania, and then to Austria, to Vienna. But he came back from Vienna to Lithuania, I think, in 1934.

OK.

And then he was arrested. But he spent in prison not a very long time. He was released, I think, in the year 1936 or something. But my father was not under immediate danger. But for example, he lost his job as a teacher for a poem he printed in Lithuanian press.

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And that poem was mildly pro-Soviet, I would say. For that he was thrown out of his job by a special decision of the president, Antanas Smetona, himself.

Wow.

Yes.

And this would have been what year? That was the year 1939, I believe.

So was this while he was still teaching in Klaipeda?

No. He left Klaipeda and he got a teacher's job in Kaunas, in the capital of Lithuania.

And that's where he published the poem?

And then he published the poem in the legal Lithuanian press. But for that, the poem passed censorship. But after that, President Smetona read the poem, became rather unpleased with it. Though the poem, as I have said, was mildly pro-Soviet.

Do you remember it?

The poem? No. The poem was pacifist, first of all, about the war. World War II was starting, I believe, at that time. And that was a pacifist poem about an unknown soldier who died senselessly, and so on, and so on. And that the only way to cease all wars forever, to stop all wars forever was a series of social changes.

So social justice?

Social justice. He never used the word "Soviet." That would never pass censorship, first of all.

OK.

But one could understood that the subtext was pro-Soviet.

OK.

That social justice can be brought in mainly by the social revolution of the Soviet kind.

I see. Well, it's interesting. And I think it's important to understand that period of time, just what kind of phraseology is enough to get one into trouble. Where are the sensitivities? And what is the subtext?

Yes.

What is the meaning, the hidden meaning that everyone understands?

Yes. We went through the same situation during the Soviet period.

Of course.

In the Soviet period, it was even more severe. But to some degree comparable, I would say.

So did your mother have any such leanings at all?

Well, being together with my father, she became also rather a leftist, leftist thinking person. But that's all. She never

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took part in any political activities.

How is it, when they got married in Klaipeda, did they decide to stay there? Is that how it is that you were born there in 1937?

Well, after their marriage, they came back to Kaunas--

OK.

--where my father was a teacher.

OK.

But later, he was offered-- he got a job, a opposition, job offer in Klaipeda.

OK.

Which was even better in many reasons. Klaipeda was considered, first of all, it was considered a bit more civilized part of Lithuania and more westernized part of Lithuania, first of all. And secondly, the salaries were higher. So my father removed to Klaipeda in, I think, '35, immediately after his marriage. And then I was born in 1937.

OK.

Then, as I have said, Hitler look Klaipeda in '39. And we have to leave. We have to leave.

Can we talk about that again? Because I think that part of it we lost because we repeated-- we edited the tape a little.

OK. OK.

So yes, Klaipeda had a very interesting status--

Yes.

--in the interwar years. And first of all, do you have any direct memories from your first few years in Klaipeda?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Absolutely no memories. I was two-years-old when we left Klaipeda.

I could imagine, yes. But I needed to ask that.

Yes.

So tell us now, from what you know of Klaipeda, what kind of situation was it in? Why was it in that situation? And what happened?

Klaipeda belongs to Germany for many, many years, for several centuries, to be precise. And it was mainly a German-speaking city.

OK.

But the villages around Klaipeda were mainly Lithuanian-speaking.

OK.

But they differed from other parts of Lithuania, because they were not Catholic, but Protestant. And the Lithuanian peasants in that region were bilingual. They spoke as good German as Lithuanian and considered themselves citizens of the-- well, they don't say citizens. "Valdiniai" How to say it in English.

"Valdiniai" would be those who are governed.

Yes. So they considered themselves to be part of the German empire.

Oh, really?

Very-- yes. Very loyal to the German Empire, most of them.

So that would have been in the late 19th century?

Yes. In the late 19th century, in early 20th century.

Yes.

Then Klaipeda, according to the Versailles agreement--

After World War I.

