

OK. about your father. Let's talk a little bit about your father. You said he was a very cautious kind of personality-- cautious person.

So, well if my mother came from a noble family, on her father's side and also on her mother's side-- I said that my grandmother was born in Ukraine.

That's right.

She was of mixed Polish Ukrainian in origin, but she was also of a noble family.

I see.

So but my father was of peasant family. And he had that very typical peasant traits, which means cautiousness, a feeling of responsibility toward his family and towards his business. And so he wanted to be always respectable. He liked comfort. His childhood was sort of difficult, but later when he achieved some degree of comfort he valued it. And so on and so on.

So it wasn't a bohemian?

In his youth he was a bohemian. Later not. Later not. Very many Lithuanian writers were bohemian especially in the Soviet period. Well, that was not the Bohemian behavior in a strict sense. But they just drank. They were very good drinkers. And my father was an exception.

He would drink rather good drinks like cognac or brandy or something like that or good wine. He understood the difference between good and bad drink. But he was an exception in the Lithuanian writer's community because he never, never was a heavy drinker.

And you're talking now during the Soviet days or before the war?

Also before the war, but especially in the Soviet times.

OK.

People drank because the Soviet life was depressing.

Yeah.

Well for my father it was probably less depressing, and he even made a very conscious effort not to become a drinker.

OK. Not to become an alcoholic.

Not to become an alcoholic, yes. And so my grandfather, for example, drank much more than my father.

His father did. That is your father's father.

No, no.

Your mother's father.

My mother's father who was a professor of classical philology. Yeah, he was a drinker. Not an alcoholic but a drinker.

I see.

Also probably partly because he was depressed by the conditions around him.

After the war.

After the war, yes.

OK.

So well.

So let's talk a little bit more now about 1940 and your father accepts Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture positions.

Yes.

Do you have any other memories after moving to Vilnius?

Not much of them. My next memory is are definitely related to the start of the war, which started in Lithuania in 1941 in the 22nd June, 1941. Hitler attacked the Soviet Union.

OK. So for Lithuania the start of the war is when Hitler attacks the Soviet Union.

Yes.

Which up until that time had been its ally.

Yes.

OK.

Yes. And so I think that was rather unexpected for Stalin, which explains, to some part, the panic flight of the Soviets from Lithuania at that time.

Well, did your family flee, because he was a Minister in the pro-Soviet government?

Well, he lived in Vilnius and worked in Vilnius. On the very first night of the war, Vilnius was bombed. And a bomb damaged part of the house we lived in.

OK.

I said that the house on Kudirkos Street is still there.

OK.

But it was damaged. And one lady, who was the wife of the my father's Vice Minister, was wounded. My mother went to her place, tried to help them but did not succeed. But that gives you some understanding of my mother's character. She did everything although she was very young. And she did everything she could, but did not succeed. And that lady died on the same night.

So she was heavily injured.

She was very heavily injured. Her legs were virtually cut out, both of her legs by a splinter of the bone, of the German bone. Now after that night, my father went to his Ministry in the old city of Vilnius and tried to work as usual-- to do the business of Minister as usual. So in an hour or so, he got a phone call from Kaunas, from the Soviet government. They told him, we are evacuating. We are leaving Kaunas and Vilnius, going to Minsk, to Belarussia You are also requested to end your work and go to Minsk.

OK.

He got the car and the driver, but he thought, as many people at that time, that it is a very temporary movement.

OK.

That he will come back from Minsk very soon. Because all the newspapers before the war said that the war may happen, but we are so strong that nothing bad expects the Soviet people.

OK.

We will fight on the territory of our enemies, not from our own territory.

So in other words, this alliance it was anticipated that there will be a fight and it most likely will be with these allies.

Well, yes. At the very, very last weeks of the Soviet Union, Lithuania and the war with Germany was, to some degree, anticipated.

OK.

To some degree-- but I believe Stalin himself still did not believe it. He still thought that he could avoid the war. But just in case, he wrote, well the war it's not impossible. But if it happens of course we will fight on our enemy's territory and nothing bad can happen to the Soviet people.

So then my father took the car, put my mother and myself to the car, and brought us to the village of Jeruzalé or Jeruzalinka-- that's just north of Vilnius-- now it is a part of the city-- to have friendly house of another leftist-leaning person, who at that time was a Mayor of Vilnius of Soviet Vilnius.

What was his name?

His name was-- I remembered it but I probably forgot.

It's OK. It's OK.

But he was still living in the Vilnius after the German occupation, during the Second Soviet occupation, and nothing happened to him-- to that person. And nothing happened to him also during the Nazi occupation.

OK.

So we were brought-- I was three years old. We were brought to that house, [INAUDIBLE] house.

Do you remember that trip?

A bit. Just a bit. And that was far from the center. That means that my father expected that it will be never bombed.

OK.

He was correct. It wasn't about bombed. And father left us there and said, well, I will be back in a day or two. But now I must go to Minsk. And he returned to Minsk. Then Minsk was-- then Vilnius was almost immediately taken by the Germans. Then Minsk was taken by the Germans. And finally, my father found himself in Moscow in the same Lithuanian car with a Lithuanian driver he went to Moscow. And so well, he stayed in Moscow and the vicinity for the entire war period, for the entire Nazi occupation period.

You had no-- during these times-- so that would have been from 1941 to, let's say, 1944-- did you have any communication with him or from him?

Virtually no. That was an interesting story but it relates to him and not to our family.

OK.

There was a person of Lithuanian origin taken as prisoner of war with the Soviets.

OK.

And my father talked with him. He was from Kaunas. My father ask him, do you know such and such region of Kaunas? Yes, I know. Do you remember such and such house that was my grandfather's house but we lived with my mother during the war. Yes, I remember the house. What happened to that house? Was it destroyed? Were the inhabitants imprisoned or something like that? Then he said no, they still live there. The former inhabitants still lived there. And as far as I know nothing happened to them. That was the only information my father had from Lithuania.

And we got information because he took part in the radio propaganda in Moscow. Some people in Kaunas listened to Soviet news. It was possible. It was a bit risky but still possible. And my father even wrote some poetry at that time and read some poetry to Moscow radio addressing also his wife and his child, who were left in Lithuania. So we knew that he knows-- well, that he still is interested in our life. He does not know anything about us. He writes nostalgic words about his family, who presumably still is in Lithuania under the Nazi occupation.

Now did you ever-- I'm sorry to interrupt though-- was there ever a feeling that you had been abandoned?

Sorry.

Was there ever a feeling, from either your mother or yourself, that you had been abandoned?

Well, the problem-- the problem had been my father

Yeah, the fact that he left you and he went to Minsk.

Well, the problem-- my mother understood that it was not his fault.

OK.

And she never discussed that problem with me. I was too small for understanding of the situation. But I think my mother never had any bad feelings towards my father.

OK. Did you remember missing him during these years?

Oh, yes. I asked often, where is dad? My mother answered, he has to work, he has an employment which prevents him from coming to see us. But that will pass. I believe he will come back.

OK. So that was to keep you calm.

Yes.

To make sure that you're not frightened.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

But I was abandoned in a sense also by my mother, because she was arrested.

Well, tell me about that. What happened?

That's a long story.

It's an important story.

That's a long and important story. So my mother lived in that village, in the north part of Vilnius in that suburb-- let us call it a suburb. But now it is definite suburb in the American or English sense of the word.

1941.

And that time it was considered a village close to Vilnius. 1941-- June of 1941. She lived there. Some of the persons also lived there, including, for example, Skema, a famous Lithuania writer who became famous in the United States.

He was an émigré I believe.

He was an émigré. But at that time he was also spending time in Vilnius suburb just in case. Partly because of the bombardment and partly because he was not absolutely sure what will happen when the Nazis come.

Was he left-leaning as well?

Skema was, I think, he was rather left-leaning, yes-- rather left-leaning.

