

An Original Source Interview with / Interviu su:

Antanas Kazakevičius

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Interviewer / Interviu Ėmėjas: **David O'Rourke, OP**

Translator / Vertėjas: **Arnas Palaima, PhD**

Interviews Producer / Interviu Prodiuseris: **Czeslaw Jan Grycz**

Subtitles Editor / Subtitrų Redaktorius: **Arnas Palaima, PhD**

Subtitles Producer / Subtitrų Prodiuseris: **Gerda Berentaitė**

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Translation text

*Let's focus on 1944, when the front between Russia and Germany got close to Lithuania.
What determined your choice and what available options did you have?*

Germans were considered occupants. Very few went to serve them. Then when the Russians came, it was the same. About 20 men from our village, including myself, went to hide in the forest. Soon, about six 'stribai' came to get me. We all had grown up together. So my mother prepared some food for them. While they were eating, I escaped.

So that was the beginning?

Yes. That was the beginning.

Did you already have a weapon or at the beginning were you just hiding?

At the beginning we were just hiding. Nobody had weapons yet. When they started to pursue and shooting at us, then we obtained weapons to defended ourselves appropriately.

So you armed yourself and then fighting started?

Yes, exactly. Simple men from the village. At first nobody was leading or organizing us. When we obtained weapons, commanding leadership appeared. Our leaders were a non-commissioned officers and viršila.

They had served in Lithuanian army?

Yes. One non-commissioned officer completed his service in the Lithuanian army under President Smetona. Another was still in active duty when the Russians came. When the Russians came and fighting started with Germany, the Russians took him to Russia. He was able to escape in Belarus and returned back to his village, living quietly under the Germans. When Russians came back again, he had no good choices: going to the front seemed to guarantee death. The gossip was that perhaps in a few years the Russians would move away from Lithuania. So hiding for a few years seemed like a better option. That's how it all started. We saw how the Russians started to behave: deporting people, shooting innocent people. A 16-year old boy from our village was caught on his way to school. They brought him to a lake and tortured him to death. They broke his arms; a completely innocent young man.

You spent nine years in the forest, starting 1944 until 1953. Not many partisans were able to stay that long in the forest. They either were killed, or joined the partisan forces later. Nine years is a long time in the forest. Was it the most difficult part of your life? Remembering when you had to stay underground in the bunker; all that suffering?

You know, it wasn't difficult when you knew why you were sitting in the bunker. All kind of things happened. Once, we had to sit in the water. Let me recall the episode. Our bunker was in a farmer's yard, under a pile of stones. Once during a big 'stribai' operation, several trucks with

soldiers came. They settled in that farm. It was raining heavily. The soldiers stayed in tents and the water started to flood over the stones and into our bunker. So we had to stay in the bunker half-immersed in the water, without eating. You could drink as much water as you wanted (laughing); but no food. We spent about four days this way. The soldiers searched the surrounding forests during all this time. We couldn't leave. Possibly we could have left during the night. But what about our host, the farmer where our bunker was located? So we stayed until the soldiers left.

But as you said, when you know why you are sitting, it is not that difficult?

You know that you are Lithuanian. You know where you were born. Why should I go to fight for Germans or for Russians? I am Lithuanian.

Let's talk now about when you were arrested by your former commander, former partisan, your former friend in arms. Please, tell how it happened and then what you felt?

One Fall, we had three battles when I was wounded. When I was arrested, Bronius Kalytis was our commander. [Bronius Kalytis was a commander of the partisans' district 'Vytautas' to which 'Audros' group belonged. Antanas Kazakevičius was a commander of the 'Audros' group]. I got a letter from him requesting a meeting. I responded to him by selecting the date and place where we could meet. We had met before in that place. My intuition was to select a place he knew. On February 28, 1953 I went together with another partisan to that place. They had already arrived before us. I was walking first, another partisan was following me. Then I saw Kalytis, whose nickname was "Siaubas". When he got closer, he told me not to worry, he would be the only familiar face. But another person, his adjutant, went to bring more people as it was done when we had met previously. He said we could spend the day together and discuss some things. When we entered the house, I couldn't recognize anyone. I kept my automatic weapon ready. What was going to happen? We agreed that we would go to spend the day somewhere else, by the Kušlių forest. I was seated in the sleigh and was surrounded from all sides. My friend (who came with me) was walking with another man in front of the horse to make sure all was clear. When we arrived at Kušlių forest, suddenly we heard shooting from an automatic weapon. I thought it was an ambush. I wanted to jump out of the sleigh. But they grabbed my automatic weapon and my hands. I tried to get my loaded pistol but was not successful. I should have struggled in a better way, then I would have been able to shoot Kalytis. But they tied my hands with a rope and took my pistol and two grenades. They didn't notice one another grenade that was behind my back. At first, I hadn't noticed it. I thought "This is it." Then they brought my partisan friend. He was shot, but still alive.