--after World War I, it was separated from the German empire and given to Lithuania. And so Lithuania took it. And so it retained a autonomous set of laws, including the law of civil marriage, about which I talked.

It was Lithuanian from the year 1923 to the year 1939, 16 years. But that was a difficult situation, because many of the inhabitants of that region leans towards Germany. And Hitler, of course, and Hitler and the Nazis, of course, they used those moods among the inhabitants of Klaipeda. There were strong, pro-Nazi parties in Klaipeda region at that time. And finally, Hitler gave an ultimatum to independent Lithuania, requesting Klaipeda back as a German-- yes, German part of Europe.

OK.

That was his very last peaceful achievement. After that, he started World War II.

With Poland.

With Poland. But Poland, he attacked Poland in September of 13 of 1939. And he took Klaipeda in March of 1939.

Half a year earlier.

Half a year earlier. He took Klaipeda relatively peacefully. Lithuanians were much weaker than Germany, of course. Independent Lithuania could not withstand an imminent German attack and simply gave them the region of Klaipeda.

So it was peaceful because the Lithuanians decided not to fight.

Yes.

But there was the threat. There was a threat that--

Definitely, oh, yeah, definitely. Definitely there was the threat. And that was a very profound trauma for the Lithuanian population. Yes, yes, very serious trauma.

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So what happened, then? Your family left?

My family left and went to Kaunas.

And what about others? Did you say others-- did most Lithuanians leave Klaipeda?

Most Lithuanians, especially those who were not born in Klaipeda region, they left.

What about Jews? Were there many?

The Jews, I think, left. Virtually all of them left, which was quite understandable, I would say.

OK.

And they also moved to Kaunas, to various parts of independent Lithuania. At that time, experiencing no problems in Lithuania.

So did your parents tell you about their leaving, about how they left, and did they have a car, for example? Did they go by train? Did they go by horse and buggy? How?

At that time, a very small number of people in Lithuania had cars. My parents did not have a car. I think they left by train. But I may be mistaken.

And do you-- when they moved to Kaunas, did they move to one place that became your permanent home?

Well, they rented the flat in Kaunas next to my grandfather's house.

On which side, father's side, mother's side?

Mother's side. My grandfather, who was a professor at the Kaunas University, lived in Kaunas. He got a house. There was a house belonging to another professor who rented the rooms in that house.

So my parents rented, I think, two rooms in that house. And our family lived there. And we could just walk 40 to 50 meters to my grandfather's house.

And is that where you stayed, or did you move around?

We stayed there until the Soviets came. And the Soviets came in the June of 1940. Soviets, between September of '39-- no, between March of '39, when Klaipeda was taken by Hitler, March of '39 and June of 1940.

So about 15 months? About 15 months.

Probably.

OK. And your father found a job then at a high school and then quickly lost that job?

Yes, because of his poem.

Because of the poem.

Yes.

And then what did he do? Well, he was employed by a literary magazine and would make his modest living by working in that literary magazine.

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And your mother, did she have any kind of outside employment?

No. She was just a homemaker, virtually, throughout her entire life.

OK. When would you say your earliest memories start?

My earliest memories start with the coming of the Soviets.

Tell me about them.

Well, that's a long story.

Still.

The Soviets entered Lithuania in June of 1940. That was an occupation I think, pretty comparable to, let us say, German occupation of Prague, which happened at almost the same time.

OK.

They just entered Lithuania. The president, Antanas Smetona fled. He fled first to Germany. And then, through Portugal, he reached the United States and died during the World War II, died in Cleveland during a fire in his house. He is buried in Cleveland.

Now when the Soviets invaded Lithuania, they arranged a new pro-Soviet government. In the beginning, it consisted of mainly people who opposed Smetona but were not necessarily communists, just true communists-- just fellow travelers.

One of them was my father. He was immediately offered job of the minister of education of Lithuania, of the new pro-Soviet but still independent, still formerly independent Lithuania. And he accepted that offer.

