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STONKUS, Leonas
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In this interview Leonas Stonkus, born in 1921 in Darbėnai, talks about his service in the 2nd Lithuanian Self-Defense Battalion that was sent to Minsk in Belarus and took part in the massacre of Jews there. The interviewee describes his participation in three massacres, which took place in 1942–43: near Minsk, in Kopyl, and in Rudensk. He claims that he stood guard in the former two and made sure the Jews didn't run away, while in the latter he was charged with shooting a Jew, which he did, but unsuccessfully and an officer, who was standing nearby, had to finish off his victim. The interviewee provides details about the massacres and the leadership of the officers of his battalion who called for the killing of the "enemies of the Homeland."

Box 1, Tape 1

[01:] 40:10 – [01:] 10:15:22
00:00 – 10:34

He introduces himself as Leonas Stonkus, born in 1921 in Darbėnai town, Kretinga region (of Lithuania); says that when he was two years old, his father died, and when he was seven years old, his mother remarried a man with four children of his own; says that his stepfather was cruel to him so he had to leave home to herd cows for their neighbors; states that he got sick and tried to return home but his stepfather wouldn't let him so he stayed with his mother's cousin; adds that when he was sixteen he went to serve in Klaipėda region; recalls how the Russians came and the army marched through the cities; describes how the military inventoried and nationalized the farmers' property; explains that at that time he was working for a farmer named **Paulikas**; that **Paulikas** and most of the neighbors fled to the U.S. soon after the Russians arrived.

[01:] 10:15:23 – [01:] 19:38:20
10:35 – 20:20

He says that after the Russians came, he went on to work as a laborer building the railway; says that the laborers were treated well, but the farmers were deprived of their property; recalls that with the war approaching, the collectives disintegrating, and a lack of jobs, he and some of his friends decided to walk to Germany to look for work, but were intercepted at the border and sent to prison in Kaunas; talks about the head of Komsomol (youth wing of the Soviet Communist party) unit in Darbėnai named **Reizmanas**, who tried to convince him to join but his aunt opposed it; explains that everybody in Darbėnai hated **Reizmanas** because he had stolen a lot of property from the farmers; remembers that his aunt told him that when the war started **Reizmanas** tried to flee Darbėnai, but was caught and tied to a horse's tail and dragged around town until he hit his head on a rock and died; recalls that **Reizmanas'** parents had a store; says

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that the Jews in Darbėnai were doing really well; recounts his interrogation by Lithuanian communists in Darbėnai before he was sent to prison in Kaunas.

[01:] 19:38:21 – [01:] 29:13:13
20:21 – 30:19

He says that **Reizmanas** only took part in his interrogation once and that **Reizmanas** hit him with a rubber stick; adds that he was interrogated and hit in Kaunas as well; recalls that he stayed in a prison cell with eight people, half of them educated; states that they learned from a prison guard about the impending war four or five hours before it started; explains that on the second day of the war all prisoners were set free by the same guard; says that a day before, 18 women from an adjacent cell were taken away and executed; specifies that there were 1500 prisoners in total; recalls that all of the released prisoners were urged to go from their cells to the kitchen, where they could volunteer for the Lithuanian army; states that he and a friend enlisted; recalls thinking that he would have to serve in the army anyway since he was very poor and points out that nobody was talking about executing the Jews at that time; states that they were sent to the headquarters in Viduklės street in Kaunas where they received Lithuanian army uniforms which were green and new; remembers that the uniforms had an armband with the words “Lithuanian war volunteer” („Lietuvos karo savanoris“) on it; says that they were trained for five months and that they were given guns and taught to shoot.

[01:] 29:13:14 – [01:] 36:26:05
30:20 – 37:51

He explains that he served in the 2nd Lithuanian Self-Defense Battalion, 1st Company, 3rd Platoon; recalls that the officers in the battalion were Sr. Lieutenant **Juodis**, Captain **Antanas Tamošiūnas**, **Vladas Kvietinskas** and Jr. Lieutenant **Dobilevičius**; speculates that only **Dobilevičius** might still be alive as he was the youngest then; adds that the head of the battalion was Major **Impulevičius** and the leader of his platoon was **Tamošiūnas**; says that after the training they were sent to guard the railway, the Šančiai airport and an institution that took care of Lithuanian prisoners in the Old Town of Kaunas, as well as some object in Žaliakalnis (a district in Kaunas); recalls that an order to leave for Minsk arrived suddenly; states that when he joined the battalion, he was told that the service was to last until the end of the war, which was expected to come very soon; claims that in Minsk they were charged with guarding a gas station, Lenin’s home, a tannery, a meat factory, television and radio factories and a hospital; explains that everything was supervised by the Germans; says that they stayed in Minsk for five or six months.

