

An Original Source Interview with / Interviu su:

Julius Sasnauskas

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Translation text

Could you begin by telling us your name, where are you from and your age?

I am Julius Sasnauskas. I'm a Catholic priest of the Franciscan Order. I was born and work in Vilnius, in the parish of the Bernardines. For the past ten years I've also worked at the Catholic radio station.

How did you become interested in the resistance?

I am 47 years old. Perhaps I could start with a little humor. We used to joke that I was born in the same year as former Prime Minister Brazauskas, former Secretary of the Communist Party. I was born in a captive nation. I understood this from my earliest days. I also became aware of the opportunity to resist this enslavement and to believe in and wait for the emergence of a different Lithuania, a new society. My family was not directly involved in the Resistance. The memories of pre-War Lithuania still existed as cultural and religious traditions. I grew up in this atmosphere. The events in Czechoslovakia during the 1968 "Prague Spring" had a big impact on my future choices. My mother had become very interested in these events. She even picked up the Czech language, so she could listen to the radio broadcasts from Prague. I was very affected by the thought of tanks rolling through the streets of Prague, and by the defiance of the people. The idea of resisting the regime was present from my earliest years. I also participated in hippies movement. All of this formed my beliefs that, given the right set of circumstances, resulted in a course of action and concrete acts that eventually landed me in prison.

How did you go from being just a young hikey student into active resistance?

It was more interesting to consider the concept of resistance than to "go with the flow." I'm no longer of an age where I should be an "eternal dissident". But at that particular time of my life I associated a lot more romanticism with being defiant than with living a complacent life that offered security to pursue studies while adapting and becoming a cog of the system. Far more attractive and interesting for me was to choose resistance. Of course, at the start you don't really expect it to cost your freedom or to cause pain and suffering to you or your family. Later I came to that realization as well. Still, the romanticism of resistance had the stronger pull. I've never regretted it. It is true even more now because I want to take stock of that period in my life in context of the Gospel and from a theological perspective rather than viewing it merely as a struggle for the political ideals of freedom and independence.

How did you get involved in the work for open resistance and how old were you?

I'd say my attitude typified that of many young people at the time. I recall in my class, there was always talk. We always remembered our Independence Day when it rolled around. There were 30 boys in my class, but only one of them would cheer for the Soviet Union's national ice hockey team when it went up against Czechoslovakia. That was symbolic of the same political struggle, so attitudes towards resistance were commonplace. I remember perfectly well how we'd manage to have the colors of yellow, green and red displayed, seemingly by coincidence,

or how we'd incorporate those colors into our attire. Keep in mind that at that time, in 1972, Lithuania to a certain degree experienced a phenomenon that happened in Prague. The self-immolation of Romas Kalanta served as a sort of invitation to reject the notion of accepting the Soviet System, to go out and protest to raise the issue of freedom. All of this had impact. Given all that, I didn't know until 1975 that there was a more or less organized group of dissidents nor [did I know] of the existence of an underground press. Sometimes I was able to listen to foreign radio broadcasts, but there was only so much you could get out of them. Later I became acquainted with some of the older dissidents such as Viktoras Petkus and Antanas Terleckas. That offered me an opportunity to act concretely. I threw myself into it full bore. It seemed to me that the participation of us younger folks would be highly valued since we were bolder, and had less fear. We didn't restrain or "save" ourselves. We gave it more energy. With time our activities gradually expanded. I remember how important the meeting with Sakharov in Vilnius was. To me it was as if the Queen of England had paid a visit! All these things contributed to and created the kind of lifestyle which became almost independent of the System. Later I never felt constrained in speech. We spoke openly about whatever we wanted. We felt no fear. You had to be careful to not put them in the position of closing down your activities, but in general, we were fearless.

Could you tell us more about how you actually got into the resistance, and what was it like?

I was about 16 when my relationship with Petkus and Terleckas began. At first there were discussions, meetings, the reading of forbidden books published during pre-war Lithuania, recounting stories of Lithuania's history, walks around Vilnius pointing out significant historical sites tied to the struggle for Lithuanian independence, tales of Lithuania's heroes. Later, in the belief that the most important aspect of our work had to do with the underground press, Antanas Terleckas and I came to a natural decision to start our own underground newspaper, especially since the "Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania" and "Aušra" were being published by, in essence, the same people. I was then too young to do my own evaluation and comparison of the publications, but according to Terleckas, a wider scope was needed since existing publications dealt only with the rights of the Church and of religious practitioners. We formulated the idea of creating a nationalist publication that would present topics on Lithuanian history, and address the nation's desire to win back its freedom. All other problems would be resolved and the questions of rights of the Church and of religious practitioners would be addressed. The underground press became our focus, but the start was inauspicious: I'd visit Antanas Terleckas home in the suburbs to copy by hand his written articles. Sometimes I would do a little editing, since I had done well in my studies of the Lithuanian language. I found I enjoyed this type of work. After bringing back the articles I'd type them up. We were set up such that if I got caught with this material, say, while en route home, at least it would be in my own handwriting and no other people would be implicated. I'll never forget our first issue which was produced under the most trying kinds of circumstances. It would have looked very odd for me to be bringing home a typewriter out of the blue. I didn't want to have to come up with an explanation. A friend of mine had agreed to let me come by and work at his place which was in Vilnius' Old Town. When I arrived at his place, no one was home. Since I had to get the work done by morning, I went to the basement which was open to anybody and, after stacking several boxes of vegetable conserves to form a table, I got to work. All night long I typed by the light of a little lamp. I don't know what would have happened had someone come in and found me there.