And he was a writer.

No, at that time he was an actor.

OK.

We was a theater actor. Later he became a playwright, and then he wrote a novel, who is considered a classical Lithuanian novel. But that was written in New York when he worked in a hotel in an elevator. Very recently, probably less than a year ago, together with my wife, we went to New York looking for that hotel. We found it.

Did you?

Yes, it is quite close to Grand Central in New York. And the elevator is still there. We even used it, believe it or not.

And what's the name of the hotel?

It's the Roosevelt hotel, I believe.

Roosevelt Hotel.

I believe.

And Skema wrote a novel while there.

Yes. Yes and he did. Well, some Lithuanian scholars founded hotels. So you can find it's where abouts on the internet. We looked on that in the internet, and just went several blocks from Grand Central and found that hotel. So my mother was-- for something she wants together with Skema.

OK.

In the same big house of the--

Mayor.

--former Vilnius mayor, yes.

OK.

Then she decided to-- well, the Germans came in two or three days. They took Kaunas in two days and Vilnius probably on the third day. The Soviets fled. Then they eventually presented no defense at that time. They presented some defense in Latvia and Estonia but not in Lithuania. And the Germans very easily come to Lithuania with not much problems. And Vilnius was in German hands, but also in Lithuanian hands. Because at that time, there was the so-called Lithuanian Temporary Government.

The Provisional Government.

A provisional government, yes. That name can be translated as temporary but officially it's translated as provisional. So there were people partly who are active in Lithuanian underground and under the Soviets, and partly they'd been active in Berlin cooperating with the German authorities, and expecting that in the beginning of the war they will arrange a Lithuanian uprising to take Lithuania in their own hands. And then they will be accepted by Nazis as their allies-- like Slovakia, like Croatia, or even better like Finland. Finland was an example.

So that Provisional Government worked in Berlin definitely under the Nazi supervision. There was a supervision by Abwehr, by German-- well, [SPEAKING LITHUANIAN].

Intelligence.

Spies. I mean espionage, intelligence.

Yes, by German intelligence and also the Gestapo. They were given some logistical help. They were given, I believe, some financial help. Then in Berlin, the head of that Provisional Government was a very ambitious fellow whose name was Kazys Skirpa, who was pretty sure that in this condition when the Germans come he will become definitely the head of Lithuania, the president maybe be the Fuhrer of Lithuania. And but that did not come as expected because the Germans played the game with the Lithuanian immigration in Berlin. And they never had any intent to recreate the independent Lithuania as a German ally. Yes, Lithuania had to be just a Nazi occupied territory as Poland, as Belorussia, as Russia, as any other part-- well what comes.

OK.

So they never allowed this Provisional Government to become a real government, which was a very big disappointment for the Lithuanian Nationalists who were pretty sure that it will go some how it went during the World War I. But there was a sort of a Lithuanian Provisional Government under the German guidance. Then Germany lost the war and that government became a real government.

So there had been some precedent to explain why they thought that way.

Yes, there was some precedent. At that time, during World War I, that there was no Holocaust, no real crimes on the German or Lithuanian side. It was a rather peaceful transfer of power from Germans to Lithuanians. And somehow Lithuanians were, of course, were opposed to the German ruler as well, although they did not emphasize it. But it was done peacefully. So this precedent was believed to be the case also in 1945.

Well, do you remember--

That was a grave mistake.

Do you remember German soldiers coming to this little village of Jeruzalémská in northern Vilnius? Did you ever see any of them there?

They probably never came to Jeruzalémská or Jeruzalé. They came only to the central city and they were not

very much visible.

OK.

They went to the east. They went to Minsk, to Moscow, and so on, leaving in place those Lithuanian officers recreated by the so-called Provisional Government.

OK.

But they never accepted the Provisional Government as the real government, only as helpers, so to speak, who could be dismissed at any moment and should be dismissed at any moment because they did not provide any future for Lithuania. Then but my mother, on the 10th or 11th day of our stint in that village, she decided that she got an apartment in Vilnius. What happened to that apartment? She had to come and to see. She found them, just with made walking, there were no public transport at the time, and went to that apartment.

She had the keys. And then in the apartment she was arrested by the Lithuanians-- by people who served that Provisional Government and put in, yes, put into prison.

She left you in the village?

Yes, she left me thinking that in two hours, she will be back.

OK.

Yes. And she was arrested and put in to that Lukiskés Prison, which is very close by now.

Yeah.

Which is still a prison.

Well it's about three blocks from where we are conducting this interview.

Yes, three blocks. Yes it is still a prison although now they think about creating a business center instead of a prison there. So now well--

She's arrested.

--she was arrested and put into the Lukiskés Prison. At that time there was no Gestapo in Lithuania-- no German-- no real German power. The administrative power was in the hands of the Lithuanian Provisional Government. And the investigator who conducted the investigation, he was also Lithuanian. And so he invited, to put it mildly, to his office in the prison and ask him, well, your name. Well, the day of birth, so, so, so, so.

So well, your father's name is Melchias. This is a Jewish name. Then my mother answered, no, it's a Catholic name. It is Melchioris. It is one of the three Magi, which was true. She never lied. Then well, Melchioris. Yes, she said, there was a famous bishop, Melchioris Giedratis, a bishop, a Catholic bishop. You may have heard about him. The investigator may have heard about him because he was a very famous historical figure.

Then he said, the investigator said, well, but you are the wife of former Soviet Minister. All the Soviets functionaries married Jewish women, all of them. So you are Jewish. No, answered my mother. Not everybody married Jewish women and I am not Jewish. I am ethnically Lithuanian and a Catholic, which was correct. She did not understand at that time that being Jewish meant virtual death sentence. But she just wants to tell the truth.

OK.

Then he said, well, go to your cell we will investigate the situation. Just wait.

OK.

She went to the cell. She spent in that cell at least two months, I believe-- the end of June, July, and August. And at that time, the Provisional Government was dispersed. The Provisional Government was dispersed by the Germans. And the Germans took all the power in their hands. Although the police, some parts of the administrative power, they're still Lithuanian just for the simple reason the Germans did not have enough people for that.

So and then the Nazis came to the prison, and they came to the cell of my mother. And they asked, who is this woman sitting in that cell? Then somebody said, Commissar Frau, that means wife of a Soviet minister, of a Soviet Commissar. Ah, Commissar Frau, is she Jewish? No, she's Aryan. We established that she's Aryan. Well, dammit, it makes no sense to keep her in prison. Let us release her. She will be under the surveillance of the police, but that's all. And they released her. The German's released her, not the Lithuanians.

Interesting.

Very interesting. Very typical by the way. And then she went to our grandfather's house in the suburb of Kaunas. She found me because I was kept by our friends, and I felt abandoned by both parents-- my father who disappeared and my mother also disappeared.

Well, I mean, for a child, a child experiences things differently.

This is not the best experience for a three-year-old child.

No. Not the best.

Definitely not the best experience. I am a bit traumatized throughout my life probably. And I think mainly because of that experience. But then my mother came back.

But I want to go back to that a little bit.

Yes, may I drink coffee?

Yes, absolutely. The question I have is, how did you and the people who were taking care of you learn of what happened to your mother when she didn't come back after those two hours?

Well, that I don't know. Some way they got news about her. That she was arrested. But I don't know how.

OK.

Do you remember them telling you that mama has just gone away for a little while?

That I don't remember. Yeah, well generally they probably told me that. But I definitely felt very much abandoned.

You remember this? You remember this. Yeah.

Later they brought me to Kaunas-- that was Vilnius, so they brought me to Kaunas where my mother's uncle lived-- brother of my grandfather, who was a classical professor.

Also.

Also-- no, my grandfather was a classical professor and that granduncle, his brother, was just a translator. Well, he spent much time in the United States. He spoke with English. And he translated everything starting



with Longfellow and ending with Steinbeck.

Oh, wow.