So our life changed immediately and very much so. Because he got a car with a driver. He got a good apartment. He got a good salary, and so on, and so on, and was expected to work to establish the work of all the Lithuanian schools, of the universities, all the theaters, for example. That was not only the Ministry of Education, that was also the so-called Ministry of Culture at the same time.

That's quite a leap for a high school teacher.

That's a very big leap, yes. Yes. Real social mobility, which happened during the Soviet period rather frequently. Later those people, would be, for example, destroyed later.

That also happened, after the big social leap. They would be destroyed, especially in Stalin times. But that did not happen to our family, nor to any other Lithuanian family of-- I think not too many of them, in any case, of fellow travelers or of Lithuanian communists.

Did he have any kind of apprehension about taking that job? Did he have any doubts at all?

Yes. I think my father had some apprehension and doubts. But he was convinced by some of his friends who became members of that pro-Soviet government.

And who would they have been? Who were some of these friends?

For example, Justas Paleckis--

OK.

--who became a nominal president of Lithuania, who was also a leftist journalist opposed to Antanas Smetona, not a communist at that time. But the Soviets appointed him in a roundabout way, but that was a Soviet appointment to be a president of Lithuania.

Also a big leap for a journalist.

A very big leap, yes. And he had a very big leap. So Justas Paleckis became a nominal president and stayed in that job for several dozens of years during the war time and after the war. He was a nominal head of state of Soviet Lithuania.

But Soviet Lithuania was not a state, yes, to tell the truth, just a province of the Soviet Union. And she needed some facelifting, so to speak. So Paleckis was still its president.

I would not necessarily tell much bad things. There would be many bad things about Paleckis. He was considered liberal.

He tried to help people persecuted with the Soviets. Sometimes he succeeded, sometimes not. He was considered not a fully communist-- not a real communist, although he became a member of the party. He was criticized frequently. But he stayed in his well-paid and well, so to speak, very representative job until his death.

And tell me what about your father? Did your father then also enter the party when he got the job?

No. My father entered the party only after the war, in 1950 or something. By the way, Paleckis insisted that he should join the party. Paleckis himself joined the party in 1940. I think at the end of 1940.

I see. During that first Soviet occupation?

Yes. My father joined it only during the second Soviet occupation.

So he had been friends with Paleckis?

Yes, they were on rather friendly terms.

OK.

Yes. Even now I am on friendly terms with that family, including Justas Paleckis, Justas Paleckis the junior.

Who was the son of this person.

Who was the son, who was a Soviet diplomat, but later he became a Lithuanian diplomat, a diplomat of independent Lithuania. Now he is emeritus, like myself. But when we meet from time to time, we also met in our early childhood.

Interesting how path's cross.

Yes. That's, well, Lithuania is a very small country. Everybody knows everybody. And everybody has some connections with everybody.

That's true, one way or another. Now you say that's when your early memories start. So what are your earliest memories?

Well, my earliest memories are-- my very earliest memories are connected with that job of my father as a minister of education.

What do you remember?

Well, for example, I remember his portrait in a magazine. And being three-years-old, I was very proud of it. Then an old writer, and old writer who wrote tales for children, Pranas Masiotas died in the beginning of the Soviet occupation.

Was this the father of Juozas Urbsys' wife? Because she was a Masiotaite, I believe.

Yes. I think he was the father.

OK.

I think it was the father. That one more just example that everybody is connected with everybody in Lithuania.

And she had been-- they were arrested and sent into solitary imprisonment--

Yes.

--by the Soviets.

But her father Masiotas died in the very beginning of the Soviet occupation. And he was given a state funeral. My father, as a minister of education, took part in that funeral and took me to see a writer whose things I have read already at that time.

So you could make the connection?

Yes. I could make the connection that this is the same Masiotas whose tales I liked very much. And this is one of my very first memories, this funeral. You know, a funeral is a very special thing. And it makes an impression on children.

Yes, it does.

