

An Original Source Interview with / Interviu su:

Balys Gajauskas

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Translation text

I am Balys Gajauskas, born in Lithuania, in the District of Vilkaviškis, lived in Kaunas for a long time, and then I lived many years in Russia.

When you were arrested, what did they arrest you for, why did they bring you here?

The first time I was arrested was for participating in the Resistance movement. There was an underground organization active in Kaunas which worked with the partisans from the western part of Lithuania. We were eventually identified and arrested in the spring of 1948. The sentencing took place in Vilnius. I received 25 years, which I served in various prison camps in Russia. I was forbidden to return to Lithuania, but eventually I did so anyway and lived here "semi-legally" at that time. When I left Lithuania it was an occupied country and when I returned it was still an occupied country, so it was logical and necessary to again get involved in resisting the Occupation. The second time I got caught was in 1977. I was incarcerated here for a year for interrogation, spent time in this cell and in other cells as well. I was eventually sentenced to 10 years in a special security prison camp plus 5 years' deportation. They transported me to the Urals, to the area of Sushovo, and then in 1987 after the ten-year part of the sentence was up, I was exiled to the Far East near the Sea of Okhotsk.

When you were arrested, how did they bring you into the prison? Did soldiers come and get you, or police officers...

My arrest in Šiauliai in 1948 occurred through a fluke of fate. I found myself trapped in a particular area that had been surrounded by the KGB police. I offered resistance, but they nabbed me and brought me to Vilnius for interrogation. At that time I had been living here illegal.

What year was it?

1948

If you were interrogated, could you describe the interrogation? How long it lasted? How many interrogators there were?

I was questioned shortly after being arrested. I was beaten severely, and after several days was brought here to Vilnius where I was interrogated quite relentlessly. Daytime interrogations would be followed by questioning during the night, or they'd interrogate you all day and continue throughout the night. It was extraordinarily difficult to bear. They eventually constructed their case and it was a done deal that I got 25 years.

When you were arrested, was it a surprise? What it like to be taken off the streets and sent to Siberia or 25 years?

Naturally, it was hard to be sent to prison, but we were of a patriotic mindset and we knew we

had to fight the Occupation. At that time the partisan movement was active and the majority of the nation was involved in the struggle against the occupiers. People were being deported to Siberia in cattle cars! We understood we had no other option but to fight. No one was going to help us. Our fate was in our hands: we could win our freedom or live in prison.

When you went to Siberia what did you do there? What were you sentenced to do?

What we did: that was the time of Stalin and life was extremely hard. All political prisoners, wherever they found themselves, whether in Siberia or in European Russia, were compelled to perform the absolutely hardest labor, that is, forestry, mining, and construction. That was the kind of work we did. Food was very poor and we were starving. Many people died, especially right after the war-they died in huge numbers. Whoever was stronger survived. In effect we were being tortured, because sometimes it seemed the work we were given to do was entirely pointless. But that's the reality of it. We had been labeled "enemies of the people" and we had to be eliminated. That was the official line and they were quite open about it.

What was your attitude toward the guards and toward the people who were running the camp?

Prisoners' attitudes towards the guards varied from person to person. My own feeling was that the guards, well, they worked here and made our life miserable, but they weren't our primary enemy. The guards were not the ones responsible for our fate or the fate of our nation, that was the responsibility of the rulers of the empire, the Communists. They're the ones who determined everything, and it was against them that it was imperative to continue the struggle. Ordinary guards didn't have that kind of power, they were just tools, like so many others were tools, in the implementation of the state policy to annihilate people who were labeled enemies of the state.

Would you talk about how many people were in the camps? How large a scale?

The prison camp where I was located was not considered particularly large, about 3000 people. But these prison camps were located throughout the entire USSR which consisted not only of Siberia-and, keep in mind, Siberia is immense! But these camps were also in Kazakhstan and in European Russia. So in actuality, millions of people were incarcerated as political prisoners. These kinds of camps existed in the tens of thousands in the Far East, in places such as in the Magadan Region. Smaller camps typically had a population of one or two thousand. And such is the one I was in, a camp of 3,000 inmates.

Did you think of yourselves as political prisoners or slave labor?

Did I feel like a political prisoner or a slave? I considered myself a political prisoner because our struggle was for the highest political aim, that of a nation's freedom. However, we understood that we had been put in the position of being slaves since we had absolutely no rights, not even the basic rights that are granted prisoners in other countries. If their goal was to destroy their enemies, what sort of "rights" could we expect!

Our title for the documentary is "Red Terror on the Amber Coast."

A very appropriate title!

What is this "Red Terror?" In the lives of yourself, your family, your nation, how would you describe the "Red Terror"?