Yes, Fennimore Cooper, and many, many other things. He translated literally dozens of English books and made his living with that. So he took me, took care of me. And I was in his flat in the center of Kaunas, not in my grandfather's house but in his brother's house-- well, for some reason. It's a complicated story.

OK.

And finally, at the end of August, my mother came to the house. And well, I was more than happy. But I followed my mother everywhere, including to the WC, because I was pretty much afraid that she will disappear once more. But she did not disappear. And so we lived in my grandfather's house. She was under police surveillance. That meant that she was not expected to leave that house although she did from time to time.

Oh, so--

By the way, this is also a sort of difference-- the Nazis weren't absolutely terrible. Well, it does not make much sense to insist on that because everybody knows it. But the Soviets would definitely deport my mother as a wife of a Independent Lithuanian Minister.

If it had been the other way around?

The other way around, they would have deported. The Nazis did not do it. Probably if we lived long enough under the Nazi rule my mother would suffer. But she did not really suffer until the Soviets came for that time.

OK. So we will come to that. But you mentioned something that I think is interesting. This interrogator who insists that all of the commissars had Jewish wives.

Yes.

And then I presume there must have been more women who were arrested who would have been the wives of some of the other ministers if they hadn't fled.

Well, I think that the wives of the ministers fled.

So you were one of the only ones that were left behind.

Probably. They came from Kaunas. That was organized-- the flight was organized. There were buses. There were trucks. They could take their things with them. And virtually the entire Soviet government fled from Kaunas.

Except you.

Because we were in Vilnius.

Because you were--

I think only the Minister of Education was at that time in Vilnius.

OK.

So that was the difference.

OK.

Lots of people fled. For example, there were two famous writers, Saloméja Nėris who was a poetess And Petras Cvirka who was a fiction writer. Who were pretty talented persons but pro-Soviet advance. And greeted the Soviet rule, both of them, especially Saloméja Nėris. So they luckily escaped from the Nazis together with the entire Soviet government.

OK.

My father found himself in a different situation. Our family was in a different situation. Petras Cvirka fled with his wife. Saloméja Nėris fled with her small child who spent the entire Nazi occupation in Moscow. He died recently. He was more or less of my age. But for example, Saloméja Neris-- the husband of Saloméja Nėris was left in Lithuania. She was separated from her husband by that front line. Later, she came back with the Soviets and found her husband in the their old place. For there were as many cases as there were people I would say.

So did you-- let's turn now to what happens under the Nazis and a little bit of prehistory as it relates to Lithuania's Jews. First of all, did your parents have in their social circle Jewish friends?

Yes, they had. For some time not in Klaipėda but in Kaunas my father taught at the Jewish high school.

Which one?

He taught Lithuanian language in the Jewish high school.

Was a Shalom Aleichem I think it was?

No, I don't know the name. That was it then. I think Shalom Aleichem School does exist. now. But before the war in Kaunas-- well, it was a different school with a different name.

OK.

There were Jewish schools independent to Lithuanian teaching in Hebrew, teaching in Yiddish, and also teaching in Lithuanian. And my father taught Lithuanian language in a Jewish school teaching in Lithuanian.

Was this after he was fired for writing the poem?

No, that was before.

Was he fired from this position.

No, I don't think so. He was fired from a different school.

OK.

I think that was before 1955.

I see.

I may be mistaken but probably this late.

OK.

The director of the school was Gershovich or Gershovichius who survived the Nazi concentration camp and came back to Lithuania. And he was our family friend from that early period and also during the Soviet rule.

I see.

Now then we got some Jewish acquaintances, not necessarily close friends, but we got some Jewish acquaintances.

As a little boy when did you first realize that there are these different people who are called Jews?

Well, mainly I learned to read very early, I was three-years-old. So I read children's magazines published during the Nazi period. And there was a certain fanatical or essay written by a person whose name I will not mention, he has died in Los Angeles, I believe. And he was just a children's writer.

And the article said something like that. I remember almost some sentences of it. Lithuania, you are such a suffering country. You were trampled by the Soviets. The Soviets, that means the Cheka people, that means the Soviet secret police, and Jews. But now you are resurrected. You are free again and with the help of our German friends. And those who made you suffered will get their due punishment. That I read.

I asked my mother, well, who are the Soviets? Who is the Soviet secret police and who are Jews? She said to me, well, as virtually any country, the Soviet get secret police, and as Jews-- Jews there are some people who speak a different language, got a different religion, but they also very often speak Lithuanian. And I think she told me, although I don't remember exactly, that the Jews actually have nothing in common with the Soviet secret police and, yes, that this author is wrong. I remember the name of the author. And when I emigrated in 1977 he was still alive and still contributing to the emigre press.

Do you-- did you ever meet him?

No, I never met him. I never met him. Then he was probably a schoolteacher or something, but also a children's writer. Well, that was probably the first time when they read the word Jew.

In that context in those years.

Exactly, yes, in that context. The Jews are virtually the same as the Soviet secret police.

It was also very strange that it comes into a children's book. These are adult themes. These are not the kinds of things you write stories about for children.

Well, there was some propaganda also for children. This kind of propaganda. Once we went with my mother on the street of Kaunas and met a person who and another old man who got the Star of David, a yellow star on his, I think, on his breast, and who went not on the [SPEAKING LITHUANIAN] but on the street.

Oh, he was not on the sidewalk, but on the street.

Not on the sidewalk but, yes, on the street. And he greeted my mother. And my mother greeted him. But they did not exchange any words. And he went by. I asked him, well who is this man? Who was this man? She said, well, my distant acquaintance or something like that. Why he has such a stuff? Well, he's a Jew and the Jews are ordered to get such stars. She did not tells us anything more about it.

So then what else. I was given by my grandmother-- well, I was baptized at that time. I was not baptized by my father and mother because they were leftists. But during the German or the Nazi occupation, my grandmother told my mother, well, first of all, I am a Catholic. We are a Catholic family. I would like to see my child baptized. But there is an even more pressing problem because if he is not baptized, somebody may denounce him as a Jewish boy. And you know what happens. That come much later after the war that that was the reason.

Really.

One of the reasons for baptizing. And I was brought to the church. I was five or six years old at that time. I remember the ceremony very well. And I was baptized. Then I was given short books, short religious books about Jesus Christ, about the Virgin Mary. And one of the book told the Old Testament stories-- started with Adam and Eve, there was also Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and so on. Those stories were also told. They never

used the word Jews, but they used the word Israelite.

Israelites.

Israelis.

Yeah.

Israelis.

Israelites.

Israelites. Israelites.

Yeah.

So I asked also either my mother or my grandfather, who are Israelites? She said, well, they are Jews but not today's Jews. They are Jews of very ancient times. Well, that was enough for me. But then I understood that Jews are not necessarily the Bolsheviks.

They're not necessarily the secret police.

Yes, not the members of the Soviet secret police. That was enough for me that Jews are something much more complicated, so to speak. But at that time, I was already probably six years old. But I remember those books as many interesting ones because the Old Testament stories made a big impression on me.

Did you ever see the ghetto in Kaunas, the outside of it or anything?

No. No. I never saw it. It was in Vilijampolė in a Kaunas suburb. We never went to Vilijampolė. And as far as I know, people are not expected to go there, so to speak.

Yeah, of course. It was--

Two of my close friends went in that ghetto-- my very close friends of later period. One of the most Kama Ginkas. Kama Ginkas now is a very famous stage director in Moscow. He's a Lithuanian speaker. He speaks Lithuanian as well as myself. But he works in the National Theater. And he is a very, very, very well-known stage director. We are on very, very friendly terms for many years. So he was four-years-old at that time. And he was brought out of the Vilijampolė ghetto and brought up by a Lithuanian family who risked very much. And when the Soviets came, that was, of course, a liberation for him.

OK.

