

BENDINSKAS, Aleksandras
Lithuania Documentation Project
Lithuanian
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Tape 1, Box 1

In this interview, Aleksandras Bendinskas, born in 1920, an active member of the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) during the years of Russian and German occupation of Lithuania, discusses his family history, his youth and his attempts to study in Germany. He tells the story of the creation of the Committee of a Free Lithuania (LIK) and of LAF, the structure of LAF, their relationship with the LAF Headquarters in Berlin. He gives many names of LAF activists in Kaunas, explains the main objectives of LAF: to organize resistance against the Bolsheviks and protect the property, to use economic pressure as a means to push the foreign (incl. Jewish) capital out. Discusses the LAF action program, the manifestations of anti-Semitism in it, calls it “mildly anti-Semitic”. He describes how he and two other people prepared the white armbands (worn by the “white strippers”) that were supposed to be signs of recognition for the Germans not to shoot the collaborators, but how it became a target for Bolshevik supporters and he advocated removing them. He tells about two Jews working with LAF – a brother and a sister (Šachovai) – whom he had saved after their parents were shot, describes how he helped them to get baptized and get into a nunnery and a seminary; how the brother was shot as he was going to Gestapo for work, but the sister survived and helped them fight the Bolsheviks, and, later on, he helped her run away. Mentions another story how he tried to help a Jewish woman. He discusses the mass deportations of Lithuanian intellectuals and the participation of Jews in them and the disappointment and anger that they felt upon finding out how the director of “Parama”, the company he was working for, a Jew, took part in planning the mass deportation from the company. He talks about the massacre in the “Lietūkis” garage, discussed what encouraged the Lithuanians to kill, but mentions that the victims were not only Jews. He describes the demise of LAF after the Germans came, how the leaders of LAF were persecuted and how, when he was in charge, LAF was finally dismissed. He talks about the participation of Bobelis and Landsbergis in the creation of Kaunas ghetto.

[00:] 00:31:16 – [00:] 05:55:07

00:00:28 - 00:06:05

He introduces himself as Aleksandras Bendinskas and states that he was born in 1920 in Skersbalis village, Šilavotas district, Marijampolė region. He discusses his family history: how his father served in the army during the World War I; how the rest of the family was expelled and lived in Ratomka, close to Minsk (*in Belarus*); how, after the war, his parents came back and found everything had been burned down; how they lived in a dug-out. He tells about his youth, how difficult it was; how, despite their poverty, his father sent him to study; how, after finishing his third year in grade school, he entered gymnasium; how he liked sports and how he would

write for newspapers; how he was interested in what was going on in Lithuania [a person in the backgrounds says that the TV should be turned of]; how in 1939, after graduating from the gymnasium, his friend Šapalas told him about scholarships being granted by the Ministry of Communication to study Communication and Management in Germany; how he was granted the scholarship; how, when the war started, he was afraid to be drawn into the war and came back from Berlin to Lithuania in September 1939; how, after he came back, he worked for the Catholic Action Center, at a printing-house on the corner of Donelaičio and Mickevičiaus streets, which published the newspaper named “Laisvė” (“Freedom”) and specialized in right-wing newspapers.

[00:] 05:55:07 - [00:] 09:48:06
00:06:05 – 00:10:08

When asked about the Lithuanian Activist Front, Lietuvos Aktyvistų Frontas (LAF), he starts talking about the Mutual Assistance Treaty between Lithuania and the Soviet Union, which was signed in 1939 and according to which Vilnius was handed over to Lithuania, and, in return, Lithuania permitted military bases to be stationed in its territory. He explains that in 1940 the government of Lithuania agreed to let in additional troops without any resistance; that this caused a spontaneous and highly unorganized resistance among young men like him against the represvie nature of the government, the bolsheviks and Stalin. He mentions that when the Russians came he was thrown out of the university and worked at the „Parama“ company. He remembers how he first heard about the resistance movement on the international scale carried out by the refugees from Lithuania, who called themselves „forced exiles“; how, in November (1940) they learned about the establishment of the Organization for a Free Lithuania, Lietuvos Išlaisvinimo Organizacija – he notes that he cannot rememeber when exactly he heard about the establishment of the organization (the end of 1940 or the beginning of 1941). Asked to repeat the name of the organization, he specifies that it was called the Committee of a Free Lithuania, Lietuvos Išlaisvinimo Komitetas (LIK) in Berlin. When asked about the LAF again, he says it was created later. He mentions some members of the LIK: Galvanauskas, Maceina; he explains that the objectives of the organization were to free Lithuania and inform the world of what had happened there; that it was an organization of a more general nature; that LAF was created more as an action committee, as an umbrella organization.

