

ARBAČIAUSKIENĖ, Aldona
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In this interview, Aldona Arbačiauskienė, a survivor of the Holocaust originally from Rūku village, narrates the story of her arrest, victimization, and survival that took place in the region around Skuodas. Mrs. Arbačiauskienė (her maiden name was Bružaitė), while suffering a critical case of pneumonia, was arrested by “white-strippers” at the outbreak of the war because she had signed on with the Communist Youth during the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania. She recounts how she was first driven to Mosedis and then from there to Skuodas along with many Jewish prisoners. She describes the beatings, interrogations, and conditions under which the prisoners were kept in Skuodas. She describes a forced march, during which she witnessed Jews forced from their homes in the old-town by Germans and “white-strippers.” She describes an attack by Russian irregulars on the Germans who were holding them prisoner, which allowed her to nearly escape. She recounts how she was recaptured and brought to the shooting field to be executed but survived the bullet and remained still until the executions were over. She recounts in great detail the hardships she faced during her attempt to escape while she was severely wounded, including witnessing corpses of other escapees who had been executed in the forest and encountering an execution of Jews at close range. She discusses being recaptured and the conditions of the hall in which she was kept with other Lithuanian and Jewish prisoners. She explains that she was eventually released and allowed to return home, where her family members did not recognize her. She talks about the psychological trauma she suffered once at home. She also discusses appearing as a witness at several trials of former war criminals. Finally, she mentions how she narrowly avoided being deported by the Soviets, who considered her escape as evidence of complicity.

[01:] 00:30:20 – [01:] 08:37:18

She introduces herself as born in 1923 in Rūku village in the Skuodas region; describes how, during the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania but before the Germans invaded, she and the youth of her village joined the Young Communists in order to be allowed to perform a play, explains that she did not realize the potential implications of joining; recalls getting sick with pneumonia two weeks before the war and remaining in critical condition when the Germans invaded; talks about how her mother tried to hide her in a forest among beehives; explains that she was too sick to spend the night outside, and they brought her closer to the house and put her in a wheatfield and when that proved to worsen her health, her family brought her back to the house; recounts that the war started on a Sunday and the following Tuesday three Germans came to her house on bikes carrying guns, forced her out of bed at gunpoint and then arrested her; mentions that her mother had already been arrested at that point, but was quickly released; describes how she was escorted to the police by three armed men in a wagon to Mosedis; points

out that the police brought her to the doctor to make sure she was not feigning her illness; explains that the doctors brought her downstairs where she witnessed an incident in which the Jews from Mosedis were forced into 15 or 20 large cars to be driven away; recalls a conversation between a “white-striper” and an interpreter who discussed how the Jews would be shot and buried in trenches that were already dug in Skuodas; recounts how she was ordered to leave the building and line up against the wall along with Jews who had their hands raised, mentioning that both German soldiers and “white-strippers” were present; talks about the demographics of the city: that the old-town part was inhabited almost entirely by Jews and that some Jews also lived in the newer areas; explains that she and the other prisoners were lined up in the newer part of town and forced to run in a column toward the old-town; recalls an episode in which one Jewish woman named **Apšteinienė [Epšteinienė]** was unable to keep up with the rest of the column and was shot, after which women onlookers immediately rolled her corpse over to take her beautiful apron; explains that once they reached the old-town they had to stand in front of the gymnasium with their arms raised; recalls that she left out a part of the story and wonders if she should go back eventually to recount it.

