

JONAS KUPRAITIS-VIKSVA

1917-2015

Age when rescuing: 24

Profession: Farmer

People rescued: 4

- Took part in the Battle of Kalniškė.
- A partisan.
- An exile.

Jonas's father Antanas, the son of a large farmer named Pranas Kupris, went to the United States when he was young and spent seven years there. While living in the United States, he not only got a taste of what life is, but also broadened his horizons greatly. At the request of his mother, he returned to Lithuania and started a family. Antanas married Ieva, the daughter of the affluent Vaučeskas farmers, with whom he raised five children: Ona, Petras, Antanas, Juozas and Jonas. They lived in the village of Vaitkabalai in Vilkaviškis District. In 1944, at the request of Fr. Vytas Baltutis (who was recognised as Righteous Among the Nations in 1980), the Kupraitis family took in four people of Jewish descent – Miriam, Iser, Masha and Esther Gail – three of whom were children at the time. The Kupraitis family hid and took care of these people for six months, until the district was occupied by the Soviets in October 1944.

As the front approached, Jonas went into hiding because he did not want to join the Soviet army. At first, he hid in Kaunas with family friends. Later, he went to stay in the village of Mikalauka with his sister Onutė. The NKVD began operating more and more intensively in the villages looking for men. At the urging of teacher E. Malijonis and at the recommendation of the partisans, **Jonas and a friend went on foot to the Kelmiskė forest in early spring 1945 and joined the partisan unit under the command of Jonas Neifeltas. After taking the oath, he received a hand-held machine gun. He was given the code name "Viksva" ("Sedge").** Remembering those times, Jonas said: "After going to the place where the partisans were stationed, I found out that my mother had died on 23 March and I couldn't attend the funeral. I once dreamed of my mum, who told me that she was waiting for me, but to no avail. When I woke up, I found out that the Russian army had surrounded the Kalniškė forest and that we would have to fight. Soon we were on the top of the hill and, after getting in the right position, we waited for the enemy to attack. Not expecting strong resistance, the Russians moved almost without hiding. After letting them get closer, we opened fire with rifles and machine guns. The first attack was repulsed, but the Russians were not going to retreat. New army reserves kept being sent to the battlefield. From the enemy's side, there was the constant fierce chatter of assault rifles and machine guns. Apparently, mortars were used. Tree branches and saplings broke from the hellish shooting. Our positions were much better because we were shooting from a hill, so the grenades we fired went far. This battle continued with little interruption until late in the evening. Only later did we learn that we had been attacked by units of the regular army returning from the front. We had killed about 400 enemy

troops. After the ammunition ran out and evening came, we got the order to retreat. I don't know how many of our guys were left alive, but the seven of us made it out successfully. The next day, members of the destruction battalions and the NKVD tore apart the surroundings looking for the remaining partisans.

Not all farmers took us in, since they were afraid. We went our separate ways. After tossing my machine gun (there were no more cartridges), I found a depression in the ground somewhere near the Kirsna brook, in a wet meadow by the bushes. I lied down in it, covered myself with branches and grass, did the sign of the cross in my head, and lay there. I heard gunshots nearby. The soldiers must have shot my friends when they saw them, and then they were looking for me. Soon after, the soldiers passed by me. When they saw a fishing-basket on the ground nearby, they said: "Борсетка для ловли рыб" (Russian: "Here's a net to catch fish"). And went on without looking. After lying like that for 24 hours and making sure that everything had calmed down, I left my hiding place. I went to a local resident named Paskevičius, who took me in and hid me. I stayed there until September. Then I went to Poland and stayed with my cousin's relatives. After living there without documents until 1947, I was arrested and taken to Gusevo. From Gusevo they took me to Marijampolė. **During the brutal interrogations, I managed to defend myself, that I was a partisan, a participant in the Battle of Kalniškė. I convinced the Cheka that I was evading service in the Soviet army. As a result, on 6 January 1949, the court sentenced me to 25 years in prison as a "traitor to the Motherland".** At the transfer point in Vilnius, I received news from my relatives that my father had died. I missed my mother's funeral, and the same thing happened when my father died." Through the transfer points, Jonas Kupraitis ended up in the Komi prison camps, where roughly 200 male prisoners were housed in old barracks in the woods. They all worked in logging. They were monitored by armed guards with dogs. In the spring, when the rivers flooded, they sent rafts.

The prisoners began writing enquiries to Moscow and the Lithuanian prosecutor's office regarding their wrongful conviction. Only in 1955, after Stalin's death, was a reply received that Jonas Kupraitis was free and could return to Lithuania. After six years of hard labour, Jonas returned to his homeland in July 1955. He settled in Mikalauka with his sister, Onutė Stankevičienė. He registered, got a passport and worked in the forestry brigade at the Banga collective farm. In 1960, Jonas married Anelė Puzaraitė. The family had two daughters – Asta and Rima, who gave Jonas and Anelė three grandchildren.

This information was collected using:

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According to information shared by the Kupraitis family