[00:] 09:48:06 - [00:] 13:46:20
00:10:08 – 00:14:17

He talks about the structure of LAF; explains that the main objective was to prevent the Bolsheviks from deciphering it; that they gathered into groups of five; that not everyone from one group knew each other, so if one was caught, he couldn't give out more than two or three names; he acknowledges, however, that they did not stick to the rules and that he knew everyone who worked in the Kaunas Old Town. His group of five consisted of people working at

“Parama”: **Skrinskas**, an attorney; **Vaitkevičius**, senior accountant; **Žemaitis**, the manager of a garment factory, some girl and **Kvedaras**. He gives out names of people from other groups of five: **Bazevičius**, **Ambrozaitis** (he mentions, that he is still alive in the US). He explains that the main goal of their organization was to prevent the Bolsheviks from looting, taking away or destroying property; that on the second day of the war, after the declaration of Independence, the looting began. He mentions the white armbands with the letters TDA (Tautinio Darbo Apsauga, „National Labor Guard“) on them, worn as a sign of recognition for the Germans not to shoot them; he says that later Germans shot a number of the „white strippers“ anyway. He recounts how, on his initiative, the newly appointed commandant of Kaunas, **Bobelis**, in order to prevent the looting, issued an order to confiscate weapons from former policemen and others who had kept their weapons from the times when Smetona was in power; mentions that **Gražiūnas** has written about it in his book. Explains, that when the major shops were nationalized, they were essentially left without owners, which encouraged the looting of shops, selling food, gold etc.

[00:] 13:46:20 – [00:] 18:38:22
00:14:17 – 00:19:20

He tells about the LAF documents, their program, which also talked about the necessity to protect the property. He explains that an order by **Sniečkus**, issued on the 7th of July, 1940, provisioned the extermination of Lithuanian intellectuals: the members of the National Party, the Christian Democrats, the Esers; that out of nine to eleven signatories, five or seven were Jews (one of them was **Todesas**, now dead); that Lithuanians felt hurt and even enraged. He talks about the elections to the People’s Seimas and Lithuania, about Lithuania joining the Soviet Union. He confirms having seen the LAF program and assures that there were no statements about the expulsion of Jews from Lithuania. He mentions, that there were Jews at LAF – **Šachovas** and **Šachovaitė** (*Šachovas’ sister*); that they graduated from the gymnasium together with him; that they knew Russian well; that they worked against the Germans together; that they hid them; that **Šachovaitė** is still alive and that he had saved her. He talks about the mass deportation (*of intellectuals*) that took place on the 13th, 14th and 15th of June; that the members of the National Party had easier access to positions of power in Smetona’s government, that he didn’t like it; that he, like his father, was a Christian Democrat. He mentions that he did see some statements that he considered dictatorial in the LAF program, and that one of them was “to refuse the Jews our hospitality”, but admits that he doesn’t understand what the authors of the program in Berlin meant by it; that he did not understand why he should refuse hospitality to the Jews, since he knew many of them and got on well with them.

