

SILKINAITĖ, Vera
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In this interview Vera Silkinaitė, born in 1925 in Kaunas, talks about the pogrom at the „Lietūkis“ garage in Kaunas that she has witnessed in June 1941 as a young woman and describes how people were being beaten up with barrels of guns, sticks and water hoses, while a crowd of observers watched – stressing that most people turned around as soon as they saw what was going on, but some stayed and encouraged the perpetrators. She talks about the relationship between the Jews and Lithuanians before the war; about her family’s relationship with their neighbors Vitkinai, a Jewish family; a Lithuanian army volunteer named Šerelis, who lived in the same house and who tried to take Vitkinai to the Fort VII to be executed as soon as the war started, but was stopped by the Germans. She also talks about the attacks on Jewish property which happened as the war was approaching and the results of which she had witnessed herself. She mentions the blood libel stories, associated with the Jewish people that were circling around in the interwar period. She discusses how people – her mother among them – supported the Jews and brought food to their homes in the summer of 1941, before the ghetto was established, as the Jews were afraid to leave their homes; talks about the beginning of the war, the establishment of the ghetto; discusses how the Jews were taken to work in different locations in the town, how she would bring food to the son of Vitkinai and put it on the pavement, so he could pick it up as he was walking in his colon. She discusses what happened to the Jewish property, explaining that the most valuable things were taken by the Germans, while the apartments were given away to families expelled from Vilijampolė, where the ghetto had been established; notes that a family from Vilijampolė moved to their house as well.

Tape 1 Box 1

[04] 00:40:24 - [04] 07:22:02

00:00:35 - 00:07:33

She introduces herself as Vera Silkinaitė, born in 1925 in Kaunas to a family of an office employee and a homemaker; says that she had two sisters and a brother; that her father died early. She says that in her youth there was no animosity felt towards the Jewish people among intellectuals – only among uneducated people, who considered themselves patriots, but, in her opinion, had a very negative impact on the Lithuanian nation. She mentions an “event at the garage” (a pogrom at the “Lietūkis“ garage) that she herself has witnessed; describes how shaken she was by the cruelty of Lithuanians; points out that there were not so many Jews and Lithuanians in the garage.

[04] 07:22:02 - [04] 12:08:06

00:07:33 - 00:12:31

She discloses that the owners of the apartment that her family lived in was a Jewish family that lived next door; that they had a good relationship with the owners; that the owners had three children, who all studied at the university: law, French and technology. She remembers that the neighbors had a phone and let her use it for free. She points out that among the Jews some were rich – **Sklitauskai**, Slavina – but some were really destitute. She says that the Jews would let everyone buy on credit, which it had to be repaid each month; that some, who were most gravely

indebted, sometimes bullied their creditors by breaking the windows of their stores or stole fur coats from them; recalls how she once went into a bakery that belonged to a Jew named **Kapurskis**, and heard that all the windows of a store that sold fur coats and belonged to another Jew named **Vynikas [Vinikas]** had been broken; that she went to see herself and saw the broken windows; concludes that the Jews were not being physically attacked, however, there was a lot of damage made to their property. She notices that as the war with Germany was approaching, the Jew haters grew more violent. She recalls that there was a Lithuanian army volunteer living in their house; that as the war started, before even the Germans arrived, he grabbed the owners' family – the parents had been dead, but the lawyer son with his wife were still living there – and led them to the Fort VII to be executed, but was stopped by the Germans and sent back home; that the wife of the Lithuanian army volunteer had robbed the owners' apartment while they were away; that her mother tried to protest, but the army volunteer retorted, „shut up, or it will be your turn soon“.

[04] 12:08:06 - [04] 17:53:06

00:12:31 - 00:18:30

She recalls how the Vilijampolė ghetto was set on fire by the Germans as they retreated; mentions that the smell was very „unpleasant“. She explains that the Russian army officers' wives were also kept in the Vilijampolė, just opposite the ghetto; says that her family participated in collecting food for the officers' children when they were sick; that as she brought the food, she could sometimes see the neighbors' son, who would whisper to her when he will be taken out somewhere; explains that if an old German officers was leading the colon, she could hand the food to the neighbors' son, however, if it was a representative of „Hitler Jugend“, it was dangerous to even try. She goes on to talk about an acquaintance of her family, who recounted in pride how he smashed windows of a Jewish store in the Old Town. When asked how people like him justified their actions, she responds that she would hear them say that „Jews don't belong in Lithuania and they can go wherever they want to from here“. She expresses an opinion that the people who felt most animosity towards the Jews were children of rich farmers. She says that even before the war nobody would reprimand them, since everybody was afraid of them. She recalls that there were two Jewish girls in the school that she attended – one of them later married an attorney named Levinsonas – and the other children would make fun of them, especially when the rabbi came to teach the religion class for the Jewish children.