Box 1, Tape 2

[02:] 41:03 – [02:] 09:34:17
00:00 – 09:49

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[He takes some time to remember the name of a place.] He recalls that he participated in an execution in Rudensk and that it probably happened in 1943; says that the execution lasted for one day only; explains that the young soldiers were not forced to shoot and were simply given more difficult errands and were denied pay; states that he had to clean the floor and make the beds because of that; recalls that the executioners were older and more senior *[probably in rank]*; describes how a car would come to pick up the executioners in the morning and take them somewhere; recounts that the executioners lived in a separate house and didn't socialize with the others much; states that they only learned through rumors that a massacre had taken place and how much alcohol the executioners brought back with them; adds that the Lithuanians did not want to shoot and that therefore the Germans were angry; recalls how they were taken on a train to Rudensk where they disembarked; describes the surroundings of the site of the massacre; explains that there was a pit dug out in gravel; mentions that the Jews were ordered to undress and were executed wearing only underwear; says that nobody knew about the executions in advance; says that only on the eve of an execution rumors would start to spread about the upcoming mission but that nobody ever knew where they would be taken; explains that on the mornings of the missions they would get up at 6 a.m. as usual, and would leave at seven a.m.; describes the morning routine; says that they left for Rudensk from Shatsk (a town in Ukraine), where they were staying, although their main headquarters were in Minsk.

[02:] 09:34:18 – [02:] 19:03:07
09:50 – 19:41

He talks about the travel to Rudensk; says they boarded cargo train cars with benches in them and that the train was very long; claims that he only went in those train cars once, while the others later went to Kopyl, Begoml, and other towns whose names he cannot remember; says that the Lithuanian soldiers were allotted three train cars and that they were nearly full; recalls that there were people from three companies and that they didn't know where they were being taken; states that some were saying they were going to an execution, while others said that they were going to pursue the Soviet partisans; claims that there were experienced executioners in the train car too and they told him that shooting Jews was very simple; recalls that when they arrived in Rudensk, they were immediately lined up and the leader of the company **Tamošiūnas**, "all red with anger", announced that they were going to destroy those "who were a great threat to the Homeland"; deliberates as to why the Jews were pursued; speculates that everybody was just following orders because there was a war going on and they were fearing for their own lives; describes the surroundings of the execution site once again; says that from the train he was taken into Rudensk town to guard the soldiers from the Soviet partisans; describes what he saw in the town; explains that the Jews had already been locked up in a concrete building and that the Lithuanian soldiers were led to that building thinking that they would have to take the Jews to the execution site, but the Germans were taking care of that themselves; claims that as they approached the building all the doors and the windows were closed and nothing could be seen; states that the Jews were kept in the basement and that they were guarded by the Belarusians or the Ukrainians; mentions that there were Belarusian battalions that killed Jews; adds that they were led from that building to a huge pit and lined up on both sides.

[02:] 19:03:08 – [02:] 28:52:13
19:42 – 29:55

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He says that the distance between the pit and the building was about 400-500 meters; when asked to describe the execution site, he starts explaining himself and talking about a *[probably Soviet]* interrogator who had been asking the same questions; explains that he was mostly guarding the petrol station and the radio factory and did not participate in the executions; says that there were few Germans in Rudensk, only several officers, and that they were standing among themselves; says that it was German soldiers who led the Jews to the site; speculates that before the war a wasteland that belonged to the collective farm existed on the execution site; claims that it was barren land and not a single soldier brought anything from there; says that when they arrived at the execution site nobody explained to them that they were going to shoot the Jews because otherwise they might have run away; describes that when they arrived there were already four or five wide oblong trenches, each about one hundred meters in length; recalls trying to convince his interrogator to let him go and see the memorial stone at the site, but was denied permission [laughs]; says that there were around one hundred Lithuanian soldiers in Rudensk; asserts that some of them were standing guard while the others were shooting; states that members of three platoons participated in the execution; recalls that the Jews did not try to resist when they were led to the execution site; when asked how many Jews there were, he responds that nobody was counting, since they were all petrified in fear.

**[02:] 28:52:14 – [02:] 36:29:15
29:56 – 37:52**

He says that as he saw the Jews being led, he thought that maybe they were being taken to the adjacent train station; says that the Jews were led in two batches, not all together; recalls that men, women and children were all going together in families; says that the Jews knew they were going to be shot and that they left their clothes right where they undressed; adds that they had no packages or things since a search had been conducted in advance; states that all this took place in August and the Jews were wearing summer clothes; says that he was standing guard and that one young Jewish man successfully escaped and nobody paid much attention; claims that there was one soldier allotted for each Jewish person; says that after a batch was executed and a new one lined up, a new set of soldiers was also ordered to line up; says that his turn arrived with the fourth batch; recalls that before that he was standing guard and could see the others shooting; confirms that the Jews were lined up on the brink of the pit and that when hit, the Jews fell to the ground they were standing on and he doesn't know who threw them into the trenches later; says he thinks that it might have been the Belarusian soldiers.