[00:] 18:38:22 - [00:] 25:51:17
00:19:20 – 00:26:41

He talks about there being rumors just before the war about when it was going to begin; how it was predicted to begin in May, then on the 1st of June, then later again the 15th of June; how the

groups of five were ready to defend the property; how the deportations started on the 13th; how the General Staff (although it was not called like that) – colonel **Vėbra, Damušis** (now dead), **Barakauskas, Lušys** – said that they should disband. He claims that the deportations changed their thinking; that out of 15 people in his class six were Jewish girls and that there was no anti-Semitism before. When asked about anti-Semitism in the LAF program, he claimed that it was „mildly anti-Semitic“; that its tone was more dictatorial than anti-Semitic; that the statement “to refuse the Jews our hospitality” did not call for killing Jews. He starts talking about anti-Semitism in Smetona’s times; explains that “Parama” was created in order to resist the foreign capital: Jewish, German, Russian; that there was not a single Jew working in “Parama”, and that there could be no anti-Semitism there; that it was the same in every major company, like “Maistas” (“Food”), “Pieno centras” (“Dairy Center”); that economic pressure should not be interpreted as anti-Semitism. He admits that there were various statements and criticisms; stresses that criticism of Israel today is not anti-Semitic; starts talking about the status of the Jews as the Chosen Nation; claims that “anti-Semitism has much deeper meaning than the one that is given to it today”; that if one wants, he or she will find anti-Semitism in LAF program, even though it was a call to fight with economic means; that Jews controlled 70-80 percent of the trade industry and they had to be pushed out, but not because they were Jews; that the Co-operatives’ Union, which was created with Lithuanian capital, was pushing the Jewish capital out. Asked about the meaning of the phrase “to refuse the Jews our hospitality”, he says that they did not discuss this statement in their groups, and that even today he cannot tell what it really means.

[00:] 25:51:17 - [00:] 30:08:17
00:26:41 – 00:31:19

He says that as the war started, normal order had not yet set in after the mass deportations; that when he had heard that the war started, he went secretly to “Parama”; that he found **Skrinskas** there; that they informed their groups of five; that they had decided in advance that they should have control of the police, or otherwise they would all be caught in the streets; that someone from his group of five, **Živatkauskas** (now dead) had kept in touch with some policemen, who had served when Smetona was still in government; that they went over to the police headquarters; that they took the police without a single shot; that it was three of them who went: himself, **Žemaitis** and someone else; that **Živatkauskas** also went with them; that later Abrozaitis also came with his group of five from Vilijampolė. He specifies that all this was taking place on Monday morning (*the 23rd of June, 1940*). He remembers that the director of “Parama” at that time was a Jew named **Štromas**, whose son was raised by **Sniečkus** later and is now famous (*Aleksandras Štromas*); that he succeeded **Pakalka**; that **Štromas** was a millionaire; that the personnel manager and the manager of spec. department were also Jews; that they managed the mass deportation from „Parama“; that late into the 23rd of June he, together with his group of five, opened the safes; that they found the documents about the ones to be deported;

that two waves of deportation were planned; that at first he was listed with the first wave, but then, for some reason was transferred to the second; that the lists were signed by **Štromas** and the personnel manager and the manager of spec. department [he cannot remember their last names, but says he can find it in his documents]; that he doesn't know where **Štromas** was when they were opening the safes; that somebody from his organization might have done something to him, because „not all of them were saint“, that in the groups of five there were people who did not deserve to be there.

[00:] 30:08:17 – [00:] 37:22:15
00:31:19 – 00:38:52

He says that it was him and prof. **Briedelis** who would prepare the white armbands (stripes); that there was a third person, but he cannot remember his name; that they prepared the armbands not just for themselves, but for everyone; that they worked in a house in Aleksotas (*a district in Kaunas*), where **Briedelis** lived, and where he would sometimes hide himself; that the idea to wear white armbands came from Berlin; that the head of LAF, **Škirpa**, gave orders to wear the white armbands, explaining that the German units had been informed that the “white striper” would assist them and that they had signs of recognition. He claims that he was advocating for the armbands to be removed as soon as possible; that it was only done on the 25th of June; that the white armbands were a target for Bolshevik supporters. He recounts that they started preparing the armbands after the deportation, around 16th or 17th of June, as they were preparing to fight the Russians, and the Germans had promised to support them; that the armbands were stored in the house in Aleksotas, where they made them; that they distributed several tens for the armbands through the groups of five; that they stopped wearing the armbands when they understood that they were a target; that the communication between Kaunas and other cities was difficult, so the armbands were worn longer outside of Kaunas. When asked if he knew any cases where Lithuanian flag was worn instead of a white armband, he claims he has not witnessed such a case and that there was no such resolution. He recounts how, when he was the head of the Political and Administrative Unit (*of the Interim Government of Lithuania*), on the 24th or 25th of June commissions were formed to inspect the representatives of economy, arts and culture: which of them stayed as the Russians retreated and what their relationship with LAF was. He names the members of the commissions: **Vytautas Marijošius**, a conductor; **Baltrušaitis**, a baritone; **Santvaras**, a poet (the Commission for Arts and Culture); **Kleiva, Kiela** (the Commission for Economy). Explains again that the commissions had to check the relationship between the representatives of arts, culture and economy with the Bolsheviks; that only three people were punished: **Tallap-Kelpša, Dauguvietis** and **Kipras Petraukas**; that **Karšenauskas** tried hard to take away **Petraukas'** title, but that it was not done in the end.

