

**An Original Source Interview with / Interviu su:**

**Vladas Terleckas**

**2007**

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

Transcriber / Vertējas: **Zita Petkus**

Interview Producer / Interviu Prodiuseris: **Czesław Jan Grycz**

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

Subtitles Producer / Subtitrų Prodiuseris: **Viltė Minkevičiūtė**

Shot on Location in Lithuania / Filmuota Lietuvoje 2007

## Translation Text

I am Vladas Terleckas, I was born in Eastern Lithuania to a family of small farmers. I was not quite two years old when the Second World War started.

***How old were you when you came to understand that your country was at war and under foreign occupation?***

I was around five when I started to understand what was going on. And when the Red Army arrived in July 1944, I would hide myself from the soldiers under the currant shrubs and other plants. In a word, I knew, probably, from hearing the grown-ups talk that the invader was someone to be feared and to hide from.

***Terror seen through the eyes of a child is very different but also very real.. Could you describe what was like in your village and for your family with the Red Army there?***

Well, let me start out with a little bit of humor, since the Red Army offered us our introduction to American articles. The Red Army of Occupation arrived in Studebaker vehicles which, incidentally, were totally unsuitable for village roads. Also, the Russian soldiers consumed American pork products. After the war, life in the village was pervaded with an atmosphere of fear: fear of deportation, of killings, of theft. There was an oppressive sense of terror that had no answers. Another regular topic of village talk was the slaughter of innocent Jews. My parents were very hospitable and had had many close Jewish friends. I mainly remember people, especially older women, gathering at my parents' home to exchange news about these events and about the deportations.

***Could you describe what your family life was like under the occupation? How did your family cope with the occupation?***

Perpetual fear, day and night! Trying to hide from the Red Army; hiding from their tax collectors; hiding from those who would force you into unwanted loans. Perpetual waiting for the terror to end. Finally, the building of a spirit of moral resistance from within. This was not just my mindset but that of my parents, my brothers, and our entire village of 234 people. One day at school, we were told by the teacher that we had been enrolled into the Red Cross and to come forward to pick up our membership badges. Not one of the 46 pupils got up to pick up a badge. We had never heard of this organization, all we knew was that it was being thrust upon us by a foreign power. Then the teacher distributed badges to us at our desks, but when we left school that day, not a single person had taken their badge. Thus, without any prior agreement, we enacted this silent but public protest. Here's another small example of children uniting in a spirit of resistance. In school, under the guise of conducting a writing exercise, the teacher instructed us to take dictation and proceeded to read a request for membership in the Young Pioneers. She explained that this wouldn't be the real thing and that the dictation was only for purposes of the writing exercise. After we finished, she announced that we had just joined the Young Communist Pioneers. Rejecting this deception, when the teacher's journal was left unattended during recess, several of the students tore out the page that contained the official list of Young Pioneers. We were all questioned as to who did it, but no one gave them away.

