

Zalman Kaplanas



This is me, Zalman Kaplanas. This picture was taken in Vilnius in the early 1950s.

In 1949 I wrote a diploma work and graduated from university. I got a mandatory job assignment to the Ministry of the Forest Industry of Lithuania and was supposed to start work on 1st August. I resigned from the vocational school and was looking forward to my new job. In the middle of July I was called to the headmaster's office. My job assignment was changed. I was shown the order of

the minister wherein I was assigned acting director of the vocational school I was so happy to have resigned from. The previous director, who had practically ruined the work of the vocational school, was promoted to a deputy minister in Moscow. It was normal for the Soviet regime to get rid of negligent directors by promoting them. I was trying to resist the best way I could, but the minister promised that I would be transferred to another position after ensuring order at school. It turned out to be more than one year.

In a year, viz 1950 I was again appointed the acting director of the vocation school at the collegium of the ministry. I couldn't be appointed director as I was a Jew, and besides I didn't belong to the Communist Party. It was the period of state anti-Semitism. Almost every day 'rootless cosmopolites' were stigmatized in the papers, which said that they were looking for ways to do harm. At that hard time when Jews were fired no matter what position they had, I became the acting director of the vocational school. Since 1950 the commissions from Moscow came to the vocational school on a frequent basis. Many people couldn't abide by the fact that I was a good director. In reality, the vocational school became one of the best in its field. I moved to the vocational school. I locked my apartment, where I had a relative comfort. I lived in my office, slept on the leather couch. Back at that time such couches were the attributes of the offices. Many people burned the midnight oil trying to copy Stalin.

I followed the behavior of my students. I often went to the hostel. I didn't allow them to drink moonshine and flirt. There was a semi-military discipline in the vocational school. Many people disliked it. My position became shaky. On the one hand I understood that I would be working there until a good Lithuanian director was found, on the other hand I didn't like my job, but nobody allowed me to leave. In the full swing of anti-Semitism, during the Doctors' Plot, at the beginning of 1953, the auditor came to the vocational school intending to fire or arrest me. But he couldn't find a reason. The most interesting thing was when the Minister of Forestry was trying to find out from our curators in Moscow who initiated the checkup, it turned out that the checkup wasn't coming from our system. They didn't even know the name of the auditor. It means that other important authorities were interested in me, mostly likely it was the KGB. It was a terrible time. It was impossible to read those loathing articles about Jews being criminals and murderers. All people with common sense understood that it was libel and provocation. But still it affected the public opinion. People became suspicious. The Jews in the street were looking around feeling harassed.

Fortunately – and it's not a slip of the tongue, I mean it – fortunately for me and for other millions of people, the tyrant died on 5th March 1953. I didn't mourn over his death, but I didn't show my joy either. By that time I knew a lot about the true persona of Stalin and repressions. Every morning I listened to Radio Free Europe in my office, BBC and other western radio stations. It was impossible to black out these radio stations in Lithuania and the voice of Anatoliy Goldenberg, the BBC announcer became dear to many Lithuanian households. That year, 1953 I was given a car, a 'Moskvich-401', for being the director of the best vocational school of the industry. I stayed in that position for another four years. In 1957 they finally found the director who met all requirements of the ministry. He was a Lithuanian and was educated in forestry. By that time I had been given an apartment by the vocational school. They told me to move out of my apartment after my resignation as it was meant for the new director. And again luck was smiling at me. The vocational school was transferred to Kaunas, so the apartment was left to me.