[00:] 37:22:15 - [00:] 46:42:41
00:38:52 – 00:48:35

Explains that the safes of „Parama“ were opened simply by force; that they were surprised to see the lists (*of the people to be deported*) and that everything was done in such a planned manner. He remembers how the Russians were retreating from Kaunas; that a minimal level security was kept by the policemen, who were loyal to them. He criticizes the numbers proposed by Dalia Kuodytė (*a Lithuanian historian*), who claims that 38, 000 Jews died in the first days of war [the interviewer thinks that D. Kuodytė is referring to the numbers in the whole of Lithuania, but V. Bendinskas thinks she is referring to Kaunas only]. When asked about the killing of Jews, he says that he has not witnessed anything like it; that there were no people who took part in the killings in his surroundings, among the students and employees of „Parama“; once again mentions that the Germans were shooting the „white strippers“ on the way from Marijampolė to Kaunas. When asked about the „Lietūkis“ garage, says that he was not there, but that he had „accurate information“, which he used when writing about the event in an article, published by „Gimtasis kraštas“ newspaper. According to him, the former government of Lithuania – **Paleckis, Gedvilas** and others – had already run away, but the „immediate executors“, the [*Soviet*] security agents stayed behind to destroy the classified documents; then the Independence was declared and the unrest began, and they (*the security agents*) were planning to take the cars from „Lietūkis“ garage and run away. He notes that he himself had given orders in the „Parama“ garage to make sure the cars would not turn on. Explains that, when the security agents could not take the cars, they started commotion, and some group of five that was just passing by saw and arrested them without asking if they were Jewish or Lithuanian; that when on the 24th the (*Lithuanian nationalist*) security agents came out of the prisons and later out of the basements, and heard about the Jewish and Russian security agents in „Lietūkis“ garage, they went there and started arresting anyone who looked suspicious. He points out that the tragedy started when the (*Lithuanian nationalist*) security agents came out and recognized one or two interrogators kept at the „Lietūkis“ garage; and that’s when the execution started. He names two witnesses: **Kazys Urvydas**, a linguist; and the wife of colonel **Šlepetys**; both of them told him about signs of beating that they saw. He admits that the execution happened, that people were killed, but claims that the whole event has been exaggerated.

[00:] 46:42:41 - [00:] 51:23:03
00:48:35 – 00:53:27

He claims that people were kept in the garages [the interviewer chokes, drinks some water; pauses]; that the first people were taken there on the 24th of June; that he had issued an order not to give the cars away in April or even earlier; that more specific orders to the employees of “Lietūkis“ and „Parama“ were issued on the 17th or 18th of June, when they learned that the cars from “Lietūkis“ and „Parama“ had been mobilized for the mass deportations; that **Pakalka** knew about it, but had already been removed from his position and could not do anything about it; that there were 20-30 people in the “Lietūkis“ garage; that nobody knows the real numbers, but one may guess from the photographs that have been disseminated by the Germans and the Jews. He

says that he and others had heard about the tragedy that had taken place in “Lietūkis“, but that this event did not stand out in the midst of disorder and war; that 162 people from their own ranks had been killed in the first days of war; that people were looking for each other in prison; that there were explosion everywhere.