[04] 17:53:06 - [04] 23:49:07

00:18:30 - 00:24:41

She claims that the Jews had been abused before, but it really intensified as the war was approaching and Hitler occupied Klaipėda; that when the Soviets kicked the Germans out, most of those, who committed crimes against the Jews, fled or went into hiding. She remembers that every year before Easter rumors about the Jews wanting children's blood for their matzos started spreading and people tried to guard their children; that these rumors spread among the uneducated, in the market and the children. She points out that Jewish doctors were very good and didn't take too much money from the poor; recalls a Jewish military doctor's assistant named **Ipka**, who treated everyone in need for free.

[04] 23:49:07 - [04] 28:28:05

00:24:41 - 00:29:31

She tells an animated story about a Jewish store owner, who always asked her to come in the morning and be his first customer, because he believed that she brought him luck; recalls and describes in detail another story that moved her, in which the owners' son, who was a lawyer, saved her pet goat; goes on to tell that the wife of that son escaped the ghetto and came back after the war, when the house, that had been nationalized, was returned to her, sold the house and went to Israel, where – she had heard – she lost her mind, as she kept on seeing how her one year old child is taken from her by force [the interviewer asks if it happened during the „Children's Action“ and she responds positively]. She says that the owners' last name was **Vitkinai**, and their sons' names were **Jisonas** and **Aronas**.

[04] 28:28:05 - [04] 36:24:19

00:29:31 - 00:37:48

She says that in the days preceding the war the streets were calm and only in their homes people would talk about the fact that something big was going to happen; recalls how on the first day of the war a woman, who would bring milk from Aleksotas (a district in Kaunas) every day, informed them that the airport had been bombed, but nobody believed her then – only when a burning parachute fell on the roof of the „Pasaka“ cinema, everybody fled the streets, although there was no official declaration about the war; recalls that the windows of all Jewish stores were broken that day. She says that about a month or three weeks after the Germans came; notices appeared everywhere, urging people to make sure all the Jews go the ghetto. She goes on to talk about **Šerelis** – the Lithuanian army volunteer, who tried to take the owners' family to the Fort VII to be executed, but was stopped by the Germans; explains that he had a gun, because he was an army volunteer; that he was a drunkard and a thief; recalls how he stole a pot that she had left in the hallway; that when the owners were finally taken to the ghetto, he and his wife took all their clothes and furniture; that they fled to Žašliai as the Germans were retreating.

Tape 2 Box 1

[05] 00:40:22 - [05] 06:37:23

00:00:44 - 00:06:56

She says that the first ones to arrive in Kaunas were the German motorcyclists; that riots occurred as they entered; that she did not see broken windows of Jewish shops with her own eyes, since she lived in Žaliakalnis, and most Jewish stores were situated in Laisvės Alėja (main street in the center of Kaunas) or the Old Town; that she decided to go out and take a look at what was happening in the city and water the flowers at the cemetery; that as she turned into Vytauto avenue, she saw a crowd watching some incident; that most people would approach to take a look at what was going on and then leave, but there were some, who had been standing there for a while and shouting „hit the Jew“; that as she approached, some people had already been lying motionless and water was being poured onto them; that other people were being beaten „for no apparent reason“ – she explains that the garage was empty, so the Jews couldn't even have tried to take the cars away. She describes the sights that disturbed her most: water being poured onto a man lying on the ground, but the man not coming back to life; another man with a wounded face [indicates the location of the wound] stirring; people who could hardly walk being beaten up with sticks, barrels of guns and water hoses. She claims that she did not stay for too long and ran to the cemetery nearby, where she was scolded by the cemetery guard for being out on the streets; explains that „all the scum“ had taken to the streets that day. When asked how much time she spent watching the massacre, she responds that probably no longer

than five minutes – until she understood what was going on; describes the sights that most disturbed her once again and wonders how some people could have watched it for so long.

[05] 06:37:23 - [05] 12:05:23

00:06:56 – 00:12:38

She says that she can remember four victims: the motionless man lying on the ground; the man with the wounded face; a man who tripped and fell after she arrived; and a fourth man, who was standing up, while blood was gushing from his nose; notes that there were more people there, but she couldn't see them all – explains that the massacre took place in a large area. When asked if there were any people, who were waiting for their turn to be beaten up, she responds that she didn't see any, but admits that there might have been some inside the garage, as the massacre was taking place outside on a parking lot. She says that the person with a wounded face was shouting „help“, while the others simply tried to cover themselves with hands. She suspects that there were six or seven people involved in the slaughter and describes their outfit – they were wearing boots, military pants, military shirt, while others were wearing suits – she points out that they were poorly dressed. When asked again how perpetrators were involved, she responds that eight or nine. When asked if there were children among the observers, she responds positively and recalls how one adult observer put a child on his shoulder, so that he could see better. When asked what the perpetrators were saying, she respond that they were cursing and calling their victims „žydpalaikis“(a derogative term for a Jewish person) and „degenerates“; speculates if the perpetrators were drunk; repeats that most of the people, who came to look at what was going on, would immediately turn away, but some „enthusiasts “watched the pogrom for a long time, laughed and encouraged the perpetrators.