[01:] 08:37:19 – [01:] 14:29:21

She returns to talk about the wagons that drove her and the Jews from Mosėdis to Skuodas, mentioning the heavy security with armed guards on bikes around the 20 wagons; remembers an episode in which they encountered a man driving down the road on a bicycle with his wife and 4-year-old son, and how the parents were immediately arrested and the son was kicked into a ditch on the side of the road and left there; recalls the mother’s hysterical mourning which did not cease until they arrived in Skuodas around 10 p.m; recounts how the wagons were parked in front of the German headquarters near the church and that she could not move to get out of the wagon because her hands and legs had gone numb from being tied so tightly; recalls the “white-strippers” discussing among themselves how they would set up machine guns and get rid of all of the Jews and prisoners quickly if they could not find room for them; explains how the woman whose child had been kicked into a ditch would not stop crying and drew attention to her wagon; recalls the shock of the “white-strippers” upon seeing her (the interviewee) in the wagon because she was so young and sick, and how they crowded her into a warehouse only 1 meter wide and several meters long with 50 other people for the night; explains how at dawn she and the others were forced into the courtyard of the headquarters; recalls how a German ordered two “white-strippers” to take her to a doctor who diagnosed her condition as critical but the “white-strippers” just laughed it off; talks about how, after that, she was taken to the police station where there were two rooms where all the people were forced to wait, focusing on the cement floors and the single window that was being boarded up; explains that they were kept in that room until Thursday with no food or water, and recalls hearing heavy gunfire; recounts how on Thursday a woman named **Vičiulienė** from **Kaukolikai** village was brought into the room and informed them that she had been arrested after her husband had been shot and that trenches were being dug and people shot into them; recounts how on Thursday night prisoners were being taken individually into rooms to be interrogated and tortured; explains that, in addition to the interrogator, two armed guards were positioned on each side of the doorway; describes in graphic detail her interrogation and the beating she received for admitting to being a member of the Communist Youth.

[01:] 14:29:22 – [01:] 18:46:15

She recounts the events of the night after returning to the storage room: at around 3 a.m. there was great commotion and gunfire, which turned out to be an attack on the Germans by Russian forest fighters from Latvia; explains that the prisoners remained locked in the room during the skirmish until a German soldier tried to shoot off the lock on the door, killing an 18-year-old boy in the process; explains how once the door was broken in, the door hit her so hard that she lost consciousness and when she woke up she was the only one left in the room; recounts how a German made her get up and walk into the courtyard of the police station where all the other prisoners were standing with their hands above their heads and at this point they were forced by both Germans and “white-strippers” to jog into town; explains that they were told to stand on a bridge with their hands raised and were surrounded by German soldiers who looted the old-town and started driving Jews out of their homes; discusses the belongings some Jews took with them from their homes; explains that the Jews were rounded up 100 meters away from where she was standing; mentions that she along with the other prisoners were forced to empty their pockets; describes her physical condition: how her face was swollen and her back completely bloody because the door had wounded the back of her head; talks about the woman standing next to her who had all sorts of bottled medicines which she took out from her pockets and how one German soldier indicated that she (the interviewee) should take one of the bottles to care for her wounds.

[01:] 18:46:16 – [01:] 23:34:02

She recounts how while they were standing in the old town several trucks full of Russian soldiers came out of the forest that was on the Latvian border near the train station; describes the chaos that ensued when all of the soldiers, who had been guarding the prisoners left them in order to shoot at the Russian soldiers and all the prisoners scattered; describes how she together with another woman ran into a field and hid in a ditch; points out how this ditch turned out to be in the middle of the battleground where Russian soldiers were shooting from a house; recounts how once the fighting quieted down and the Germans appeared to be retreating after the Russian soldiers had been killed she suggested leaving immediately; explains that the other woman wanted to stay hidden longer to be sure they were safe; describes how 15 minutes later a “white-striper” appeared and ordered them to rise; expresses her dismay that the “white-striper” did not even ask who they were before beating them with the butt of his gun; describes how she saw another “white-striper” leading two Russian POWs; describes how she and the other prisoners were all marched past the gymnasium and into the football field where she saw about 20 men standing with guns; explains that the field was full of Germans watching them from the steps; describes how she knew those were the last moments of her life and how her life flashed before her eyes; describes the weather; explains how they were lined up with their backs to the executioners and their arms raised when she lost consciousness.