They'd have wondered what the heck was this youngster up to? It was surreal, as if it were a scene from a film about the Underground. When I finally left the premises, it was dawn, the birds were singing, and I experienced such a sense of freedom!

When did you begin to learn the price of working for independence and freedom?

The price was apparent immediately because it was impossible to meet with people! As our circle of acquaintances expanded, it was inevitable that the KGB direct their attention to us. Special attention was focused on young people so that they wouldn't be contaminated by those "nationalist clerics," as they called them. Ten of my classmates - students more or less who hought along similar lines - formed a little group. Later on, of course, many of us went our separate ways, but during those times, in 1976, barely a year after I got started in this work, it was enough of an attention-getter to draw the interest of the KGB. They came to our school to get us and took us down to the militia station where we experienced our first interrogations and got a taste of the price to be exacted for freedom, a price for being true to our inner selves! And that price continued to increase of course. The first time my apartment was searched was on August 23, 1977. But my determination just continued to grow. I wasn't so easy to intimidate. I knew, I was told that sooner or later I'd be going to jail. No other outcome was possible. I had come to terms with this inevitability. Even today, speaking from a philosophical perspective, when someone claims that they only want to be true to themselves I respond that in any society you have a price to pay for that freedom. At a very early age I came to understand the price of being oneself, the price of being a free man in a system of slavery. Not even one year had lapsed from the time I first met those former political prisoners to when I myself was being interrogated. The interrogators let me know in - no uncertain terms - what lay in store for me if I continued down this path. On the other hand, their implied threats only tended to strengthen my resolve to defy the system and to pay the price regardless of what it turned out to be. Later on, during my pre-trial interrogation, (I don't know if they were sincere or not in expressing regret about their previous approach) they remonstrated over having made enemies of us. They said that perhaps there could have been a different outcome. However, they didn't hold back; they tried to intimidate us, they lied, they employed blackmail. This was their modus operandi with people who burned for freedom, truth, and morality.

What happened after you were arrested?

After producing several issues of that first little underground publication, we expanded the scope of our activities to publish a second one, all the while knowing we had to operate clandestinely since we were involved in an illegal activity.

Could you describe for us what happened when you were arrested?

Incidentally, you can still view copies of these publications. I, myself, have saved several, including one issue of "Vytis". It is framed and hung up on my wall. From time to time I pull them out of the cellar and reread them, reflecting on the cost of the free press, and what it means even today to speak freely, to obtain information, and so on. The publications were rather simple, 50-60 typewritten pages. Sometimes they made it to the West, sometimes you heard about them

on a foreign broadcast, so you knew they were getting a wider circulation. But first and foremost, they were necessary for us, for those who wanted to exercise their freedom in an unfree society, for those who wanted to express a rejection of the system. Of course, there were others who completed the broader assignment of publishing the Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania, a publication that was translated into many languages and was distributed throughout the world. Using our own names, we'd write quite openly to various Soviet institutions expressing our protest on assorted cultural, historical and human rights issues. Our group was comprised of about 10 people whom we could trust and work with. Obviously, you can't operate illegally for very long. After that first time when I was investigated, the searches came fairly regularly, one right after the other. They'd comb through the place, confiscate whatever suited them, e.g., the typewriter, to add to the case they were building against me. However, a couple days later I'd bring in another typewriter and continue plugging away. It got so that I was quite open about it and started working at home. And then when I got a job in Vilnius' Old Town as the night watchman at St. John's Church, I had the opportunity of sequestering myself with my typewriter all night long in the director's office and writing through the night with no fear of discovery. There was the additional benefit of being able to conceal my files somewhere under the eaves where no one would run across them. However, bit by bit, a lot of evidence was accumulating against me. We were taken into custody at the end of 1979. As the Moscow Olympic Games were drawing near, the authorities had embarked on a campaign to, as they phrased it, "cleanse the entire Soviet Union" of dissidents. There were waves of arrests in Moscow, Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. That particular autumn and into the new year about 10 people were taken into custody, something that hadn't happened on that scale in quite a while. Everything transpired quite matter-of-factly: On December 11, 1979, they came to my place ostensibly to conduct a routine search, but even before they got started they told me I'd be going with them to KGB headquarters. I immediately understood what this meant: Terleckas had already been taken and I knew I'd end up in similar fashion. After the procurator got through with me, I landed in the cell. Nowadays you are welcome to tour the cell quite freely as part of the Museum.