Now, the second was Aleksandras Stomas, now deceased, who was probably already 14 to 15-years-old. But he was also brought out of the ghetto and brought up with a Lithuanian family-- present, helped and saved by a Lithuanian family. Later he became a professor, an emigrate, and an anti-Soviet thinker, and quite well-known known person in Lithuania. After the war, he also became my close friend. So this is my only connection with Vilijampolė ghetto. But I--

I could mention one more.

Yes.

And that would be Antanas Snieckus.

Well, I never-- yes, but I never met-- well, yes I met Kama Ginkas. I met Aleksandras Stomas, who, by the way, is Antanas Snieckus relative-- rather distant relative-- and Antanas Snieckus. But I met all of them after the war.

After the war.

I did not know them before the war or during the German occupation.

OK. Do you have any other memories of this German time? You were then between four and eight years old.

No, between three and seven I was.

Oh, three and seven, excuse me.

Between three and seven because the Soviets came in 1944. I was not yet seven. I was six and 10 months or something when the Soviets came.

OK. Do you remember them returning?

The Soviets, I think yes.

OK.

I remember also some Germans. When we went by Kaunas Street, a German soldier standing on the street told me, oh, "Sussigkeit. A nice boy. Would you like to get some chocolate?" But my mother did not take the chocolate and she went by. I was extremely unhappy because I wanted chocolate. Then the second time, what I saw on one of the buildings, I saw a black flag-- black banner with the letters "SS." And I asked mother, what is SS? She said it's a sort of military office but the people are not expected to talk much about it. That was all. That was all that she told me.

But that's my only memories about the Germans because there were not many Germans in Lithuania at that time. Most of them fought on the Eastern Front, or some of them probably on the Western Front and so on. And the real administrative power was still, until the end of the war, mainly in Lithuanian hands.

And was your mother-- did your mother ever have any other incidents with the authorities after she was released from prison? During this whole German occupation was she ever called in again to your knowledge?

No. Not to my knowledge, and I think she was not called again. But from time to time, there was a Lithuanian policeman, and old man who served in the police during the independent Lithuanian period, during the Soviet period, and I think also during the Nazi period.

He was an old man. He was an acquaintance of our family, of my grandfather's family. And he, from time to time, he warned for my mother that probably during this night that they will come to people and bring them to the-- well, part of the people were brought to the camps and part of the people that brought to the so-called Reicho darbo tarnyba.

The labor--

The labor service for the German-- yes, for the Germans. Especially young people were taken to Germany and worked for the German war effort.

So forced labor.

Forced labor but not necessarily a camp. They were in definitely better conditions than the people in the concentration camps. So this policeman warned us that you may be taken into the camp or maybe to that labor service. So don't sleep at your house. Then she went to the center of Kaunas, to the apartment of this great uncle I already mentioned, brother of my grandfather, and spent a night or two in his flat. And then came back. So that was the only trouble she encountered. And that was rare. That did not come frequently.

Did you or she ever hear your father's voice over those Soviet broadcasts?

No, she never heard my father's voice. But one of her acquaintances living several houses or in a block away, she came and told her, well, last night I heard your husband's voice in the Moscow broadcast. And he was reading his poetry also about you and also about Tomas, about your child. So my mother was extremely happy. But first of all, we did not have a radio-- how it's called--

A radio.

A radio. We did not have a radio and that lady did have. By the way, after the war she was arrested by the Soviets, deported and punished in deportation.

Really?

Yes, notwithstanding the fact that she listened to Moscow broadcasts, and for that reason, might be considered a Soviet sympathizer.

Isn't that interesting. I mean, again, the ironies that one finds in these stories, in these people's destinies. So would the next memories that you have be of the returning Soviets?

Yes.

And what do you remember?

Well, we were in a village, we were in a village. Late in the evening there were still Germans on their horses, the cavalry, making rounds around the village. And the next morning, the Germans were no more around and the Soviet Pioneers came looking for the mines, looking for the German mines. Well, in Russian or in Lithuanian they are called Pioneers. I don't know.

You mean pioneers? They would be like pioneering. No. Minesweepers. Minesweepers. Minesweepers.

OK.

There came probably ten persons looking for those mines which might be left by the retreating Germans.

What village was this?

Klangiai.

Klangiai?

Klangiai.

Is it far from Kaunas?

Around 50 kilometers. On the bank of Nemunas. We spent summers there, notwithstanding that my mother was under police surveillance, but we managed to go and live there with our distant relatives. So the next morning those minesweepers came and they entered our house. The house where we lived with those peasant acquaintances.

Everybody was rather uneasy because there was a lot of propaganda that the Soviets are killing everybody around. Not only killing, but torturing, especially children. Well, my mother tried just to calm me, but I was very much afraid of the Soviets. She was less afraid, but still a bit worried how will it look. The minesweepers were very-- I would say-- rather very polite and very-- sumišę.

Oh, confused.

Very confused. They spoke only Russian. But my mother spoke Russian. And even the peasants in that

village, they understood some Russian as many people in Lithuania do. And then we started-- my grandmother was also there-- we started to speak with those Soviet soldiers. They were rather polite. In any case, not animalistic Not so terrible. Well, German soldiers also did not look animalistic. Then one of them who happened to be a Ukrainian.

Then my grandmother said, "do you speak Ukrainian?" "Yes, I speak." My grandmother knew Ukrainian. She started to speak Ukrainian. "Oh, my goodness," said the soldier. "You speak our language. That's interesting. Which place of Ukraine are you?" She said, from Slavuta. "My goodness, I am also from Slavuta, from the city of Slavuta. Which village are you from?" "We lived," my grandmother said, "we lived in the village of Krevin."

"Well, I am not from Krevin, but, of course, I know the village. And such a strange coincidence." Then they get some vodka. Those peasants gave them some vodka, some homemade vodka. It was very common in Lithuania that time as if you see them now I would say. And the soldiers drank some vodka, not too much, and left.

But on the same evening one girl was raped in that village. But the peasants took that as well, such things are inevitable in times of war. That's all they told. Well, I knew about it in a very vague way. But I knew something about it. That something very unpleasant happened between soldier and the peasant girl. And this is, of course, bad. But such things happen in war times.

Well, that was all just old story. Then we went from that village to Kaunas. Kaunas which was already taken by Soviets. Kaunas was virtually empty. But we went to my grandfather's house and in several days we were joined by our father, who came with the Soviet troops.

And do you remember that meeting? Do you remember--

Oh, yes. I remember that meeting.

Well tell me.

Well, just like Jewish people in Vilijampolė, some of them survived the Nazi period, although definitely not many of them. But of course, they felt liberated. And Kama Ginkas, and Stomas and Antanas Sniekus, all they felt liberated.

Of course.

We also felt liberated because we were from the pro-Soviet and persecuted, to some degree, family. Although persecuted to a much lesser degree than the Jewish people. But still we felt liberated. But that was an exception. 90% of Lithuanians felt not liberated, but under the second occupation, which should be not necessarily better than the Nazi occupation. For many it looked worse. For many it looked worse. For a very simple reason. There was also some extremely immoral saying at that time. Extremely terrible saying which I hate.

What was it?

The Germans murdered only Jews. They left Lithuanians to live their lives. But the Soviets will murder us. And that is much worse. Well, that was the general mood of the population.

Do you remember hearing that at the time or later when you were grown and you began to understand what was going on?

Well, it's difficult to tell because I was six-years-old and 10-years-old And I started to--

We can say it in Lithuanian.

I started to attend the high school and so on and so on. And this information seemed to me in parts, to my

country-- only in parts. But, of course, when I was 10-years-old, I already understood, for example, such a common attitude of the people.

What happened with your family when your father returned?