[01:] 23:34:03 – [01:] 29:48:00

She expresses her thoughts when she regained consciousness and that she was unsure whether she was alive or dead; describes how she then looked to the side and saw the woman and the POW's, whose heads had been completely blown off because they were all hit with bullets that exploded; explains that the bullet that she was hit with did not explode but only skinned her

scalp; recalls feeling a strong impulse to live once she realized she had not been killed; recounts how a column of Jews was brought to be shot; focuses on their intense moaning; describes how Jewish men were lined up and as they were shot a large man fell on top of her; explains how many more rounds were shot for about 4 or 5 hours until the entire field was covered with corpses all the way up to the gymnasium building; recounts the conversation she overheard in which two of the executioners discussed where the bodies would be buried after lunch; describes her indecision whether to indicate that she is alive to end her suffering or try to sneak away before they bury her; recalls a conversation in which someone told one person to stay behind and shoot anybody that was still groaning one more time while the rest went to eat; describes how this person came to her and shot her in the foot and then went to eat lunch; recounts how she tried to stand up but could not; says that she managed to crawl away toward the riverbank, which was also covered with corpses from the episode when the trucks had a skirmish in the old-town and many of the prisoners had tried to run away and had been shot; describes how she managed to put back the spilled guts into one old man's corpse that she came upon while crawling; describes how when she was trying to find a patch of ground to sit on so she would not have to sit on the corpses she heard a man walking through the brush; mentions that he stepped on the corpses and on her back and head because she was pretending to be dead; recounts how the man found four more Jews who were hiding and brought them over to where she was lying and shot them; describes how one man fell directly on her and began to choke her in his death throes, focusing on the blood that spilled over her; explains that she lay in that exact position the entire night.

[01:] 29:48:01-[01:] 35:11:23

She describes what she was wearing and how her clothes were blood-soaked; describes the scenes of fighting and the fires that she witnessed at night, focusing on the red sky and its reflection in the river that looked like blood; describes seeing, from where she was lying, a light in the window of a room in a house that she used to rent and wishing she could seek asylum with the proprietress there; recounts how she made her way to the river to drink some water but noticed that all around her bullets were falling into the water but missing her; explains that she found out only a year later that the room with the light in it was occupied by Germans who were shooting from it with machine guns; recounts how she tried crossing the river even though she did not know how to swim; explains how she almost drowned and even cried out to but was able to catch hold of a root and pull herself out of the water; talks about how she stood up and tried to walk away, when a guard from the other side of the river near the school house began shooting at her; describes how the second time she tried to get up, the guard began shooting again and a bullet cut off the tip of her braid; explains that from then on she understood that she had to crawl to get away, focusing on the sharp grass cutting her skin and her wet clothes; describes coming upon a muddy quicksand and deciding to try to hide in it but began drowning and somehow pulled herself out; describes the state of her clothes: the entire front of her shirt had been torn from crawling and that only her sleeves were left; describes the heavy fog that did not allow her to see any house where she could seek asylum.

[01:] 35:11:24 – [01:] 42:15:03

She describes how she came upon some cows and decided to wait nearby because she knew somebody would come to milk them; recounts how two women came and began milking the cows without noticing her, until she came up to them, at which point they both ran away; focuses on the fact that one told her father who was a “white-striper” named **Skurdauskas**; describes how a man with a gun approached her and recalls their conversation; focuses on how she even kissed his boots pleading for her life but he kicked her; mentions her envy of those who had been shot immediately; explains how many Jews had been shot with all of their clothes and valuables throughout the forest during the fighting; describes seeing two men walking among the corpses—one with a basket, the other with an ax—gathering jewelry from the rotting corpses; recounts how she was led to the main hall to the “white-striper” boss named **Vasaris**, who had been in charge of bringing each line of prisoners and Jews to be shot in the field; points out that he recognized her from being shot with the first four victims; describes the hall into which she was brought which had hay strewn on the floor; explains that at that point it was covered in feces because Jews were kept there and not allowed to leave or even stand up; recounts an episode in which a rabbi simply stood up and was suddenly shot dead by a guard through the window; recounts recognizing her aunt who had been arrested for housing the theatrical productions staged by the interviewee along with her cousin and others from the Communist Youth; explains that when she approached her aunt she was offered food and clothes that they had brought with them upon being arrested.

