

An Original Source Interview with / Interviu su:

Jonas Abukauskas

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Translation Text

Could you introduce yourself?

I am Jonas Abukauskas. I was born in 1927 in a village of Narvaišiai of Užpaliai, Utena county.

Presently we are in Remeikiai village which is neighboring the Narvaišiai village. You joined active partisan ranks in 1948 year, right?

In 1949 year, during the first days of June.

At that time, I think, partisans did not expect any aid, neither from United States nor from other Western countries. By joining partisan ranks, what did you expect regarding the ending? Why did you pick such a road in 1949?

The main goal was not expecting something but trying to avoid something worse. In 1944, on September 8th at the start of the second Soviet occupation I was arrested. I was seventeen. I was arrested for having a rifle without permit. I found that rifle when we kids were walking through the trenches right after the front just passed through our village. While the front was passing, there was shooting and there remained all kind of metal scrap as we called it. My friends were fourteen year old, but I was seventeen. In one place we found about 30 rifles hidden in the trenches. Over short period of time, we took all the rifles, each of us taking a few. This was in July and I was arrested on September 8th, after a few months. They came with horses from Užpalis, a new Police Chief with another policeman. They arrested all of us teenagers from our village. They left the youngest who were thirteen or fourteen year old, they only took rifles from them. I was already seventeen, so they took me with all my rifles to the police station. After about a month, I was brought to the Court even though I was an underage. The judge gave me maximum penalty for possessing a weapon: five years. I was sentenced in Vilnius by the Baltic War Tribunal. At first, in November we were taken to Rasų Street Prison. This was once a convent, at that time empty. We were the first prisoners of it, I don't know how many, maybe 40 prisoners. We were marched there on foot from Lukiškių Prison at night. I was there until April. Then we were taken to the Macikai Concentration Camp (Southwest Lithuania, close to Šilutė). We were also the first to be taken there. We were about 125 prisoners. There was nobody there. It was empty. Wild rabbits were running around in the orchard, soldiers used to shoot at them.

You mentioned earlier that when you returned from the Concentration Camp, your father almost did not recognize you?

He did recognize me but he was concerned the way I looked, he was afraid that I would not recover. But in a few months I again weighed almost 200 pounds.

And how much did you weigh when you returned from the Concentration Camp?

I am not sure, there was no scale in the village. I weighed maybe about 80 pounds when I returned from the Camp.

Let us return to your choice in 1949 to join the partisans. Did you have any belief, hope to win against Soviets or to receive help from the West?

Why did I go? In 1948 Soviets wanted to recruit me to the Soviet Army, Construction battalion. I refused to join by not coming to the Recruiting Center. In 1948 during summer months I started to hide. The Soviets were not actively searching for me, but in hiding I got acquainted with the partisans and they trusted me because I had spent time in Concentration Camp. Because of my connections with partisans, it appeared to me that I could be arrested so I decided to join them. But it didn't happen quickly. The partisans tried to talk me out of it. First, they succeeded by telling me that nothing good was expected there. Only later was I able to join them. It was on June 5th or 6th in 1949.

Could you clarify what partisans meant by saying that "nothing good was expected"?

They didn't explain anything to me. They just pointed out that it was hard to be a partisan. There was constant danger to your own life. To me this was somewhat romantic, I liked armed men. But I was afraid the Soviets would arrest me again. People had already started talking that I was meeting with the partisans. When the Secret Police learned about it, they would arrest me. And the sentence would be much longer than 3 years (as compared with my first sentence)...

As a teenager serving your sentence in Macikas Concentration Camp, what was the most difficult for you?

The most difficult was the constant thinking about food, and getting food. Once we found a dead horse and had the opportunity to eat raw horsemeat. We were so hungry that we found it delicious. In general, being a 17-18 year old, I didn't think about much else except to get some food or to pass time faster.

Another important moment of your life was in 1952 when you legalized?

Yes.

Did you believe those promises that they would leave you alone, would not touch you if you leave the forest?

No, I didn't. Maybe, a little but not much. You see the matter was not only about me, but also about my family and relatives. My father was sick in bed facing deportation. My relatives were regularly taken for interrogation by Secret Police. In addition, during winter our bunker was discovered. We didn't have another good place where to spend the winter. Also, a few partisans from another group legalized and Soviets didn't touch them, but let them live without problems. The Soviets used them as an example to attract other partisans by printing announcements and delivering them to partisans' relatives. Of course, we didn't trust the Soviets much.

So your main motivation to legalize / register with Soviets was feeling insecurity for your relatives?

Yes. None of my relatives were deported yet and it seems that was the strategy employed by Soviets. They kept following my relatives very closely (trying to catch me) and kept bringing them to the Police Station for questioning. But they did not deport them at that moment. My brother was also hiding at that

time.

And when your brother got killed and you were arrested, your relatives were not deported?

No. There was nobody to deport. My farther was very sick in bed and they didn't catch my brother. When he died later, he was only 14 years old.

So, in February 1952 you got married, yes?

Yes.

You married Bronė (Bronė Indrašytė Abukauskienė) with whom we talked earlier. And on October 16, 1952 you got arrested. Could you tell more about it?