Box 1, Tape 3

**[03:] 40:10 – [03:] 10:32:15
00:00 – 10:51**

He says that the participation in the executions was rewarded with money, not with promotions; says that they were paid in Russian rubles and that they were paid bi-weekly and not for each execution separately; observes that those were very difficult times; goes on to talk about how

cruel the German army was; when asked if the executioners were awarded in bonuses, he responds positively; explains that the bonuses for guarding objects or pursuing the Soviet partisans were lower and that the biggest bonuses were granted to those who executed Jews; claims that he did not get any bonus because he only participated once, and one had to execute at least a few Jews before one was granted any kind of bonus; replies positively to the interviewer's question as to whether all the executioners were volunteers; says that one could refuse to shoot and speculates that if they had not been allowed to refuse, the whole battalion might have risen up in protest; recalls the cruel faces of the officers of his battalion [*his face is distorted with disgust*]; speculates as to why the officers were so eager to kill the Jews; says that an officer would usually stand in the middle of the file and shout out the order "Fire!", after which he would shoot the first shot himself; claims that all the officers of the battalion took part in the executions; that **Juodis**, **Kvietlinskas** and **Gicevičius** participated less than the others; goes on to talk about **Gicevičius**; remembers how he had to bring a letter from **Gicevičius** to his parents; says that **Gicevičius'** parents were well-off and lived near Kretinga; that **Gicevičius** was a pilot [*the interviewer notices that there were many aviation officers among the people who participated in the executions of the Jews*].

[03:] 10:32:16 – [03:] 20:10:13
10:52 – 20:53

He explains that he only knows about **Juodis'** participation from the investigation materials and he has not himself seen Juodis shooting; recalls that the officers had a flag in their hands as they gave orders to fire; when asked about the Rudensk massacre, he explains that the Jews were standing about 15 meters away from the pit, behind an iron fence, and that they were led to the pit by German officers; states that the Germans also counted how many Jews had been "liquidated"; says that the soldiers were firing from about 10 meters away; explains that they were not allowed to come closer since firing from a closer distance could cause the gun to bursting; when asked how many people he had shot himself, he responds that he shot only one and that he did not kill him; explains that he was nauseated and shaking; recalls that even the officers later told him that he was not suitable for such a task; says that there were around 30 soldiers lined up to fire with him and that they had "simple" guns with five cartridges in the charger; says that they were ordered to shoot all five; describes the process of the execution: the Jews were made to undress, led to the gravel pit of about two meters wide, and, after the Jews were lined up, the soldiers came and lined up in front of them.

[03:] 20:10:14 – [03:] 29:48:08
20:54 – 30:55

He recalls the faces of the Jews; says that some were walking with their heads down while others were holding their heads up in defiance; says that there were some who tried to resist and started running towards the soldiers; states that they were shot immediately; repeats once again that the Jews simply fell on the ground they were standing on; speculates as to whether it was the Belarus army or civilians who buried them after they left; explains that the execution took place in a huge pit; says that the Jews who were to be shot were not made to stand right beside the corpses but two or three meters away from them; when asked what happened if someone missed, he responds that a soldier who was standing next to the one who missed would shoot the Jew; says that they

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were ordered to aim at the chest area; describes how the Jews were standing with their backs to the executioners; when asked why they were not aiming for the head, he replies that great accuracy is required for that and most of the soldiers were too anxious to aim well; goes on to talk about how he shot a Jew, explaining that he was aiming at the left side of the chest [*indicates where*] but that his victim did not fall down right away and was finished off by an officer who was standing next to him; goes on to explain that after a soldier had shot his victim, he had to retreat, and if a soldier felt that he could not continue shooting, he didn't have to stand in file again; recalls that he was leaning on his gun after the unsuccessful shot and an officer passed by him and asked him why he was not joining the file; says he responded that he was feeling nauseated and the officer ordered him to put down his gun; says that he was locked up in the punishment cell and interrogated immediately after they came back for causing such panic; states that he protested that he was not causing panic and did not try to tell anyone what they should or should not do and that he simply could not go on shooting himself.