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[02:] 00:31:14 – [02:] 08:50:05

She resumes the interview and recounts how, while reconvening with her aunt and other friends, **Vasaris** told her to step outside, which she thought meant that she would be shot; recounts how he led her into a room that was piled high with confiscated Jewish belongings and gave her clothes to wear, took her to doctors who cut off all of her hair and wrapped her wounded head and feet and returned her to the hall and allowed her to sleep for the day; explains that Jews were being kept not only in the hall that she was in but also in a neighboring house; recounts how that house caught fire that night and as the people stampeded from that building into the hall, she was nearly trampled, lost consciousness, and found herself behind a stage in the morning; recalls the exchange between her and **Vasaris**, who marveled at her endurance and left her in the hall to recuperate for two weeks; describes what she witnessed in the hall, focusing on how German soldiers would enter and strip Jews of all of their jewelry but that the Germans could not stand the smell of the hall for long; describes how one Jewish woman began to give birth and called for help, but a German soldier came over and bayoneted her through the stomach; explains how all of the Lithuanians huddled behind the stage and that sometimes Jewish girls would try to hide in their midst; explains that German soldiers were allowed to choose any of the Jewish girls they wanted to rape, as long as they shot them immediately afterwards; comments on the hellish living conditions in the hall; talks about how rumors had spread in her hometown that she had been shot; talks about how one boy in the hall had fallen in love with her and how he told her that her mother had come to visit her aunt but was not allowed to come inside and had to wait on the stairs; describes how they all went outside and heard her mother ask her (the interviewee’s)

aunt if she knew where her daughter had been killed because she had not recognized her in her current state.

[02:] 08:50:06 – [02:] 14:45:00

She recounts how immediately after her mother left, all Lithuanians were called out of the hall to line up outside and report to Vasaris, who then read 15 names, including hers, from a list and ordered those to stay and the others to go back into the hall; recounts how he ordered her to gather her belongings to go home; talks about how she received her documents and was released together with another woman; explains how they spent the night at her cousin's house, which was only 3 km away, rather than continuing 17 km to her own house; recounts how her relatives did not take them into the house for the night because they could not recognize her, but let them sleep on the hay in the barn; mentions the desolate scenery on her journey home; talks about how her brother and cousins did not recognize her when she returned home; expresses in great detail how she cherished her land when she finally stood upon it; explains that she was worse off at home than in the hall because of the nightmares she would have every time she closed her eyes; talks about how her mother took her to a neurologist who expressed his surprise that she was still sane at all; comments on the stark difference of her personality, contrasts her happiness before the war to her state after being released; vividly describes the hallucinations and psychological trauma that she suffered; explains that when she would hear music she would imagine that corpses were rising and how if she were walking down the road and she saw a single man walking towards her she would be unable to continue and would take a wide detour through the woods.

[02:] 14:45:01 – [02:] 19:15:23

She talks about how for several months afterwards she had to go to Mosedis often to register with the police, focusing on the strife that that caused her family; talks about how she found out many years later, from the old man who owned the house that the Germans had claimed as their headquarters, why she had not been shot: that the leaders had held a meeting to discuss her fate and decided that she would not be left as much of a person anyway and that if they ever needed to, they could shoot her later; comments on how much **Vasaris** had helped her and how grateful she is to him; mentions that he had fled abroad; expresses her wish that none of her enemies ever experience what she went through and that she forgives all of them; recounts how she was summoned by a major to appear in court in Skuodas and how she was driven there to be questioned as a witness in the trial against **Skurdauskas**, the man who brought her to be shot a second time; describes in great detail how, when brought before her, Skurdauskas admitted to his crime and knelt at her feet begging forgiveness; mentions her response and that other people had encouraged her to take revenge; focuses on the fact that the major even gave her a gun and gave her permission to shoot Skurdauskas; talks about how he ended up getting 20 years in prison but because of other people's testimonies, not hers.

