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by Jim McBeth

LEN Murray was taking copious notes – but he suddenly stopped writing, his pen poised over the yellow legal pad on his lap. Surely he had misheard the man? When the Lithuanian interpreter repeated his words, a spectral hand clasped the lawyer's heart. Behind the Iron Curtain, on the convoluted trail of a Nazi war criminal living in Scotland, Mr Murray had not been mistaken. The venerable old man had indeed described in appalling detail how he had murdered a Jewish child a lifetime ago.

Everything about him, his benign face, melodic voice and soft words, contradicted the horrific nature of his actions as a young man, when he was a member of a notorious Lithuanian SS death squad which preyed on its own people on behalf of the Nazis.

The circumstances of the child's death are still seared in Mr Murray's memory 23 years after he sat in Juozas Alexsynas' cottage near Vilnius, interviewing the 'soldier' who admitted helping to massacre thousands of innocents.

'He killed the child with his own hands. There was no emotion, nothing to hint at such barbarity,' says Mr Murray, who was transported to a disturbing world reaching from Second World War Europe to the modern day – and a district of Edinburgh where he believed a mass murderer was hiding in plain sight.

The interview with Alexsynas was a turning point. Out of great evil came enlightenment. Alexsynas and other witnesses would name Lieutenant Antanas Gecevicus as their superior officer in the 12th Auxiliary Lithuanian Police Battalion – part of an ersatz SS 'regiment' which, from 1941 to 1943, killed 500,000 people in Lithuania and Belarus.

Gecevicus' unit was said to have been responsible for up to 46,000 of the deaths.

Described as a vicious killer, he revelled in massacring Jews and the 'conveyor-belt slaughter' of Russian prisoners of war, often wading into mass graves to dispatch survivors of the initial gunfire with a single bullet.

'Gecevicus was a monster,' says Mr Murray, 'but no one would have seen him in Anton Gecas, the man he would become after the war.'

'None would have recognised the war criminal in the respectable man who arrived in Scotland in 1947, becoming an engineer and working for the National Coal Board.'

'And who could have identified such a man in the benign, smiling mine host who, along with his wife, would run a B&B in the semi-detached town house in the Newington district of Edinburgh?

'But there he was, hiding in plain sight – a mass murderer who would eventually feature on the most-wanted lists of organisations dedicated to bringing Nazi war criminals to justice.'

Mr Murray travelled to Gecas' homeland in 1991 on behalf of STV, which had made a documentary about his links to war crimes.

When the Lithuanian sued for £600,000, it was Mr Murray's job to defend his client against an action that could have potentially cost the station £1million.

He says: 'I had always believed Gecas to be involved in war crimes, but when I returned from Lithuania I was convinced he was a murderer, responsible for thousands of deaths.'

'Happily, a year later, one of Scotland's top Law Lords would agree with me and condemn him as a war criminal.'

But Mr Murray, who is preparing to deliver a lecture on one of the most defining cases of his career, said: 'Sadly, in the end, he would not be brought to book for his actions.'

'However, I did succeed in exposing him for who and what he truly was – a monster who emerged from the darkness of war to make his home in Scotland, becoming a British citizen in 1959. It is a truly remarkable story of a man who literally got away with murder – by dying before he could be brought to justice.'

The story begins in Lithuania, where Antanas Gecevicus was born in 1916 to a well-to-do family of landowners.

He graduated from the Lithuanian Military Academy in 1937 and was commissioned as a second lieutenant.

When the Nazis invaded Lithuania in June 1941, he signed up to a German-sponsored battalion established in Kaunas and became a platoon commander.

The Nazis regarded Lithuanian collaborators as part of the Final Solu-



Guest house: Gecas' Edinburgh B&B

tion. On joining the battalion, Gecas, a German speaker, claimed to belong to 'an old German family' and pledged allegiance to 'the military success of the Reich and the greater glory of Adolf Hitler'.

The duty of the Schutzmannschaft units was simple – to eradicate Jews. They were ordered to make Jews 'disappear without a remnant'.

Gecas' unit was one of the most notorious, gaining a particular reputation for viciousness. Its 'crowning glory' was the slaughter of 8,000 Jews in a single town.

MR Murray says: 'Sitting in the homes of these old men, listening to them recount the chilling details of mass murder, is something that has stayed with me ever since. The barbarity and inhumanity of it all was beyond belief.'

'Witnesses told me how they would round up thousands of Lithuanian Jews, execute them and bury them in mass graves. Gecas would climb down into the pits, striding over the dead and dying, searching for signs of life, which he would extinguish with a bullet from his revolver.'

'Sitting in Juozas Alexsynas' remote cottage, I listened with horror as he laid bare the true scale of his crimes.'

'I was in a room barely 12ft square, with fading, colourless wallpaper. I shall never forget the scene. He and others like him had been brought to justice. Alexsynas had served 25 years in a Soviet labour camp. The scale of what they did defies description.'

'I was particularly horrified when he described in detail how he had murdered a child of ten or 11 because the boy refused to line up with the others by the side of a mass grave. He dragged the child away and, well, I don't think we need say any more.'

'And time and time again, Gecas, as we knew him, was named. I was left in no doubt he was a killer and a war criminal of some magnitude who played an active role in genocide.'

'Witnesses said he moved among the dead and dying, dispatching anyone who survived the first volley.'

Gecas obviously found favour with his masters in Berlin. He was awarded the Iron Cross for his 'service' to the Third Reich. But the tide of war was