Well, he was no more a Minister. He ceased to be a minister when they were in Moscow. Formally, technically the Lithuanian Soviet government-- well, it was not the government but sort of-- well, Soviet administration. It still existed. It still existed so that there were some offices, some salaries, I believe, and so on, and even Ministers. But my father ceased to be a minister. Another minister was appointed to this place I think in 1943. He became a war correspondent. He came to the front line and wrote articles about the Lithuanians fighting Germans because there were some Lithuanian soldiers in the Soviet army-- even the entire Lithuanian detachment--

That's right.

--that support Lithuanian division. He was quite closely connected with some people in that detachment. He was a war correspondent and the freelance writer.

Oh, so my next question was what newspapers did he write for? Would it have been Pravda? Would it have been Tiesa? Would it have been some others?

Well, mainly to Lithuanian newspapers published in Moscow and magazines-- there was one Lithuanian magazine published in Moscow. From time to time, probably, also to Pravda, but not much, not much. Then well, what else that's interesting. You know at Yale there was a Professor Benjamin Harshav, a well-known literary scholar who lived to first in Israel, then he moved to United States and became my colleague at Yale. We were in the same Slavic department.

He told me, you know, your father, as a Minister of Education, probably saved my life. How, I asked to him. Well, during the Nazi occupation we managed to go to the Soviet Union. And we were in a-- since our family comes from Lithuania, we went in a Lithuanian house for children. There was one such house for children who had been evacuated or fled from Lithuania.

In Moscow then.

Well, not in Moscow, In the Ural Mountains.

OK.

In the village of [? Gidosi. ?] There were some, I think, Lithuanians in that house, but probably most were of Jewish origin--

OK.

--of Jewish background, including Benjamin Harshav. And our children's house went under your father's address, so to speak. And the winter was coming, there was terrible winter of the year 1941. And your father managed to get [SPEAKING LITHUANIAN].

Blankets.

To get blankets for us. Without those blankets we will probably die. But with blankets, yes, we managed to survive. And it was your father who, as a Minister, who--

Was able to do this.

Yes, who was able to do this. So that was--

What a surprise.



One more surprise.

Yeah.

But that was all what my father did as a Minister of Education during that period, just providing blankets for the children who were suffering cold Russian winter.

Now did he ever have a government post again?

Well, later he became, for example, a member of the Central Committee. But he never was a minister again.

OK.

He was a head-- for some time he was the head of the writers union, which was also sort of a government post. But mainly he was a freelance writer. He was a very productive writer. And since the Soviets paid rather goods royalties to every writer, and especially to productive and loyal writers, our family was a very well-to-do family.

Now, you said when the Soviets came back, your mother had some trepidation something could have happened to her. You know, you mentioned it earlier that while the Germans were there you described just the extent of their surveillance of her, but that there was some things that happened to her when the Soviets did come back. Is that true?

No, we simply did not know how the Soviets would behave.

I see.

We simply did not know. The newspapers printed during the Nazi times wrote that the Soviets are coming full of revenge feelings, which was partly true, and they will kill, more or less, everybody on their way, especially the children. They printed stories about tortured children. There were especially many information about Mongolians. The Russians are eventually taken out by the victorious German troops. And now there are only the Mongolians in the Soviet army. They are of drinking some kind of people. They will kill everybody.

So my mother believed to some degree, as everybody believed that to some degree. But in Lithuania not much of that happened. There were some examples-- now the Lithuanian press writes much about it-- of vandalizing, of destroying houses, even of killing people, of stealing people's possessions. That was rather-- I think that was rather typical about the Soviet troops.

Well, also rape. Rape was also part of it.

Also rape, but not so frequent in Lithuania. It was much more frequent on the German territory. I think in Lithuania Stalin understood that people are not totally sympathetic, to put it mildly, towards the Soviet rule. And he did not want to exacerbate it, did not want to. Well, that was, I know for sure, that were some orders for the troops-- be as polite with the Lithuanian people as possible.

When you come to Germany, yes, you are free to do virtually everything. And they definitely did very bad things and on the German territory, but not necessarily on the Lithuanian territory. It happened, but not too frequently. And our experience was very peaceful with the coming Soviet soldiers-- not only our family, but also peasants who were moving around.

Now, your uncle who was deported, Juozas, did that deportation ever worry your father?

My father wrote a letter to the Soviet authorities explaining that his brother was a good man, then he helped our family, that means his family, during the Nazi occupation, and so on and so, that he does not deserve deportation, does not and should be released. He wrote that letter but that got absolutely no results.

Because he was a village elder under the Nazi rule, that was enough.

That was enough, yeah.

Although I think he was never involved in any Nazi crimes. To my knowledge he was not involved in any Nazi crimes. Some of those village elders were involved. This is the fact. Now what else? But there was another great story.

OK.

My father's sister, her name was Isabella-- I mentioned her in the beginning-- she married another peasant and those Soviets came and arrested him and she managed to escape. She managed to escape and she went to Vilnius to her brother, that means my father, who was a public figure. And said well, Antanas, try to help me. My husband has been arrested and deported with the Soviets. Then my father also wrote a letter to the Soviet authorities that he knows the person. He is a good man. He never did anything bad. He does not deserve deportation. And well, he asks for him to be released. That man was never a village elder or something else.

So there were no formal grounds for deporting him. And in two weeks, he was still on the train, on the way to the place he had to be deported. He was pulled out of the car, train car, and said, well, you are released. You can go back. He did not speak Russian and that was in the deep Russia, so to speak. He did not have money, but he somehow managed to come to Lithuania and to join his wife, that means my aunt. And he lived rather peacefully in Lithuania ever after. That was another story. So my father managed to help one man, one of his relatives, but not both of them.

Not his brother.

Not his brother, yes.

Did you know other people who were deported after the war?

Of course, lots of them. Of course, lots of them. Some of them came back.

They were within your family, friends, and circles.

Well there was a painter, Baginskiené, her name was Baginskiené who was deported and who fled. It was possible, especially if you knew Russian and could have some help. And there is a movie about that, Ekskursanté Did you see it?

I've heard of it. I've heard it.

You should see it.

People tell me it's very good.

It's a very good movie. I think a very good movie by Pranas Morkus, who wrote the script and my good friend. And a movie about a girl, a girl of 10-year-old, who escapes the place of deportation. And with some help, she knows some Russian and with some help of the Russian people, she finally reaches Lithuania. But then she is arrested once more and sent back. So that was just an ekskursija. That means--

It was just--

--tourist trip.

Yeah, a tourist trip to come back.

Yes, the title of the film is a tourist, a tourist. So this Baginskiené fled, like that girl, well she was an adult.

But she fled and came to Vilnius. And came to my mother who she knew. And said, well, I am in such a situation. They will most likely arrest me and you because there was such things as a [SPEAKING LITHUANIAN]. Meldung.

You have to register.

Yeah, you have to register with the police. You have to register. If you were not registered you were bound to the protection and you. So could you help me to get the registration. As far as I know, to my knowledge, my mother went to Paleckis, who was--

Nominally President.

--a figure head president of Lithuania, told him the story, and Paleckis said I will do everything I can. And he managed to get-- they managed to get the registration for Baginskiené and she was allowed to stay in Vilnius. So she commanded the protection. So such things happened. Rarely, but happened. And some Soviet nomenklatura people tried to help those people. Not everybody, but some tried, including Paleckis, including my father and my mother. Then what else?

Well, let's talk about post-war and how-- two things. Did your father ever talk to you about his choices, about starting with somebody who has just left-- first of all not even political, but a free thinker, and then more leftist and more leftist, and then taken into the Soviet government or joining the first Soviet government, and so on. That progression-- did you ever have conversations with him about that?

Well, not much of it. Not much of it. It was understandable by itself. Well, my father came back with the Soviet. He's a Soviet figure. And this is-- yes--

This is what it is.

Yes, this is what it is. This made the things stand.

OK.

In my early childhood, in my high school years, that was my feeling. Later, mainly in the University, I started to talk with him about the deportations, about the Soviet rule, and in general, and also about Stalin. Because after the Khrushchev talk, I ask-- well, I never ask him, but I knew for sure that my father wrote for General Stalin, praising him just like Saloméja Nėris did it, and many others. We did not talk about it. But my father definitely did not support deportations.