The whole nation was being terrorized, only the means and methods of terror changed over the years. For example, during the first year of Occupation, about 14,000 families-roughly 30,000 people-were deported to Siberia. Is this not Terror, when ordinary people-children, the elderly, women and men-are seized without due process or evidence and transported to inhuman living conditions in the Far North? Where half of the deportees die within the first six months? Where there is nothing to eat? Who wants to live this way! This is the greatest kind of Terror. Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians as well as some other nations, the Ukrainians, for instance, have profound firsthand knowledge of this aspect of the Terror. Some less extreme aspects of the Terror included frequent detentions and interrogations for petty reasons. An innocent person could be accused and serve time, say, two years, without having the opportunity to defend himself. Immediately after the War, I wouldn't say there was a famine, exactly, but life was difficult, incredibly difficult. People living on the collective farms would gather the seed heads from crops for food, but if they were caught, they'd get a five year sentence. Isn't this a form of Terror, also? People are starving, families are starving, the grain is going to rot anyway, but it's a crime to take it! Another example of Terror would be, say, after Stalin's time, when things eased up a bit: is it not Moral Terror that if you are not a Communist you can't get a good job? If a young person feels forced to join the Communist Youth in order to be considered for acceptance into the university? If you didn't join, you didn't get in! A young person wants to study their preferred specialty, but if you're not a Communist, you're not on track to be admitted. So, there is that type of Terror also. There were truly many forms of Terror that existed in the Soviet empire. Most likely there are layers which have not yet been analyzed since we tend to focus on Terror's harshest aspects: we count the dead, we eulogize them... But daily life was rife with Terror.

Are you angry at what the Communists and the KGB did to you?

Do I feel anger? Well, I may have stated already that each little "cog" wasn't necessarily a Party member. There were people whose motivation in joining the Party was mainly hunger. They had no interest in the ideology. Rather, the blame lies with the politicians who set such a vicious policy direction. Truth requires that the guilty ones be brought to justice. As for the Communist Party, the entire Party must bear the responsibility. However, in my opinion, an individual who joined the Party, whether it was for ideological reasons or for material gain, he, too, is at fault to the degree that he is accountable morally: seeing the deportations, the torture, the killing, he still aligned himself with the Party responsible for these acts. Those who actually carried out these crimes, they must be brought to trial as criminals, whereas the ordinary Communist must be condemned on moral grounds.

So what are your personal feelings?

I look at this from a political perspective. I don't harbor any personal hatred toward any individual. I would only demand Truth, which is something that doesn't exist at this time.

Could you describe for us when you were in the work camp in Siberia, a typical day. How did they get you up in the morning? How did they take you to work? What was it like a typical day in the Siberian camp?

A typical day in the prison camp where I was: well, I was in many labor camps but I'll tell you about the first one, where we worked in mines extracting molybdenum. We'd get up at 6 a.m. and shortly thereafter go to the refectory for breakfast. Breakfast consisted of some soup and 250 grams of bread. That's all! Then we'd leave for the job site. I worked in a mine that was about 1800 meters from the camp; other mines were located much farther away. The work was dangerous and it was injurious to one's health. People would get sick and die from silicosis, where hardening of the lungs leads to death. Our shift was seven hours long. On returning from work we'd have lunch, which consisted of 150 grams of gruel, a little piece of meat-about 20 grams-and some sugar, and 400 grams of bread. At that point we were done for the day unless they dreamed up some other work for us. In the evening, we were given a couple hundred grams of gruel, grams of oil and 200 grams of bread.

Everyone 'knew exactly how much food you got. It sounds like food was very important.

Yes, that's correct. Things improved somewhat after Stalin's death. During Khrushchev's era they released a lot of internees and fewer of us were left. At that point we political prisoners were no longer forced to perform such hard work, our jobs became less difficult. Eventually, our situation again deteriorated. However, during those last few years under Gorbachev, the work was quite easy. Even so, the 24 of us were always extremely closely supervised to prevent our writing any letters to the West or learning any news of our homeland or of the West. We were isolated in a special security camp, the last of its kind in the USSR, but by comparison it wasn't so bad anymore.

You were imprisoned under Gorbachev?

I was imprisoned and in various concentration camps during the regimes of all the Soviet leaders except Lenin! When I finally got to return to Lithuania our national flag was again blend displayed publicly.

When was that?

In November, 1988. Three months later I left for the United States. This was the result of a large ten year effort on my behalf involving a number of U.S. senators and representatives... I have quite a bit of documentation about this.

You're referring to a movement to secure your freedom?