[03:] 29:48:09 – [03:] 36:28:03
30:56 – 37:52

When asked how many people there were who refused to shoot, he replies that there were maybe 20; says that all of them were young and had not served in the army before; describes how they all received the same punishments, except for those who had served in the army before; goes on to say that he also participated in the execution in Kopyl, but points out that he was only standing guard there; says that they left for Kopyl in a car from Minsk and that they were dropped off around 50 meters away from the pit; says that the Jews were already there when they arrived; asserts that there were significantly more Jews in Kopyl than in Rudensk; explains that he had to guard so that nobody ran away but claims that nobody tried to run; speculates why the Jews didn't run saying that the children were separated from men and women and executed first so that they wouldn't cry; adds that women were shot after the children and the men were shot last; says that all the Jews were petrified and did not move.

Box 1, Tape 4

[04:] 40:06 – [04:] 09:03:18
00:00 – 09:18

When asked which was the first massacre that he witnessed himself, he responds that it was a massacre of Minsk Jews that took place in April or May, 1942 in a clearing of a forest about six kilometers from Minsk in the direction of Moscow; says that 70-80 soldiers from his battalion participated; adds that nobody suggested he shoot at the Jews but that they put him on guard; says that all the officers of the battalion took part and shot the first shots; describes that the officers explained that Jews were "enemies of our Homeland" and that they had handed Lithuania over to the Communists; expresses doubt about the credibility of this line; describes in greater detail the clearing where the massacre took place; says that out of 60 [*earlier he said there were 70-80*] soldiers, there were about 40 who were firing; says that the same people were firing all the time; recounts that he could see the execution from his guard post even though it

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was a little far; says that he took glances but was mostly looking sideways into the forest; states that 20-30 or maybe even 50 Jews were executed in each batch; when asked about the interaction with the executioners after they returned to the barracks, he describes the relationship between the younger soldiers and the senior officers and says that he was afraid of them; insists that they did not talk about the executions.

[04:] 09:03:19 – [04:] 19:03:21
09:19 – 19:43

He says that the officers had nice uniforms but that they changed into plain clothes when they left for the executions since they didn't want to smear themselves while wading through mud; says that he didn't hear about anyone looting Jewish property since the Germans had already taken everything away before the Lithuanians came; assumes that they received money, since they always had something to drink in the evening; insists that the executioners, as well as the guards, were sober during the executions *[he asks for a break; an accidental conversation takes place; the interviewee sings]*; when asked to give more detail on the massacre in Kopyl, he says that women and children were not made to undress, only men; says that the men were shot first (earlier he said that men were shot last); says that children were left to the end and that they didn't understand what was going on and that their parents were dead; says that the women had to lead their children to the pit themselves; asserts that machine guns were also used *[the interviewer suggests that the interviewee is probably talking about the massacre that took place near Minsk]*; explains that he did not volunteer to participate in the executions but that the whole company or half of the company would be commissioned to go so he had to go with it; says that it was mostly senior soldiers who participated in the executions but admits that some youngsters of his age also volunteered and that he couldn't tell them anything because he was afraid to be shot himself; when asked what happened in the barracks at night after the massacres, he responds that he was shaken by the events, while the executioners would usually get drunk and sing aloud.

[04:] 19:03:22 – [04:] 27:49:00
19:44 – 28:50

He wonders aloud why the Belarusians hated the Jews so much; says that they hanged the Jews; recalls that he saw one young man who had been hanged and the man's neighbors told him that he was a Jew; recalls how they went to the church; remembers the priest **Ignatavičius**, although only after the interviewer suggests his name; says that the confessions were communal: a group of people would sit down and reflect upon their respective sins, and after they were done, the priest would assign prayers and give blessing; disputes the value of confessions; says that he had confessed his sin of killing a man in Rudensk to a priest in Darbėnai and that the priest responded that his sin was not so abominable in his young age, since he was forced and didn't kill voluntarily; says that he told his children about the fact that he had shot a Jew; adds that he also explained to the children that he had to join the army because he didn't have a home and wanted to defend Lithuania and that he did not plan to kill the Jews.

[04:] 27:49:01 – [04:] 35:10:11
28:51 – 36:31

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He claims that he first learned that he would have to kill Jews when he was made to stand in front of Jew with a gun in his hands; when asked about the massacre in Kopyl again, he says that he couldn't see the site of the execution from his guard post; says that he was guarding the Jews in a grove and that they were already undressed; when asked whether he feared that he would be asked to shoot again, he responds that he didn't since nobody was forced to shoot; explains that the officers were afraid that a forced man could shoot at them instead of the Jews; clarifies that only volunteers were shooting; when asked why these people chose to shoot, he speculates that probably they were promised something or they had suffered from the Jews or the Belarusians; when asked what he remembers about the Jew he killed, he says he cannot remember anything, but after some insisting, concedes that the victim was a middle-aged man.