And was very depressed because of the fact that those things took place. He used to tell me that were mistakes. Of course, there was a fight. In the fight there are excesses. That was excessive behavior of the Soviets. But now it has been corrected, and there is nothing to speak more about that. Yes, it has been corrected. And true after Stalin's death people started to come back. People started to come back. People came back from prisons, including many writers, like Antanas Skėma, like Kazys Boruta like--

So his good friend had been deported himself?

Yes, yes, yes. Well, he was not deported because his [? warrant ?] was in prison but in Vilnius. And only for three years. My father was asked to be a witness during his--

Trial?

--during his trial. And he did his best to defend Boruta. And Boruta got only three years of prison, although ten years was the very least at that time. So I would say that my father helped Boruta. And after he came back from prison, they were on very friendly terms again.

OK.

So such they were-- after Stalin went those people started to come back. And they met many of them. Well, I was a bit shy to ask them how was it there. I considered it even a bit impolite to ask about that. I understood that was a very difficult experience. And if people don't speak about that themselves, I am not the person to ask them about that. But I knew many people who were deported or arrested or to spent some time in prison, even tortured. But never to speak much about that. For example, Petras [INAUDIBLE]. Petras [INAUDIBLE] was a leftist.

When my father was a minister of education, he was a vice minister. Later he was arrested by the Nazis and tortured, but released. Later he was arrested by the Soviets. Not tortured, but sent to Siberia, spent probably 10 years in Siberia, then came back. And he used to visit my father, and my father helped him. They were still on friendly terms. But [INAUDIBLE] was definitely anti-Soviet. When Joseph Brodsky, for example, came to Lithuania, he made very close friends with Petras [INAUDIBLE]. Although Petras [INAUDIBLE] was 60 to 70-years-old and Joseph Brodsky was 25 or something. But they made good friends.

So the other question I have is this how-- and this is the post-war years-- how was the Holocaust, as you remember it, explained? How did you learn of the scope of the atrocities? How did it play out in the society as you were growing up? You know this is different from it developed in the West.

Yes.

So tell us about that.

Well, during the Soviet period-- well first of all--

Again, relating to your own life, as you learn things.

During the Soviet period, I went to school-- just would walk, there was no public transport. That was around 2 kilometers.

Here in Vilnius.

In Vilnius. Most of the way was through the former ghetto.

Through the old town, then.

Through the old town, through the former ghetto, which was absolutely destroyed. The old synagogue, the ancient and famous Vilnius synagogue, the walls were still standing-- only the walls. But it could be reconstructed. The Soviets destroyed it. But I remembered those walls. For the first three or four years of my school period they was there-- they were there.

I even went to that synagogue, not understanding exactly what it was. That it was the synagogue. Then at school we were told that the Nazis were terrible. They murdered people. They murdered the innocent Soviet people. The name Jews were virtually never mentioned, very rarely, very rarely. Sometimes it leaked through-- that the Jew such and such was murdered.

One of our teachers at school was Jewish. And one of my classmates who was an ethnic Lithuanian boy who had some conflict with that person, he wrote, I think, on the blackboard. Well, he wrote the name, the Jewish family name, of that teacher. I will not mention the name.

He wrote the Jewish family name of the teacher and he said, he was not killed by the Germans, but I will kill him. But he was not thrown out of the school or punished. He was, of course, he was he was told that such things are never done. And that the next time he will be severely punished. But that was all. That was all. Well, he was probably 12-year-old or something like that. But still that was a terrible story.

Of course, it's brutal. It's absolutely brutal.

Brutal. That story I remembered very well. That story I remember very well. It made an impression on me.

So well, that was probably the first time I understood that the Nazis were killing mainly, if not exclusively, Jews. But the Soviets very much insisted that there were not only Jews. They very much insisted that there were Soviet prisoners of war that were killed. Yes, they were. They were even more. Well, one more story about the Nazi period in Lithuania.

Sure, please.

When we lived in my grandfather's house with my mother, there was a prisoner of war camp--

Not far?

--not far from our house.

What is the address of that house?

Address of the houses [SPEAKING LITHUANIAN].

[SPEAKING LITHUANIAN]?

Now it is Gybowski Prospekt 3.

Grybowski Prospekt 3 is what it is now?

Yes.

And then it is--

Yes, my grandfather's house-- former house of my grandfather. Later we sold it to a different family. Now it is in bad shape. But the house is still there.

OK.

So and the Soviet prisoners of war, they were guarded by the Nazis-- by Germans, not Lithuanians. Such tasks were given only to Germans.

That's interesting. There was this differentiation then.

Yes, that was a differentiation. Ghetto can be guarded by the Lithuanians. but the prisoner of war camp, only by the Germans, as well I say remember.

OK.

And one of our friends-- and I think Lithuanian-- went by this prisoner camp and he saw that those Russian soldiers taken by the Germans were extremely hungry.

Yeah.

He had a cabbage head, and he threw it. He was immediately killed by the German guard.

That young Lithuanian

That young Lithuanian. For helping the Russian prisoner of war. Well, the German could probably say, well, maybe he through a bomb--

Yeah.

--or something else-- one of those. Well, I have my orders, and I had to kill such persons-- betrayed it,

maybe. But of course, nobody even, I think, no body even interrogated the German soldier.

It must have been such a shock to hear.

That was a big shock to the entire suburb of Kaunas that we lived in. Because that was a boy from a good family-- from a rather well-to-do family-- I think from a professor's family-- and he was killed.

Right like that.

Right, yes. Just for giving a head of cabbage to a Russian prisoner of war. Now, well, what else?

Well, it was basically I wanted to get a sense of when did it dawn on you-- and you've explained it--

I understand and I tried to. So the Soviets insisted there were Russian prisoners of war, there were also Lithuanians. Very much was said in school about the poet who was called Montvila. Montvila was a friend of my father, of Boruta. He wrote a lot of poetry during the first Soviet occupation praising Lenin, Stalin, Soviet army, and so on-- lots of poetry. And he did not flee to the Soviet Union. He stayed in Kaunas. They say that he tried to flee but he did not manage to do it. He was arrested and he was shot together with the Jewish people. And but very much was told about him.

So he became like a heroic, like a tragic figure.

Yes, a heroic and tragic figure. But of course, not Abraham Sutzkever or not anybody else who was not Lithuanian. No, he was our strictly Lithuanian guy who was this fighter for the Soviet truth, for that he was killed by the fascists.

OK.

They not necessarily so by the Lithuanian fascists. By the Nazis-- he was killed by the Nazis. He was compared to Federico Garcia Lorca. He was compared to, I don't know, Vaptsarov or such a Bulgarian poet killed by Nazis, and so on. So we also have our hero, Montvila. Montvila, well at least he took some part in the political--

He took some action. He had been active in some way.

Yes. Of course, God forbid, one should not be killed for that. One should not be imprisoned for that. Because, well, poetry is poetry. Even bad poetry is poetry and not a punishable offense. But now thousands of Jewish people were killed together with Montvila, including children, including old people, including women who did not take any part in political activities. And they never said a word about that. But partly by reading, by talking with people, by getting some non-Soviet literature, I understood the nature of the Holocaust, the real nature of the Holocaust. But I probably understood it only when I already graduated from the University.

It that while.

It took to just a while. It took a long, long time. And I was very [SPEAKING LITHUANIAN] how do you say?

I was very curious.

I was a very curious boy. I think a lot of my schoolmates or University mates were much less curious. And they not necessarily understood the situation as well as I did.

So would you be reading underground literature?

I was reading about literature. Then I'd go up to the Jewish friends, like [INAUDIBLE] like Stromas, like Ginkas. During the Soviet period, before my emigration, I did not know whether they might take it very well.