Yes, I have very many documents from this time, letters from various senators. Gorbachev was looked on as a liberal or enlightened, and still you were in a slave labor camp under Gorbachev. Yes, that's right! Yet the West perceived Gorbachev as a symbol of freedom, however, you could say he achieved that status not by choice but was forced into it by circumstances beyond his control. The Soviet empire was crumbling and there was nothing he could do to save it. If he had had the means to rescue the empire, he would have done so and would not have become an icon for the West. When he realized the degree to which the Soviet Union was collapsing economically and morally, he had no other option.

Have the Communists ever apologized for what they did to you, and if not, what do you think the Communists need to do to make things right for you and your family?

No one has apologized, the Communists have not apologized. There was a general apology from Juršėnas, ostensibly on behalf of all the Communists, but he ended up being taken to task by the others for his unilateral statement. So in actuality there was no apology. The Communists have tried to adapt. They tried to hang on to power under new circumstances by throwing on "democratic clothing." You have only to look at who came into power in the Seimas in 1990: there were 80 former Communists there! But only consider how many of us non-Communists there are!

When you were in Siberia, what were the other people you were with there for?

That's quite a broad question. The prison camps held people of various nationalities, educational levels and political involvement. In the majority of cases we Lithuanians were there for political activism in seeking independence for Lithuania. A very small fraction were there for collaborating with the Germans. This general description also holds true for the other nationalities-Latvians and Estonians, for example. Some of us had been convicted of "agitation and propaganda." If I said something bad about Stalin or Khrushchev or whoever, that was considered "agitation and propaganda," and during Stalin's reign it got you ten years, during Gorbachev's time, it got you seven years. Or let's say you wrote a letter where you said unflattering things about the government. The letter gets censored, and you get 10 years for "propaganda." The standing joke was, "on account of my tongue". "Why did you get 10 years?" "Oh, on account of my tongue!" Ten years was held to be a short sentence, and 25 years-a ton one.

In the barracks, did you talk openly with people? Were spies there? Did you have to be careful how you talked? Did anyone care?

It wasn't merely in the barracks that spying existed, spying pervaded all echelons of the entire Soviet Union. There were spies everywhere. The same held true for the prison camps. They tried to recruit internees to sell out their friends. In their own way prisoners rebelled against spies by

uncovering their identities and punishing them using means at their disposal. People generally spoke openly with each other and perhaps only later, after a bad experience, would they be more apt to pick and choose who they felt they could talk to. As for me, I personally had no fear in this regard. When I returned to Lithuania at the end of 25 years, I spoke openly regardless of the hanging threat of being accused of "agitation and propaganda." Despite living semi legally in Kaunas, in my workplace I would be quite open in my speech. I told it like it was: what was what and so forth. And then, later, of course, I was tried for something different. But basically the system was one of spying, total spying.

What happened to you and some of the other people seems quite absurd. Did prisoners joke about the situation, are there other jokes from the camps, or books of jokes? Is there a way to get ahold of these books?

Undoubtedly there were funny occasions, everything happened there. After all, it wasn't our vacation but where we lived our daily life for 10 years. I wouldn't say there were many happy times there, but despite life being so extraordinarily hard, it was, nonetheless, interesting. We met a lot of very interesting people from many nations, from various cities, having all sorts of specialties, and of various education levels. And so, in that sense life was truly interesting. Naturally, a person whose family and whose life have been taken away from him experiences such a huge pain that no sort of diversion can numb the ache. The pain is present throughout the day, every day. Take a man, locked up in a prison camp while his deported family is starving somewhere in the Far North near the Arctic Ocean, he doesn't know if they will even survive, or if he'll ever see them again. So, happy times as such didn't exist for us in the camps, one can only state that was life "interesting." I met a large number of people during those years. Later, of course, things got better, but during Stalin's time we weren't even able to read. No books allowed, no newspapers allowed, no letter writing. We were allowed to write only one letter every six months! We had nothing! If you were caught with a pencil you were put in isolation. Later on, after things had eased up somewhat, we were permitted to receive books, though not the kind of books we wanted. Books from the West remained totally forbidden, and that even included books which had nothing to say about bolshevism.

What are you doing today? What is your life like now?

Well, I'm in the process of writing my memoirs, I'm involved civically, and I travel abroad, I write letters to California, for example. A California congressman has helped me Enormously, his name was Donovan, I believe. You live there so you should remember his name. He was a very good man who supported my cause in the US Congress from 1979-1988. He was from Los Angeles. I have a picture of him with his family. He even wrote me a letter when I was in the prison camp but I had no knowledge of it. Those sorts of letters didn't make it through, of course. Only later, after I had come to Los Angeles, was I able to learn from my relatives what had been done for me.

Thank you very much!