[02:] 19:15:24 – [02:] 23:10:21

She talks about another trial that she was summoned to be a witness at several years later of six "white-stripers" from Skuodas who had been the executioners; explains that she could not

recognize them for the court because she had been lying on the ground during the crime; talks about not recognizing any of them and only knowing one last name, **Vyšniauskas**; complains about the bureaucracy of the courts, how they picked at every detail and decided who would get what belonging be it rings or bicycles according to the 60 witnesses; mentions that the only witness who could have told everything kept silent; talks about how she could have even been deported to Siberia if it was not for a certain **Paulauskas**, with whom she danced with as a youth and who had managed to run to Russia and study law; explains that once he was in the position of prosecutor in Kretinga, he crossed her name off of the list of people to be deported; explains that she had been put on the list precisely because the Nazis did not shoot her the second time, thus raising suspicions that she was an agent of some sort for the Germans; explains that the Soviets had interpreted her survival as evidence of her collaboration.

[02:] 23:10:22 – [02:] 30:05:04

[She reiterates certain details of her story, answering the questions of the interviewer]; specifies that there were about 100 Lithuanian prisoners in the hall; talks about the fate of her aunt and her uncle who had been arrested as well; explains that he was taken from prison to prison, beaten terribly and that her family does not know where he was buried; repeats the story of how German soldiers took Jewish girls from the hall to rape and shoot them and because of this the Jewish girls would seek cover among the Lithuanian prisoners; specifies that she walked 17 kilometers home, after being released, barefoot because her shot foot was in a bandage; mentions her mother's arrest, which she remembers very little about; talks about the three collaborators that came to arrest her in the very beginning of the story, focusing on the one she knew, named Gurauskas; explains that she saw him one more time, when he came by to see what state she was in after her shooting while she was recovering; specifies that she did not recognize any of the guards on bicycles that were guarding the wagons on the way to Mosedis; talks about the Jews she recognized who were in the wagon with her; mentions **Leizeris**, who had four of his teeth knocked out during his interrogation, **Apšteinienė**, who was shot when he was ordered to run and was not able to, and then **Suvelas**, a doctor; specifies that the guards ran alongside the prisoners who were forced to run with their hands above their heads; reiterates that the entire field in front of the gymnasium was covered with bodies; points out that she could not tell how many groups of men were being brought there to be shot.

[02:] 30:05:05 – [02:] 41:18:05

She talks about how after the war ended, she received a summons to Skuodas to bear witness to where the pits were dug; mentions hearing that Jews had been forced to drive the corpses in wagons from the shooting field to the burial pit; explains that once they dumped all of the bodies they themselves were shot; specifies that she saw Jews being forced out of their homes by both "white-stripers" and Germans while she was standing with her hands raised with the other prisoners; specifies that during the mass-shooting, the order to turn around was given in Lithuanian while the Germans stood on the gymnasium steps and watched while the "white-stripers" were in charge of the execution; returns to discussing the time she was summoned to Skuodas after the war for the reburial of the victims; explains that the bones were put into large coffins and buried properly in the field where she had been shot; articulates the psychological difficulty of attending the funeral; mentions that a memorial was built but then later taken down;

specifies that she learned about the “rape and shoot” rule from the mothers who knew about it; specifies that she did not see any group of Jews led out of the hall that did not return; explains that later, she heard the soldiers had put stars on them and drove them away somewhere and that the men were shot first, then the women and children; talks about the food she survived off of in the hall and that her aunt had brought food from home; describes how impossible it was to carry water to people because of the crowded conditions in the hall; talks about the time when **Vasaris** gave her Jewish clothes to wear, focusing on the fact that she was practically naked at that point; graphically mentions that she was covered in blood, brains, and mud, focusing on the fact that she must not have resembled a human at all; specifies that she, along with the other woman and the two Russian soldiers, was shot by “white-strippers” from about ten steps distance, and that there were about 20 men who carried out the shooting.