What was his name?

Streikus Svilas Alfonsas.

So that shooting which you heard was shooting at your friend?

Yes.

Did they load you into the sleigh or a truck?

I was, of course, emotional. But they were simply shaken. I asked them "Why are you afraid? I don't have any weapons." I would just sit down. They kept asking questions of my dying friend. But soon, he was dead.

What were they asking him?

I don't know. They were too far away for me to hear.

How about the grenade which they didn't find?

When they brought me to Vėžuonuos, their car was waiting there. They put me into the car by the container of gas. My hands were almost black from the rope so they loosened the rope. I checked to make sure the grenade was really still with me. I thought I could pull it out and blow myself up, together with the rest of them. A lieutenant who was sitting next to me noticed my movements and asked: "What are you doing there?" I answered: "Oh, I am just exercising my hands to get some blood moving!" But he started to search me again and found the grenade. That's how it ended. The grenade was almost ready to detonate.

But you had the determination to blow yourself up with your enemies?

Yes, yes. Most of us were determined not to be captured alive.

Why?

You would get the death penalty or at least 25 years in Siberia. You would perish there anyway if you were not killed during the interrogation.

What kind of food did you have in the bunker?

Over so many years all kind of things happened. Sometimes, we got a good supply of food, including dried bread and flour. We had a kettle in the bunker to boil water. We cooked the food and so we survived. Personally, I liked to walk around. However, there were others who had a big bunker with a water well and a toilet and a place to cook food. They used to spend all winter underground. But when Spring came and they came out, they could hardly walk. Although the ventilation was good in the bunker, staying underground too long was not healthy.

How did you dry your clothes? Wasn't it wet in the bunker?

No, not really. A bunker was usually on high ground surrounded by sand. So, no it was not wet; especially when people were inside and a lamp was burning.

Probably, here in Aukštaitijoje there is a lot of sand.. Good conditions?

You chose places that were good for a bunker. I heard that in other places which were lower, it was hard to find an appropriate location for a bunker.

How did you take care of your wounded comrades?

I was wounded myself. I couldn't walk. We got medicine because there were doctors who helped us. They advised us on how to treat wounds. I recovered rather quickly. But my leg was not functioning well for some time.

The treatment was conducted in the bunker or somewhere else?

In the bunker. Difficult cases or when Russians were not active in the area, the wounded would be treated somewhere on the farm in a quiet place. A doctor or medical sister would come from town to check them. Those who were hurt badly, often died. It was impossible to bring them to a hospital. There they would have been arrested and would receive the death penalty.

How about your comrades who were killed in the battle and their bodies were not captured by the enemy? Did you have an opportunity to bury them? Did you have any rituals when burying them?

It was quiet and fast. There were no special rituals. I recall my first battle in Vaiskūnai. One of us was killed and another wounded. The Russians were forced to retreat from the village. So we buried our killed comrades in the pine forest. Another man was wounded. He lived only a couple more days and then died as well.

When you buried your comrade in the pine forest, did you label his grave?

No. We didn't leave any sign of a grave. Once we buried a partisan (who had blown himself up) in a coffin in a graveyard. They learned about it, dug him up and humiliated the body. It was impossible to keep a complete secret in a village.

How did you get guns and ammunition?

Often from people who supported us. There was no lack of guns and ammunition. Also, from 'stribai' (after a battle).

How did you communicate among different groups and bunkers?

We used a password that was valid for specific amount of time. If it wasn't used, it was no longer valid. And if it was used once, it was not valid anymore. We used different means to communicate. For example, leaving notes in hidden places, in piles of stones. Also couriers (both men and women). They brought letters to us and then took letters from us. People were dedicated. They often risked their lives. Many couriers perished by being betrayed by wounded

partisans who were broken during interrogations. This was the case with Kolytis. He knew too much and started to betray the partisans, couriers, everyone. Maybe the Soviets were able to convince him that they would release him or something..

When you learned that a partisan or courier was arrested, who knew the location of your bunker, what did you do? Did you try to change location at once?

Yes. At once.

You didn't expect that he or she would endure the interrogation/torture?

It's human nature. They say that when you make iron hot you can bend it. So what you can know for certain about humans when they are tortured in the most terrible way? They had different means for torture. For example, during my own interrogation, I was barely alive. They put me into very small room. Soon gas permeated the room. I had no idea how I got back into my original jail cell. Later, they called me to sign statements covering the last three days. I could not remember where I was or what I did or said during all that time. In another situation, I remember I was laying in my cell. Maybe they gave me something with my food, or maybe they did some type of hypnosis on me (laughing). I opened my eyes and saw people with white coats demanding me to talk. I just closed my eyes. I can't even explain to myself what I saw.