Another example is the joy with which we received the news of the Hungarian Revolution. We were very excited that the Hungarians were succeeding against the Russians, as was the case initially. Amongst each other we shared news gleaned from listening to foreign broadcasts, and we held out the hope that once Hungary freed herself, Lithuania would also rise up and regain its freedom. Not only we children, but even the village dogs were able to differentiate between friend and foe! Our neighbors had a dog whose bark changed depending on whether it was the partisans or the KGB who came by in the night. We could always tell by his bark who was in the vicinity. And I was truly surprised to learn that this phenomenon also existed in other villages, that even the dogs differentiated between the KGB and the partisans and barked accordingly. That's a fact! Even more so than with the killings and the torture, people were shaken to the core and totally unable to come to grips with the desecration of the bodies of dead partisans. How was this desecration carried out? They'd dump the bodies in the village square in the thick of the KGB quarter. They'd strip the clothes off the dead partisans, even from the women! The KGB collaborators, even females, would poke at the corpses with sticks and push their genitalia around. They'd shove rosaries and prayer books into their mouths. They'd force their parents and relatives to come to the site to identify the dead. Usually, the parents and siblings would deny their relationship to the deceased. Later, the KGB would dump straw over the bodies but keep them out in the open for over a week. Cats would eventually forage for food among the straw and passersby would see cats with bloodied mouths emerging from the pile of straw-covered corpses. Families were forbidden to bury partisans' bodies in the cemetery. There was one occasion where the parents surreptitiously retrieved the body of their dead partisan son and had him buried in the cemetery. They were informed upon, and the KGB dug up the grave, removed the body from the coffin, desecrated it, threw it in a truck, and with soldiers sitting on the corpse, they drove away. On our way to school we could see the empty, broken coffin that had been dumped in the road. People were also appalled when the *stribai* and KGB would take target practice at crucifixes, aiming for the figure of Christ. All the neighboring villages were in shock from another incident. The KGB had shown up at a homestead where a young man was chopping wood in the yard. They shot him dead then went inside, put on the phonograph, forced the dead man's sister to dance with them, and then helped themselves to his new suit. That's why later the people rejoiced when the partisans caught and shot the killer, who was dressed in his victim's new suit. There was more than one KGB *stribas* who'd been heard to say, "For me, shooting a man is the same thing as shooting a cat." And their works bore this out. For example, he spies an old man walking by the woods, so he loads his gun and shoots him! Doesn't talk first, doesn't ask questions, just kills him outright! How we hated the power of this Armed Oppressor! We couldn't wait for the partisans to tan their hides and teach them a lesson, like they did during the nation's big Uprising in 1941. Sadly, those victories were almost non-existent, since the enemy was too large. In 1945, there were still some battles with the armed forces of the Occupation; however, as time went on and partisan numbers were decimated, there were fewer and fewer battles. And so, people kept returning to the same old stories from the earlier years. I'll tell you one of them. On March 11-12, 1945, there was a huge battle in the Forest of Labanoras, with about 100 partisans involved in a fight against at least 500 Red Army troops. About 75 partisans died, none were taken prisoner. When they ran out of ammunition, they blew themselves up rather than surrender. One of the survivors described the battle. The battle was lost when the enemy brought in extra firepower. When a Red Army officer who had participated in the taking of Berlin tried getting into the partisans' bunker to demand their surrender, the partisans shot him. I remember that my uncle had been ordered to bring back the

bodies of the deceased and he retrieved the body of this Russian officer. Who were the partisans? They were young men who were good at ploughing and working the land, and not in the use of weapons. The young fighters who died in this battle were buried in a location which to this day remains unknown. The battle was so intense that not only were there casualties on both sides, but even the trees died. The trees in the area of the bunkers dried out. This is where my father used to go to get wood for heating; often, while sawing branches, we'd come across embedded bullets.

***Who controlled your village, who ran it, what was it like?....Who were the authorities, were they local people?....What was the Occupation like on a very local level?***

Chairmen and other functionaries were put in place. An infrastructure was created out of the most despicable members of society, those who relied exclusively on the power of their weapon.

***Was there a mayor or a council?***

Nothing of the sort at first. At the very lowest administrative rung there were about 150 armed soldiers and their helpers in each village. That's who was in charge. Another story often recounted by people with a certain sense of gratification was about an attack that took place by about 80 partisans on a certain town where the Red Army had established itself and installed its administrative structure. The battle lasted all night, with Red Army troops holed up in a brick building. Although the partisans had explosives with them, they made the decision to not use them so as to spare the building for future use by an eventually independent Lithuania. Just like the dogs did, we also differentiated between who came to the house. Let me take a moment to note the differences: there was the NKVD or KGB Army which was, by comparison, better disciplined, and therefore less intimidating. Even my parents were less fearful of them. And then there were their helpers, the collaborators or *stribai* who were assembled from among the lowest social layer. They were the most vicious! What would they do? They'd conduct raids ostensibly searching, as they claimed, for "bandits". In the process, they'd thoroughly nose through the contents of the entire house, even to the point of getting into the stove. Food is baking and they're helping themselves to what's in the oven. I remember one time we were awakened thus at night, but when they saw that my brother and I were just kids, they didn't do anything to us. Typically, they'd loot whatever caught their eye, be it ordinary kitchen tools, food, sausages, bacon, clothing—everything and anything that had any value to it. That's why people started concealing things, burying things, hiding things in the hay, hiding the butter under the straw, and so on. As far as they were concerned, we children were also not to be trusted. For example, my friend and I were once stopped and questioned on our way home from buying some fish. We were carrying a bag that appeared suspect to them, as if we were transporting ammunition. In their eyes every single person warranted suspicion. Once during a search at our house, the *stribai* found a pair of my father's trousers dating to the time he had served in the Czar's army during World War One. These trousers were stained with red paint, but the *stribai* decided it was blood and that was enough of a reason to drag my father in for interrogation. However, the interrogating officer had more sense and released him. They could bring you in if, for example, they found you had a newspaper dating back to the period of Lithuanian independence; or an emblem associated with independent Lithuania; or money from that time. Right away there'd be accusations: "Ah, so you despise Soviet rule! You're hoping for bourgeois Lithuania, for Smetona's (Antanas Smetona was Lithuania's President when the

Russians invaded) return!”. It was extra tense whenever the partisans turned up at night, because you knew if the Soviet snitches happened to come by, your fate was sealed: you would either die right there or be on your way to Siberia. There were many such instances of the partisans spending the night with us, so we constantly quaked in our boots. They’d set me up on “guard duty”—and a fine guard I’d turn out to be: a half hour, and I’d doze off!