Then there was a meeting at which my father gave a speech, a meeting with red banners, with slogans, and so on, and so on, with shouts, hurrah, long live Comrade Stalin, and so on. And my father gave a speech. I don't remember meeting very well. But still, it is one of my very early memories.

Well, that's the way it is with children. Is that we have episodic memories.

Yes.

But they are there.

Yes.

They are there.

Yes.

And do you remember much of the apartment that you moved to?

Just a bit of it, just a bit of it, but not much of it, but the apartment is still there. It's on the Kudirkos Street in Vilnius and--

Vilnius or Kaunas?

In Vilnius.

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In Vilnius?

Yes. Because the Ministry of Education moved to Vilnius almost immediately. Most other ministries remained in Kaunas. But my father moved to Vilnius and got an apartment.

And the apartment is still there. When I go by bus or car on that street, which I do almost every day, I see the windows of our former apartment. But I don't have very exact memories of it.

OK. Let's turn now to something a little bit more personal. And that would be your parents' personalities. Tell me a little a bit about what kind of personality your mother had and then, your father.

Well, my mother was, as I have said, one of the most beautiful women in Lithuania. Well, she was strong. She had a strong personality.

She was very loyal to her to her family, to her husband and her child. And she learned me-- she taught me. She taught me never, never say lies.

If you know for sure that it is untrue, never say it, even if it helps you, even if it helps you. This was the best lesson I was given at a very early age from three to six, let us say. And that is never, never tell lies.

She had an ethical kind of value system.

I think so. I think so. And she, until her late years, she became rather leftist in her views. Although in her very old age, she also had some interest in religion once more. And she got a friendly priest, Kazimieras Vasiliauskas, a well-known person in Lithuanian who used to visit her and to talk with her. She died at the year of 95.

And what year was that?

That was 2006, I believe.

Well, her life spanned so many different eras.

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And so she preserved good, I would say even physical, but especially psychic shape until her death. She never got Alzheimer's or such things. Before her death, she gave an interview to a Lithuanian newspaper. And that was a perfectly readable and interesting interview.

Is it the only one she ever gave?

She gave, I think, two interviews.

That's not much for such a lifetime.

Yes, not much. But then, it was very long.

Well, that's interesting. Yes. They are available. I think they are also available on the internet, if you are interested in that.

I will look them up.

Yes. Look the name of my mother. And they will give you, oh, yes, on the Google, they will give you the interviews.

And tell me-- here's another interesting point. You say that later in life, she becomes interested in religion and Kazimieras Vasiliauskas comes to visit her. Well, he himself had been arrested and deported by the Soviets for many, many years.

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Oh, yes. Oh, yes. But he was a very tolerant person. He was a very wise person.

Mhm.

It's probably it would be probably incorrect to say that we were friends. But we knew each other well. I respected him very highly. And he kept quite fatherly attitudes towards my humble person.

Oh, how nice. How nice.

Well, he was connected, associated with the Lithuanian Helsinki Group.

And you were part of that Lithuanian--

I was part of the group. He was probably not a part. But he was, so to speak, a sort of a spiritual father for the Helsinki Group.

Oh, that's interesting. And that is part of, let's say, a post-war Soviet dissident history. And we're still in World War II. But it is all very interesting, the connections and the overlapping of people's destinies and paths in a small country like this, which is in the path of two great powers. And what happens when you have these two totalitarian regimes come in and how do they impact all these lives, how do they change their destinies?

So it sounds that your mother had a very strong ethical core. That for her, telling the truth was a very high value. Was she the one you were closer to as you were growing up, or was your father someone you were closer to?

No, I think I was closer to my mother.

OK.

Although I loved my father, and I still love him.

OK.

So tell me a little bit about your father, what kind of a personality he had.

Well, he was a pleasant type of personality.

What does that mean?

That means he was-- well, first of all, he was cautious.

OK.

He was cautious. And he was-- well, how to say it-- he was a business-like personality. Well, As truputi pavargau.

O, as atsiprasau. Let's cut a little bit.

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