When my brother was still alive, the Soviets used to call me. They kept asking me to convince my brother to legalize. It was not about me. They just kept asking me to convince my brother to legalize. They told me, as an example, about someone who had legalized and was living free. The Soviets argued that they would shoot my brother anyway unless he chose to legalize. When my brother got killed on September 21st, there was no reason for them to keep us (former partisans who legalized) free. On October 16, 1952 (about 3 weeks after my brother's death) I got arrested.

Could you tell more how your brother got killed, if it is known?

It is pretty well known based on the Secret Police Archives. He was betrayed by a women Aldona Rudokaitė from Ukmergė who later was killed by a truck. Nobody knows if she killed herself or it was an accident.

Was Aldona Rudokaitė the partisans' liaison?

No, officially she was not a liaison. Just a good acquaintance. By the way, she was a good seamstress. She sewed shirts for the partisans.

So after betrayal, was your brother surrounded in the bunker or ambushed?

My brother hid with others in an abandoned small house on top of the hill and Aldona Rudokaitė knew about it. She promised to get them some ammunition. Although they were warned by the local partisan, Kazakevičius, not to trust her, they contacted her anyway and agreed with her to meet at specific place and time. She said she needed to get the ammunition from her relatives in an another village. Instead, she went to Soviets (KGB/Secret Police). Their house was surrounded around 2 PM on Sunday. They noticed that they were being surrounded and started to defend themselves by shooting at soldiers, heavily injuring one of them who was operating a machine gun. Then, their Russian officer captain, Kulikov, who was brought from Vilnius or Moscow, took the machine gun from the injured soldier and started shooting at the partisans, wounding or killing them.

When you were arrested, probably, the most difficult for you was to leave behind your young family?

I will tell very shortly about my arrest, how it happened. They didn't arrest me in my home but they requested me to come to the County Center under the pretext that someone in high rank had come from Vilnius and wanted to see me. They arrested all four of us (legalized partisans) separately, each by a separate Secret Police team. It was me, my cousin, Vytautas Abukauskas who was living in the same village, and two others living in Vilnius. They were afraid that if I were not at home during the arrests and I would learn about it, I would return back to partisans in the forest. I kept my connections with partisans. They even kept my gun which I did not give to Soviets when legalizing. So I arrived to the County Center and there was an Assistant Chief of Secret Police from Vilnius, captain Kulikov. It seems that he was coordinating by phone with other Secret Police teams who were arresting the remaining three former partisans. It is clear that he was killing time with me by inventing different reasons why I should wait longer. Later he told me that we needed to go to Utena to meet another Secret Police Chief who was unable to come here. So they directed me to exit the room through an open door into the yard. It was already dark and visibility was low. While passing the door I noticed that it led directly into back-side of a military truck that stood very close to the door. There was no way to escape. Inside the truck, there were a few compartments, in one of them my cousin was sitting. I went to the remaining central chamber and sat down. At that moment I smiled as I understood everything. That was the moment of my arrest. I didn't react. Of course, I was thinking about my family or about my uncertain future. But since I had already once been in a Concentration Camp I knew that if they get you, there is no escape. Such was the feeling.

Lets switch now to another topic. So you received a death sentence?

Yes. It was also another interesting moment. When they brought me to the Secret Police Headquarters in Vilnius I was received by an interrogator. So I calmly asked him about their promise not to arrest me if I come out of the forest to legalize. He agreed that there was such promise. But he said that I didn't stop my illegal activities even after I legalized. I knew what I did and I knew that they didn't know what they were not supposed to know about my activities. What they knew about me was legal and nothing to be punished for. "Interrogation will show" he concluded. And later, when my interrogation was complete, I was acquainted with my file through a translator (it was written in Russian) and I was waiting to hear about the complaint by someone regarding my illegal activities after I legalized. But there was no such complaint. So by this detail I knew my case was fabricated. Our interrogation was completed fast. We were arrested on October 16 and were sentenced on January 25-26, 1953. It took two days for the Court to sentence us. Our case consisted of five volumes. During our interrogations, they didn't beat us but they didn't allow us to sleep either. During the day we were not allowed to sleep and during the night we were interrogated. Why did the interrogation go so fast? They already had a lot of documents signed by me when I was partisan's group leader (before legalizing). Someone betrayed the location of one of our bunkers with documents so the Secret Police had access to them. Since they already had all these documents in their hands they just formalized them. The War Tribunal took two days. In my case they applied three articles: 58.8, 58.11 and 58.1a (treason, participation in criminal organized activities and terrorism). Each of these articles warranted the death penalty. So if I was found guilty, even for one of them, I would receive the death penalty. So for me it was three times the death penalty. If not for the governmental changes in Moscow around that time, I am not sure how it would ended for me. While I was in the cell for death row, Stalin died. Then Beria (Soviet Union Secret Police Chief) got arrested. Originally two of us (my cousin and liaison Rožė) each got 25 years sentence and other two of us (my assistant Zeveckas and me) each got the death sentence. They reduced the death sentences to 25 years in Jail/Concentration Camps on June 21, five months after we received our original sentences.