[05] 12:05:23 - [05] 17:16:14

00:12:38 - 00:18:01

She goes on to talk about the shock she felt when encountered with such a view; when asked, how the water was being poured on the victims, she explains that water hoses from the garage were used to first to beat people up, and later to pour water over them in order to bring them back to life. She recalls how she learned about Hitler's policy towards the Jewish people: two brothers, named Lagenpušai [Lagenpusch], who were local Germans, served in the Lithuanian army and knew her family, came over to say goodbye to her mother before they repatriated to Germany and told her that they were bringing with them a sick child and an elderly women, whose fate, they feared, will be „the same as the Jews“. She recalls how later her mother received a letter in which the brothers had informed her that the child had been given a vaccine on the border from which it did not recover, and the elderly woman had also been eliminated – they explained that the Germans did not need sick children and old people. She points out that one of the brothers returned to Lithuania during the German occupation years as a military interpreter; that he was captured by the Germans (the Soviets?), while the other brother, Verneris Lagenpušas [Werner Lagenpusch], retreated with the Germans, therefore one brother ended up living in the East Germany, while the other stayed in the West Germany; mentions that she tried to correspond with them, but was forbidden to.

[05] 17:16:14 - [05] 21:53:24

00:18:01 - 00:22:50

She claims that, as the war was approaching, everybody knew that the Jews will not be spared, since the news about Hitler's policies reached them from time to time. When asked about the date of the massacre, she hesitantly says that it took place on the second day of war, on Monday; she recalls, how the soviet police forces simply disappeared from their headquarters on the first day of war; she claims that she witnessed the massacre around 9.30 am; that there were 10-15 people standing there; that there were many more who approached, but turned around immediately after they saw what was going on; when asked, why, in her opinion, people were running toward the massacre, she opines that probably they simply wanted to know what was happening.

[05] 21:53:24 - [05] 27:32:01

00:22:50 - 00:28:43

She recalls seeing Jews being taken to work; says that if somebody would throw a piece of bread or a pack of cigarettes and the Jews tried to pick it up, they would be hit by a barrel of a gun immediately, although the older German soldiers tried to pretend they didn't notice anything, but the young would not only beat up the Jew who tried to pick something up, but also the person who put it there. She says that she saw Jews being led through Savanorių Avenue and in the downtown; that the Jews were ordered to clean streets and military barracks and work in construction. She recalls that once, as she was going down Savanorių Avenue, she heard somebody calling her name quietly, and, as she turned to the colon of Jews that were being led down the street, she saw the son of the owners of her house, who, together with the others, was being taken to the "Ragutis" beer factory; that he motioned to her that he will be on the same route the next day; that her mother packed bread and salt to bring to him the next day; that later on he disappeared and she never saw him again. When asked about the life of the Jews in Kaunas in the summer of 1941 until August, when the ghetto was created, she replies that they were hiding and only a few ventured to leave their homes; that other people would buy food for the Jews; that her mother brought food to a family of a Jewish doctor, as well as the owners' family; that they mostly bought grains and bread, since there was no money; that other neighbors also brought food to the owners' family. She thinks that it was dangerous for the Jews to leave their homes, as they could have been beaten up; that the Germans, as well as some Lithuanians, complained that the Jews were „contaminating the air“. She says she has heard that one acquaintance of hers, who was a Jew, was beaten up on the street, on his way to a market.

[05] 21:53:24 - [05] 27:32:01

00:22:50 - 00:28:43

When asked what happened to the Jewish property after they were taken to the ghetto, she replies that the best apartments and things were appropriated by the Germans; opines that the Germans killed the Jews for their treasures; says that the most valuable things were sent to Germany; that the Lithuanians took whatever was left after the Germans took all that they found valuable; points out that some Lithuanians were allowed to come to the ghetto and bring products (to trade with the Jews); recalls a woman who lived in Širvintų Street and knew German well; says that this woman became rich and left together with the Germans; explains that the Jews did not have money, so they could only pay for the products in jewels.