I see.

But I knew Stromas and Ginkas very well, and, of course, they told me much.

They told you about their families.

Of course, of course, they told me very much. So I knew something about that. But it took at least 10 to 15 years to understand the entire problem of the Holocaust.

Well, I'm going to jump a little bit because we could talk about your post-war years ad infinitum, and I won't do that. But you did write-- when you did become a famous dissident, you openly became a Soviet dissident against the system, I remember that one of the most pivotal essays that you wrote was about Jews and Lithuanians. And that was in the '70s and the '80s. Tell us about that and what prompted that essay and what kind of effect did it have? So tell us first about the background and then the essay itself.

OK. I will try, but let us do some break.

Sure.

So this was something about one of them.

Yes, I'd like to hear-- I forgot to ask you before-- I mean, he was he was a poet, yes?

He was a poet and then a fiction writer and a good man.

And he was imprisoned by both Smetona--

Yes.

--and by the Soviets. So what was he accused of under the one and what was he accused of under the other?

Well he belonged to the party of SR, that means socialist revolutionaries.

OK.

Who were very definitely against Smetona.

OK.

And yes, they even made some terrorist actions. Boruta, himself, was never involved in terrorism but he was part of that group.

OK. Like [INAUDIBLE] You know is that the group that tried, I think, a coup or an assassination or something like that?

They tried to assassinate the Prime Minister Voldemaras, but he survived. Well, then Boruta had to flee. First, he fled to Latvia, which was a bit more Democratic at that time than Lithuania. But from Latvia, he fled to Vienna, to Austria. And spent, I think, at least seven whole years in Austria, then came back in Lithuania in '34. In '34, then he was arrested.

Because of these activities?

Because of the activities of his group. He belonged to the group which was active in anti-Smetona work. Ut wrote what he wrote mainly poetry but that was definitely anti-Smetona poetry, I would say.

OK.

Then he spent some time under the Nazi occupation, and he tried to help Jewish people. He was part of that network of helpers. A small part, he himself probably never saved anybody personally. But for example, he employed some Jewish people because they had to make a catalog of Jewish books in the libraries, in Lithuanian libraries. And Boruta was there the head. So he employed some Jewish people, including, I think, Abraham Sutzkever. They were friends. And by giving them employment, he was a sort of a mini Lithuanian Schindler.

OK.

Boruta. But under the Nazi rule he was not imprisoned.

OK.

Under the Soviet rule, in '46 or '47, he had a female friend-- well, a lover, to be precise-- whose name was Ona Lukauskaitė. Who was also a part of that SR group, socialist revolutions group, who fought against Smetona. But then she decided that she will fight also against Stalin. Because is even much worse than Smetona.

OK.

She wrote a letter, I think to Winston Churchill of all people, explaining the situation in the occupied Lithuania-- that the situation is difficult, people are persecuted, people are deported. The country has no its own administration. The country has no independence although it had it before the war. So dear Winston, please help us. And she started to collect the signatures. She came to talk Boruta and asked him to sign. Boruta said, well, I think it's senseless. I will not sign it. But he never denounced it. She was arrested very soon and got 10 years in Vorkuta camps.

Hard labor camps.

Hard labor camps. Then she was released, and later she became a member of the Lithuania-Helsinki group. We were colleagues in the Lithuania-Helsinki group. One more example of how everything is interconnected in Lithuania. But Boruta never denounced her. So for the fact that he knew about her deeds and never denounced it, he was also tried. But thanks, perhaps, partly to my father, he got a short sentence and was not even brought out of Lithuania. He served his sentence in Vilnius. Lukauskietė told me when we were together in the Helsinki group, your father was also a witness at my trial. I have nothing to reproach him.

Oh.

I was very proud of that. I was very proud of that. So that's about my father and about Boruta.

Boruta. OK. And now let's come to the essay. And what was it-- how did it start that you even wrote it, and then we go from there.

I wrote an open letter to the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, which was the letter of breaking the relations between me and the Lithuanian authorities. I wrote in that letter that I was all my conscious life, I was not on their side. Although my father was on their side. But for of my father and for everybody in Lithuania, it was never a secret. It was never a secret. But because of that, now I cannot any more work in the cultural field.

OK.

My work is never printed. Even my translations are not printed. I cannot teach and so on and so on.

And you were how old at this time? When you did this.

I was around 40, 38 or 39.



OK.

And for that reason, my life starts to become senseless in the Soviet Union. I don't agree with the communist ideology. I considered it wrong to a very large degree. I did not tell that I considered it completely wrong. Even today I don't consider it completely wrong. But I considered it wrong to a very large degree. And their absolute monopoly of that ideology in our country is harmful for culture and harmful even for the state.

I cannot do anything. But at least I can express my opinion about it-- probably I even should do it. That is always something. So I wrote such a letter. And then end of was, since it is as it is, I think that I should leave the Soviet Union and ask for the emigration-- basing myself on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which says that the person is free to choose their country where he or she wants to live and also basing myself on the existing law. Because the Soviets sometimes let people out, including Jewish people.

And you wrote this letter in what year?

That was in '77-- no, '75.

OK.

In 1975. I wrote this letter. It was opened, that means they sent it to the Central Committee. But they also send it-- I also gave it to some friends. about whom I might be sure that they will leak it to the West. They will be instrumental in leaking it to the West. And the letter leaked to the West. It was printed in the Western press, in many Western newspapers. And I became a sort of well-known figure in the West, which helped of course. Because otherwise I would be either imprisoned or put in the psychiatric hospital. But because my case was already well known and the West, that gave some protection-- not 100% protection, but some protection.

And was it at this time, after you wrote this letter, that you wrote that famous essay?

Yes.

Tell me about that.

Well, the Central Committee invited me and said well, we are ready to forget that letter. It was written in a moment of depression. Just please work as before and we will forget it. I then answered, well I prepared myself for writing such a letter throughout my entire conscious life. If I wrote it I will not deny everything that is told in it. They said, in this case, you wrote it to the wrong address.

The problems of immigration are decided not with the Central Committee, but at the Minister of the Internal Affairs. Go to that Minister, they are giving visas. If you have grounds for leaving, they may maybe give you a visa. This is their problem, not our problem. Well, I went to the Ministry of the Internal Affairs. That means police but not the secret police, but the usual police. And they said, well you have no grounds to go out. So don't come to us anymore. It makes no sense. And then I became the so-called otkaznik.

What does that mean?

That means refusenik. A person who wants to emigrate and who is refused this right. 95% or more of refuseniks were Jewish. I was not Jewish-- neither on my father's side, nor on my mother's side. So it was a very strange sort of refusenik. But of course, I made contacts with many other refuseniks, which was numerous in Vilnius at that time. One of them was Felix Dektor. Felix Dektor, who later left for Israel. And now he lives partly in Israel, partly in Moscow. He is still alive and active. He's still my good friend. And that time he still lived in the Soviet Union as a refusenik. He told me, dear Tomas, I am organizing a Jewish underground newspaper, Tarbut.

Tarbut, which means, I think, enlightenment or something like that. Than would publish memoirs of a Jew

who was persecuted by the Lithuanians during the Nazi occupation. And who writes just terrible things about Lithuanians. You are a Lithuanian, but not a Soviet Lithuanian. You are anti-Soviet Lithuanian because of the letter you wrote which is known now to everybody. Could you write an answer? How do you evaluate the behavior of the Lithuanian and generally the entire question of the Holocaust in Lithuania? I said, well, of course, I will write it.

And this was what year?

It was '75th or 6th.

OK, so '75, now '76.

I was still in the Soviet Union. I wrote it for the Jewish underground newspaper in the Russian language. And my essay was written in Russian language. I did not know everything at that time. I wrote it, how to say, [SPEAKING LITHUANIAN].

I wrote it in a cloak-- sort of like in a summarized form. Is that what you know?