Then what happened?

Then, usual interrogation process. A case was built against me. It was a one-sided process. They'd take you for questioning to a room several floors up. Many questions we just wouldn't answer. In fact, we'd try not to answer any of the questions. We were especially careful not to embroil other people by mentioning any names. It was difficult to mount a defense since they had collected so much evidence. They took fingerprints. It wasn't hard for them to claim that I produced or helped publish an anti-Soviet publication. We had accomplished quite a bit over the course of the two years. The famous Nijolė Sadūnaitė was imprisoned just for typing 6 pages, whereas we had produced quite a bit more over the course of two years. There was always the question in your mind, not so much as to whether you'll get out of this or not, but more as to will they succeed in breaking you or not. Will you be tempted or not? Will you give in to them or not? Will you end up trusting them or not? They had various methods of interrogation. No longer Stalin's era, no one beat or physically abused us. But they'd play games. They'd say things like, "We're very tolerant. If you go to church, that holds no interest for us whatsoever. There is religious freedom in the Soviet Union. You can even attend the priests' seminary."

Earlier that same year I had formally declared my interest in enrolling in the seminary. They would always tempt you. They'd imply there was a third option, another way out of my situation. They would even cite from the Gospel, "Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God the things which are God's." So, when at the age of 20 you find yourself incarcerated, lying awake staring at the bars and the steel door, and you realize that it's not just a bad dream but the real thing. Yes, it can be very hard. But one can get used to anything - even that. There was even a positive side to this.

What were the positive things?

Out of the identifiably positive things, well, I guess I could say that never in my life will I have that kind of opportunity to read as many books as I read then in one and a half years! The prison had a pretty good library with a fair amount of classic literature, including Lithuanian and Russian classics. So, I would read for hours every day, even at night, since the bare light bulb was on all night. At first, they didn't allow me to do any reading. But when they saw that I was doing it anyway, they weren't about to shut off the light to get me to stop. I'd start a 500 page book in the morning and by evening I'd be ready for the next one. I was psychologically and physically strong enough to do that, whereas there were some who were too debilitated. I'm not sure precisely how many books I read, approximately 600. I've maintained a list of titles and I even made notes about them. Additionally, from a spiritual aspect, I spent each evening on my knees in prayer. At the beginning they tried to forbid me from praying as well, and they'd monitor me through the peephole, but eventually they gave up and I was able to use that period in my life to deepen my relationship with God with Providence, with Christ. I would also pray during the times when we were allowed to walk. Now when I reflect on everything, it seems to me that clarity on certain topics such as the nature of prayer and of God, and the questions of What is the world? Who am I? Who are these people around me? will never be as intense or as real. So that was the positive aspect of this experience. In retrospect, sometimes I think maybe we were partly fanatics. We thought of the Russian people as our enemies, for example, and viewed them with hatred. A full understanding of the enemy was missing. After having been incarcerated for a time, you began to feel pity for them.

You were deported, weren't you?

After nine months of interrogation, there was a trial. Antanas Terleckas and I were tried at the same time. He was sentenced to 3 years in prison and 5 years in exile, whereas I received 1-1/2 years in prison and 5 years in exile. After the trial I spent another nine months in my cell in Vilnius. Then I was deported to Tomsk in Siberia to serve my 5-yr sentence. I worked at various jobs until my five years was up in summer of 1986.

What was like life in Tomsk?

It was not like a jail. The point of the deportation was that they bring you to a remote place, usually a small village, provide you a job and then restrict your movement freedom. The main goal was to isolate you from your environment and connections. But I was lucky that Tomsk was somewhere in the middle in comparison with the Far East which was on the edge of the Soviet Union and relatives had to get special permits to get there. They didn't need such permits

to get to the Tomsk and the trip was also much shorter and easier. So, in five years of my deportation, all my closest relatives and friends visited me, some of them more than once. My mother and my sisters, my brother also visited me a few times, so I wasn't feeling separated. Of course, it's possible to claim that I could spend my best years, between 21 and 26, in a much better and productive way than working on dirty jobs in Siberia. However, I did like the local nature and people, some of them even became my friends, despite of initial negative rumors about my background, that I was a fascist and an enemy of people. But later local people realized that I was normal and that they could relate to me and talk. I have very nice memories about local people. And in general, I learned a lot during that period, I received a lot of valuable experience. Even in jail, the intensity that I experienced was very valuable to me as a personality. Of course, my family, especially my mother experienced a lot of pain during that period. It was particularly hard for my mother to walk close by the building in Vilnius where I was in jail. She was no superhero, but she was also part of it, loving her child and accepting the sacrifice and the pain she had to endure for the sake of love to her children and freedom of her country.