[05] 31:01:05 - [05] 34:52:51

00:32:20 - 00:36:32

When asked what happened to the apartment that belonged to Vitkinai (the owners), she replies that Šerelis and his wife took many things, while the apartment was given away to a family from Vilijampolė, whose home was appropriated for the ghetto; says that those people were horrible neighbors and thieves; starts discussing the memoirs of Valdas Adamkus (former president of Lithuania) from that period. [The camera is steered towards the interviewee's hands] she claims that the people, who moved from Vilijampolė into Jewish homes, got a good deal, as they moved from a bad neighborhood into good apartments.

Tape 3 Box 1

[06] 00:40:20 - [06] 05:44:15

00:00:44 – 00:06:00

When asked who benefited from the calamity that fell upon the Jewish people, she replies that many people did, and especially those, who moved into the Jewish apartments with good furniture. She recalls that on the second day of the war she was on her way to the dairy, when she saw two Jewish young men moving against the flow of people, and as she asked them why they were not going with the others, they responded that they were giving themselves to the hands of God. She explains that she witnessed the massacre on the morning of the second day of war, while the first Germans entered Kaunas on motorcycles at around 3 pm. on the same day. She recalls that not too far from the site of the massacre German, Russian and Polish gymnasiums were located next to each other, and the German students beat the Polish ones badly on the first day of the war.

[06] 05:44:15 - [06] 09:28:13

00:06:00 – 00:09:53

She goes on to tell that after the Jews had been locked in the ghetto, they were taken to work every day: to clean the aviation barracks and the clinical research institute of Kaunas, as well as fix cars in the garages. When asked how her life changed after the Jews were moved out, she tries to remember the last name of the person, who moved in with his family into the apartment of the owners – **Jurkevičius** or **Jurevičius** and claims that there „was no peace left“ after they moved in; when asked how her family interacted with Šerelis, she responds that her family greeted him when they met him on the stairs, but did not interact with him at all; says that Šerelis came to her family to borrow money, but her mother responded that they were too poor; that the people from the surrounding neighborhood were offended by Šerelis' treatment of the Jews; that Šerelis was seen taking the owner's family to the Fort VII not only by people from her house, but from the surrounding houses too; when asked how they knew that he was taking them to the Fort VII, she responds that there was no other possible destination in the direction he was taking them; she speculates that he thought that the Jews would be collected at the Fort VII; explains that this happened on the second day of the war.

[06] 09:28:13 - [06] 13:01:18

00:09:53 – 00:13:15

She expresses her opinion that the perpetrators of the pogrom in the garage were escaped prisoners – points out that the prison had been left unguarded after the Russians left; claims that most of them were political prisoners, but not all; mentions a „bandit“ named **Sluckelis**, whom she later saw guarding the ghetto; recalls a **Bakanovas**, a Russian Old Believer, who studied at the higher school of technology with her brother and came to campaign for her brother to join the

SS, but her brother was not home and her mother told him to leave and ordered him not to come back; says that Bakanovas later returned in his SS uniform to intimidate her mother.

[06] 13:01:18 - [06] 15:50:20

00:13:15 - 00:16:32

When asked if she knew about the massacres at the Fort IX, she responds positively, but points out that she hasn't seen the Jews being taken there – explains that they were taken to be executed in early morning or late in the afternoon – but people talked about hearing screams and shouts. She says that in the Soviet times, after the war, when archeological excavations were taking place and a monument was being built at the Fort IX, her acquaintance, who worked at the museum as an accountant, informed her that many treasures had been found and looted.

[06] 15:50:20 - [06] 20:08:03

00:16:32 – 00:21:00

[She reviews and comments on the photographs of the massacre at the „Lietūkis“ garage presented to her by the interviewer.] She claims to have recognized two victims – the one who was lying motionless while water was poured onto him, and the one with a wounded face; she concludes that she witnessed the very beginning of the pogrom, when there were less viewers and dead bodies than in most of the photographs; she reviews a photograph of a perpetrator and claims that she saw him at the site of the massacre, but he was not beating anyone, just standing around.

[06] 20:08:03 - [06] 25:31:10

00:21:00 – 00:26:36

She goes on to talk about Bakanovas, whose brother she had met after the war and asked about his whereabouts, but the brother did not disclose them. [She continues reviewing the photographs; claims that she has seen one person in the photographs somewhere else, not at the massacre; does not recognize the rest.] She says that the perpetrators were poorly dressed, except maybe for the one in the photograph whom she recognized earlier [she shows the photograph to the camera]; explains that he did not wear his uniform then, but had military-style shirt. [She shows to the camera the photograph of a person, whom she claims to have seen before, but not at the massacre. The interviewer thanks for the interview; the camera focuses on various portraits of the interviewee; an incidental conversation takes place behind the camera.]

Translated by: Milda Morkyte

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