No, [SPEAKING LITHUANIAN] does not mean it. I wrote--

Modestly?

Yes, I wrote it without rhetoric, I would say, without rhetoric.

No polemic.

No polemic. I wrote it as I understood this problem at that time. Now I understand it better. I several times I wrote more about that problem and-- well, to tell the truth, this article or this essay could be better.

But tell us what was in it. Tell us what was in it.

Well, I thought that the crime-- crime has no [SPEAKING LITHUANIAN].

Justification.

Crime has no justification. Holocaust is Holocaust. And as long as we Lithuanians would try to justify it, we would share the guilt. When we cease to justify it, we will expatriate our guilt. And this is my position also now. And that was my position at that time. So it was written, it was published in that Jewish underground press. It was read by many of my friends, including Jewish friends, but also ethnic Lithuanians. And my friends agreed with that, including my Jewish friends, refuseniks.

Then it leaked to the West, also before I emigrated. And it was translated from Russian into Lithuanian and printed two times-- once in the emigre magazine *Akiraciai*, which was very liberal and very, very good, I would say. That was probably the best Lithuanian magazine ever. And who had the totally correct attitude towards Holocaust and towards the Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust. They printed it. And then-- that's a long story, but finally I was given permission to emigrate.

Well, what I remember from this-- again from several decades ago-- is that it also went into the Lithuanian underground press. And wasn't it that you've got some sort of responses.

Yes, but I was already in the United States when I got that response.

I see. I see.

Then I got the response. Then I finally--

Was Emigrating?

I emigrated. I joined the Helsinki group. And then the authorities had only two choices, either to imprison on me-- which was inconvenient because my case was famous-- partly also because of my family name-- but I don't think that that was the main cause. The main cause was that my case was known in the West.

My case was discussed by Czeslaw Milosz, by Josef Brodsky, by Arthur Miller, of all people, and so on and so on. And it was very inconvenient to imprison such a person, better to let him out. I understand the behavior of the authorities this way. Well, he is naive. He will perish in the West. He will never get a decent employment. He will be very unhappy. Most likely he will address us for letting him back to the Soviet Union. That will be our victory. That did not happen.

I got a decent employment. And I would say even made a sort of a career in the West, which was very unexpected for the Soviet authorities. Also unexpected for the many Lithuanian dissidents, who also considered me to be a nomenklatura boy-- golden Soviet youth-- who will definitely perish in the West or will never interest anybody in the West. They were also wrong. But well, such things happen.

Now, when we emigrated-- when I emigrated, I emigrated still as a Soviet citizen with a Soviet passport. But my behavior in the West was such that they stripped me of my Soviet citizenship. I was denied. The first, well probably the tenth. The first person stripped of the Soviet citizenship was no one else but Brodsky. And it was considered a punishment worse than death punishment. So but that was forgotten. The second person stripped of the Soviet citizen was Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter.

Stalin's daughter.

That next person was Valery Chalidze, who was a human rights fighter. The fourth person was Aleksandre Solzhenitsyn, also a very well-known person, the fourth person. Then several more persons, and then my humble person, the number nine. So I was extremely proud of it. To be in one company that Solzhenitsyn or Chalidze, for that matter, that was something. And being in the West, my first pronouncement was, I am not going to ask for political asylum because I am a member of the Lithuanian-Helsinki group. And I would like to have a possibility to come back to Lithuania and to take part in the activities of the Lithuania-Helsinki group.

But when they stripped me of my Soviet citizenship, then I asked for the political asylum, which was granted. And in due course I became an American citizen. But I never lost the Lithuanian citizenship, which I still have. I have a double citizenship. And I would tell that-- well, both citizens are very important for me. I am proud of both. But I'm more-- in a sense, more important for me is the Lithuanian citizenship for a very simple reason. The United States will manage without my help and person, if necessary. But in Lithuania, I can make some difference. For that reason the Lithuanian citizenship is more important for me. Well, but that's a digression.

Not really.

So when I left Lithuania, well, there was some reaction in the Lithuanian immigration. But several persons told me that they would put their signature under my essay about Jews and Lithuanians. That was-- Algirdas Julien Greimus, a famous French scholar. That was [INAUDIBLE], an American scholar. And several other persons whom I really respected. Whom every Lithuanian respected. They said, well, we would put our signature on your work.

But there were also lots of people who would never put their signature under my essay. And who even attacked me in the émigré press and also anonymously. But still, I had enough of people of Lithuanian immigrants, who supported me, including the entire Akiraciai editorial board and the entire people who contributed to Akiraciai. And that was a very important part of the return in immigration. President Adamkus, for example, the President Adamkus was one of them. And I am more than proud that he was elected the Lithuanian president, because he's a person absolutely reproachless person in any sense.

Yes, in Lithuania also there was an article in the underground press which was also without much rhetoric, but which said, well, of course, the Holocaust is terrible. It should not repeat itself, and so on and so on. But

the Jews are also not without their guilt, because many of them supported the Soviets.

Well, I also wrote an answer to that person, which was printed in Akiraciai, explaining my position, which is different, which is a different position. First of all, if somebody supports the Soviets that does not mean that every person belonging to that ethnic or religious or racial group should be persecuted. That does not mean it. The person should answer for his or her deeds and nothing else.

The Soviets also persecuted people because, for example, not of their nature or national origin, but because of their social origin-- because of their class origin, which is also simply unacceptable. But this is a different kind of persecution. So I wrote this answer. And this answer was also published in Akiraciai.

I wrote that I would like it to be published also in the Lithuanian underground press. That was never done. But Antanas Terleckas, a famous Lithuanian dissident and underground fighter, wrote an essay in the Lithuanian underground press supporting my position. So I can tell that the Lithuanian underground, at that time, supported my position. Well, that's probably almost everything I can tell you.

You know something, I think we've come close to the end then.

Yes.

Thank you. I think those are the most important points that I wanted to highlight. I do have one last question.

Yes.

It may be a big one. But I hope that it will not be very big. How would you evaluate today? How do people in Lithuania come-- how do they understand the Holocaust and their own connection to it, in your view?

My feeling is that now it is 50-50. That means that when I wrote my article, "Jews and Lithuanians", there were probably 80 to 20.

80 not supporting and 20--

80 not supporting and 20 supporting-- now it is 50-50. Maybe my supporters even prevail, especially in the younger generation. Because they get lots of letters and I am even stopped on the street and told that the people support me, and so on and so on. At the same time I got hundreds of anonymous internet commentaries, which are generally terrible.

The internet commentaries, if this is the subconscious of the people, then the subconscious of our people it's in a very, very bad shape, unfortunately. But I think that partly it is done maybe even by Putin and Putin people, maybe. Yes, in part. But there is lots of such comments. I learned not to pay much attention to it. And it even gives me some adrenaline, so to speak. But I also get lots of support, much more than ever before.

We can only hope that it will change. And that it will be 95% of people who understand the problem, and only 5% of very hopeless people who don't understand it, which happened in Germany-- which maybe was [INAUDIBLE], but it happened. It happened in Western Europe, to some degree. But also to the degree 50-50, it happened in Poland.

Poland, in that sense, it's similar to Lithuania. In some sense, maybe even worse than Lithuania today. Because they are even have a government who insists that Polish people are absolutely beyond reproach. They are not. So in Lithuania we have probably less people insisting on that and the fact that Lithuanian people are absolutely beyond reproach-- and government does not support that position.

Now but the government's change. Now, what else can be told? So I hope that in Germany it took more than 50 years, and a very strong effort of serious people such as Willy Brandt, such as Heinrich Boll.

That's right.

And many, many others. In Lithuania, it also take time and effort. Well, I try to contribute to that effort. The time will go soon, the time will also do its work. If we don't cease to do out our effort.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you very much. I will say then that this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Tomas Venclova on September 30th, 2018.

Thank you and excuse my bad English.

Your English is wonderful. Thank you.

Thank you.