[00:] 51:23:03 - [00:] 55:26:04
00:53:27 -00:57:40

When asked about the white armbands once again, he remembers the last name of the third person – **Tirinskas**, who later died in Červenè (*a town in Belarus, where on the 26th of June a massacre was carried out by NKVD*). He explains that the demise of LAF began when the **civil administrator , Civil Verwaltung Rentelnas** came; that the Germans had been incited against LAF by the national socialists; that when at the end of July the Germans started going after **Prapuolenis**, the representative of Škirpa, then he, **Prapuolenis**, appointed **Pilypas Žukauskas** as his successor and went into hiding himself; that as soon as **Žukauskas** appointed him, A. Bendinskas, to lead the organization, he began the process of liquidation; that on the 5th of August the *[Interim] Government [of Lithuania]* halted its operations; that he and others were summoned to **Rentelnas** to sign a pledge that they would not take part in political activities anymore; that they carried on their activities anyway; that LAF was completely liquidated in August or September; that they dissolved themselves not because of the lack of support, but because people were afraid.

[00:] 55:26:04 - [01:] 04:28:09
00:57:40 – 01:07:05

He admits having noticed that the Jews disappeared from the streets of Kaunas, but claims that neither LAF, nor the *[Interim] Government of Lithuania* contributed to it; he mentions the creation of the Kaunas ghetto and the participation of **Bobelis** and **Landsbergis** in it; that, since **Landsbergis** was the Minister of Economy, the transfers had to go through his office. He stresses that he cannot be responsible for what they did; that his task was clearly defined: to organize resistance, guard property from being taken away, and – later – to inspect the loyalty of those who stayed. He remembers how, when he saw **Landsbergis**‘ (Jewish) name in the list of ministers, he told **Prapuolenis**, that **Landsbergis** should be inspected; that **Prapuolenis** replied that everything had been arranged with the Germans already. He says that his sole task was to guard the property of „Parama“ and that he bears responsibility for his involvement in all the other activities. When asked about the shootings in the Kaunas‘ s Forts, he admits having heard the shots and having known that the Jews were being shot, but claims he could not have done anything about it. He remembers, how the Jews were taken to the square next to where the Church of Ressurrection, Prisiškèlimo bažnyčia, stands today; that they would be allowed to beg there; how, that – he was staying with prof. Dovydaitis – one day a Jewish woman came over

with her daughter to their house; how they fed them; how he, together with **Masaitis**, who is still alive in the US (*Lionginas Alfredas Masaitis, died in 2007*) offered to help them to run away; how the woman, fearing that her parents would be shot if she ran away, refused to go. He remembers how he helped **Šachovaitė** to run away; how they bandaged her nose, because she was “a classical Jew”. He explains, that he offered the Jewish woman and her daughter to go hide with his aunt, who was living in the countryside alone; that his aunt mentioned later that somebody had come; that he doesn’t know what happened later. He explains that the Jews were taken to the square next to where the Church of Resurrection stands today to work – men, women and children; that women would bring their children, because people would give them food. He claims to have helped out five Jews in his life. He starts talking about **Šachovaitė**, mentions that she still lives in New York; that she had helped them a lot by preparing summaries of what she heard on the Russian radio, because she knew Russian very well; that she left in the Spring of 1943; that before that she was hiding in Darbininkų street with some women, who are now dead; that he tutored **Šachovas** (*brother*) and **Šachovaitė** at the gymnasium; that he helped them with Math, Lithuanian and German; that their parents had been locked up by the Bolsheviks for being capitalists; that, when the war started, they came out of jail and were shot – he mentions that they may have been shot by the „white strippers“; that the children ran over to him; that they agreed to be baptized; that, with the help of Father **Liukas**, they sent **Marytė Šachovaitė** to a nunnery and **Izaokas Šachovas** – to the seminary; that Izaokas tried to go to Gestapo looking for work; that somebody gave him in and the Germans shot him. [The interviewer says that the interview is over; A. Bendinskas stands up; proposes to go through the LAF program together.]