While waiting for your sentence in the cell for death row, did you know that they were executing death sentences at the time?

Usually there were 2-3 people in the cell for death row. Before Stalin death, a response to the plea for clemency used to arrive no later than after 2 months, sometimes taking only 10 days. But Stalin died and there were major changes in Soviet government in Moscow (a coup led by Khrushchev against Beria). As a result, we spent 5 months on Death Row, waiting. There were others who waited for 6 months or even the whole year.

Have you already expected that the death sentence would be replaced?

The situation was such that if you believe you would be executed then it was very difficult. It was important to take control of yourself and to believe that the death sentence would be reduced. Then it would be easier. If you believed that they would shoot you... There was one partisan from Kaišiadorys, I don't remember his name.

Maybe, Motiejauskas? He was from Kaišiadorys and he was there around that time..

I don't remember. He was waiting every night for them to come to execute him. It was very difficult for him. It was clear he was unwell. I personally tried to be more positive. By the way, for the first two months we didn't know that Stalin had died, nobody told us. We saw that prison guards were wearing mourning-bands, but we didn't ask for the reason, believing they wouldn't tell us anyway. Only after two months a new cellmate, a partisan Nemeikšis from Rokiškis, came in. He knew about Stalin's death. So we thought that something positive might happen after Stalin death. We had more hope.

Could you tell us about the time when in 1972 they brought you back to the KGB prison in Vilnius and you saw your grown daughter for the first time?

In the summer of 1972 they brought me to Vilnius to show me how nice everything was in Lithuania. When my daughter came to visit me, she was already 19 and had a baby, my grandson.

That was the first time you saw your daughter?

Yes, the first time. My wife was 4 months pregnant at the time I was arrested.

What feelings did you experience during that meeting?

You know, I tried not to worry too much, not to keep anger on anyone. If negative thoughts came, I tried to control myself. They added another three years to my sentence, two years in jail, because of trying to escape in Siberia. They brought me to Lithuania, so what, let them bring me here. My daughter had her own life. Sometime I wrote to my wife - "you live how you want, I got 25 years..." And later, 3 more years. So a total of 28 years.

Why did you try to control your emotions? Did it make easier to cope with reality?

It makes easier to survive in any circumstances. For example, in Siberia, during one year I spent 120 days in solitary confinement (4 months) just because I refused to work. They asked me: "Why are you not working?" I responded: "You call me an enemy of the Soviet people. Why should I work for you if I am your enemy? I don't want to build your Communism". They even used me as an example to others. There were some Russians and Ukrainians who were refusing to work and complaining about their health or pain. So the Soviets kept saying to them: "Look at Abukauskas. If he doesn't want to work, he says so". So that was my philosophy: not to be afraid of anyone. I was not angry if they put me into solitary confinement. That was their job. My thinking was that the work was meaningless: 12 feet deep of frozen soil and I have to dig it?! What's the point?

While at the solitary confinement cell, during dark moments did you ever have a hope that things will change for the better, that the whole Soviet system may collapse, that you will be free again?

I had hope when Stalin died and there was a coup against Beria. There were also uprisings in the Siberian concentrations camps. In Moscow they created a High-Level Commission to review all cases. So I hoped that maybe they would reduce my sentence. At one time, the local Commission consisting of military officers and civilians called me and started to reproach me that, when I was a partisan, I killed people. In response I reminded them about their broken promise to let me be free after legalization. They argued that my life was spared, that my death penalty was changed. I responded: "So what do you think, if you sentence a person with 25 years, you spare his life?" They just looked at each other and said that I can go. Usually you had to wait outside the room for a few minutes and if they were considering to reduce the sentence they would call you back. In my case, it did not happen. A caller came out of the room and said "Next one". However, later they requested for my case from Vilnius, maybe, because as a former partisan I have legalized. The Commission called me for the second time. This time, I didn't argue with them. First, a prosecutor had a look at my case and presented it to the whole Commission. I noticed that when presenting a list of my accusations to the Commission, the prosecutor skipped the most incriminating ones (I think that he was on my side) but that still didn't help. The Commission didn't reduce my sentence.

So it is clear that you had no hope to get free sooner than your sentence ended. How about the whole system? Did you have any hope that the whole Soviet Union might collapse, that Lithuania become independent again?

Very little. We had access to newspapers, including Lithuanian, radio. Based on what was written there, there was not much to expect for anything. When I was released and got back to Lithuania in November 1976, there was no hope that anything might change. Only when the real movement started (in late 1980s), then it was different.

How about when Lithuania started its road towards independence, and eventually Lithuania became independent? What was your impression at that time?

What impressions.. Impressions were very good. It was even hard to believe that it was happening. Sometimes it seemed that this was only a joke.. But step by step and it became convincing.

Were you especially proud as a former partisan that your fight against Soviets probably contributed to the independence of Lithuania?

I can say one thing. Even before Lithuania became free and independent I never regretted being a partisan, I never regretted.. When the freedom came, it was very good. Doesn't matter that the pension.. I am happy about everything, up to the present day. I am content with what I have. It is not possible that everything is available at once.