Another time my mother got a word that Red forces were on the move, so she grabbed the butter and hurried to the barn to hide it. She opens the door and finds the leader of the partisans standing there with his automatic weapon. Frightened, she says to him, “Child, there are *stribai* in the village.” And he answers, “If they feel like dying, let them come!”. There are some telling statistics that I’d like to relate. As I mentioned before, 234 people lived in our village. Out of this number, during the 1941-48 time period, 11 families were affected by the deportation of 23 people. Every single one of the older deportees—parents and the elderly—died, and they died quickly, from starvation. Eleven from our village fled to the West. Another eleven were arrested, five of whom died from starvation. Eighteen young men of the village perished as partisans. Another man, as I mentioned previously, was shot out of hand. Four men were shot by the partisans. In all, our village of 234 lost 47 people, counting those who fled to the West. There were no adult men in their prime left in the village. We had the elderly and we had children and teenagers. What was our mindset? The older kids, for example, my middle brother who was a teenager at that time but too young to be taken by the army, was gearing up for the time when he’d be able to fight. All teenagers had weapons stashed away as a point of honor. And we had patriotic songs: beautiful songs about the partisans, and mocking ones about the *stribai*, the collaborators. For example, a line from one of the jeering songs goes: “A *stribas* was shot and went sprawling, the sausage in his pocket a-showing.” Our focus was entirely on surviving trauma! There was a case of a mother who went out of her mind when she was told her partisan son had been killed. And also the deportations. A rumor would fly through the village that they’re coming tonight to deport us, so we’d hide out in the haystacks in the field, in the barn, and so on. That was tension! Tension! We lived in constant tension and trauma! Spiritually speaking, however, they were unable to vanquish us. Not a single person in my own village became a *stribas*, no one was a traitor, not one participated in the infrastructure.

***When you look back on those days, does anything stand out in your mind as the worst thing that happened?***

Hearing the ongoing stories about the killing of Jews. Also, the deaths of the villagers, children, our neighbors. These left the deepest of impressions. Some women even speculated that all this cruelty was sent by God in retribution because of those Lithuanians whose hands had been stained with Jewish blood. All the good memories have to do with the partisans and the occasions when they showed up: such handsome young men, standing proud in their uniforms, so neat and disciplined! Whereas the memory that comes to mind of a *stribas* is that of a scuzzy low life—swearing, cursing, thieving. The contrast between the two images is enormous. Oh yes, one more thing: the moral fabric of the rural village started to disintegrate when there were no longer any partisans around and when village inhabitants were herded onto collective farms to live. I can tell you more about that if you’re interested.

***Our title is, “Red Terror on the Amber Coast.” How would you describe the terror that you lived under?***

Soviet terror was responsible for far-reaching devastation in the lives of the people. A lot of intellectual potential had fled to the West. The people’s psyche had been unalterably damaged and the folk tradition of moral integrity was cut short. Ultimately, people were set up to distrust each other and then, especially through collectivization, to be distanced from God and the Church. In short, the foundations of morality had been undermined.

***What do you feel now? Are you angry at the Communists, still feel hatred towards them when you look back?***

Well, I’m not among those who can forget the damage that was done to Lithuania, and I’m not someone who doles out forgiveness. However, if they asked for forgiveness, yes, I would forgive. But on the contrary, instead of begging for forgiveness, they continue to claim that they were only working for the common good of Lithuania. I’ve got the *stribai* in mind when I say this. How else can one evaluate this Occupation’s fierce type of cruelty, a cruelty that was experienced for the most part by the Baltic countries and western Ukraine! There can be no other conclusion. All that being said, despite the psychological trauma I lived through, I’m glad I was an eyewitness to what transpired. Nobody will ever convince me that it happened any other way. Young historians nowadays who never experienced this truth personally are unable to unravel it. I feel I’m in a better position to do so.

***We hope that our film will explain to a lot of people what happened, both in Lithuania and here.***

It’s incredibly difficult to comprehend! Not all Lithuanians themselves get it, not even all our historians and specialists fully understand the root causes. If you don’t experience this firsthand, if you don’t feel the atmosphere with every neuron of your being..