Let's get back to the moment when you said that when a partisan or courier was arrested, you changed the location of the bunker.

Yes. We changed the location at once. You never knew if a person could endure torture. We all knew well that the Soviets were masters at torturing and how to break people... which were the most sensitive places to hurt people... not allowing them to sleep... interrogating them at night. I remember in the morning when they bring you back to your cell after an interrogation, you just lay down to sleep. But in a moment they already force you to get up. They didn't allow prisoners to sleep during the day. And next night they were interrogating you again.

So you were arrested in February 1953. When was your trial?

Hmm. Let me remember. I was interrogated for about seven months. At the beginning, they did it every week. Then, later, it was done less and less often. I can't remember, exactly, which month they ended it.

They sentenced you with 25 years?

Yes. 25 years and an additional 5 years in exile, without any rights.

When you were on the train towards your sentence, did you expect to survive those 25-30 years in concentrations camps and exile? What did you think?

You know, I didn't worry about it too much. I was ready for it. When I was hiding in the forest with guns, I was sure that they would not be able to take me alive. If they didn't shoot me, I

would shoot myself. On the train, I didn't worry much. I was just letting things happen. Others, especially those with families, did worry a lot. It was very difficult for them. For me, it was easier. My father had already passed away in jail. My mother and sister were in hiding. I had no home left. I had only myself to worry about. And as years passed, I got used to the concentration camps being my "home" (laughing). During those times there was not much hunger. We had bread. We had enough what to eat.

It probably seemed to you that you were born in the camp and were living there all the time?

It seemed that way. Imagine, if I returned back to Lithuania, there would be nobody there for me. I would be as alone as a bird is on a field. How would I start to live? Still, when they started paying us, initially, I saved for my return. We earned little in the concentration camp; only 5 rubles/month and only if you behaved well. If not, then you didn't get anything; only food for your work. Some took this to heart. But I didn't care that much. When they sentenced me and brought me to the train station, it seemed to me like I was going somewhere fun; like to the market! (laughing). But when I crossed the Lithuanian border, it was very difficult. To leave Lithuania. The difficult question pressed on me: "Would I see Lithuania again?) I was not afraid of dying. But the thought I might not see Lithuania again! 25 years! My father had much shorter sentence and yet he hadn't survived. I didn't think I would make it. Even if I reached the end of my sentence I thought they wouldn't release me.

Let's talk about the recent trial of Kalytis and others. Kalytis himself was absent. But there were other agents that worked with him, who participated in arresting you. What feelings did you have towards them?

I didn't feel special hatred or urgency to kill them. Just when I realized that they didn't notice the grenade behind my back, I simply thought I'd blow myself up together with them.

But during the trial, what did you feel about them?

Again, I didn't feel any hatred towards them. I even greeted them at the Court. What hurt me was that they killed my friend, Svilu. They could have taken him as well! Why did they shoot him? They could hit his head with something and could have captured him alive. But they shot him to death. I was hurt and angry at them because of this. Why didn't they take him alive? He probably didn't know as much as I did. So they simply didn't need him.

So you even greeted them at the Court?

Yes. When we passed by, I greeted them as if nothing had happened.

Did you talk to them?

No. There was nothing to talk about.

Could you tell more about your medals?

I received this 'Vyčio Ordinas' for distinction during battle.

Was it pleasant for you that the current Lithuanian State appreciated your fight as a partisan?

Of course. During the ceremony I got emotional. Was I worth the honor? But anyway, I felt that they hadn't forgotten. So much time and so many events had passed but there are still people in Lithuania who had not forgotten and felt compassion for what we had gone through. I value these medals/honors.

Was it a happy day for you when you were honored with a medal?

Yes, I would say it was a happy day.

Currently, you are almost 81-years old. How can you explain, from a philosophical perspective, all the changes and wars that happened during your life?

You see, there is not much to tell about my life: bunkers, concentration camps... That's it. I didn't see a bright day. When I returned back to Lithuania after completing my sentence, with all my documents. I was still waiting when they would take me back. I didn't expect that they would leave me alone. I was living without any assurance about tomorrow's day. Would it be at the concentration camp or after the camp? I never had a cheerful day. When I started hiding in the forest, my father was arrested and sentenced for 10 years. He died in prison. The women (my mother and sister) had to run away from home. The Soviets were after them. I mostly felt sorry for my family. They suffered because of me. If I had not been hiding in the forest, maybe nobody would have touched them? When they got me, they were also able to catch my sister. But they released her. Maybe, she was useless to them since I was already captured. We all agreed to say that we were not meeting each other.