

The death squad

Nazi who ran an Edinburgh B&B



To his neighbours, he seemed a respectable businessman – but decades earlier he had overseen the slaughter of thousands of Jews

turning and by the summer of 1944 his days as a Nazi hireling were numbered. His battalion was dissolved and he was transferred to the Italian front. In October, Gecas and 120 men under his command surrendered to the Americans and were sent to a PoW camp.

A month later, now claiming to belong to 'ancient Polish nobility', Gecas wrote to the commander of Polish forces in Italy, asking to be

allowed to serve in his Army. His wish was granted and, bizarrely, Gecas ended the war on the side of the Allies.

Mr Murray says: 'He must have changed his name at some point after he arrived in Italy. What we know for certain is that he was in Scotland by 1947.'

Gecas was intelligent and resourceful. He went to work for the National Coal Board and did a

management course at Heriot-Watt University, enjoying a successful career as an engineer.

He had been in Scotland for 35 years when the stories of his past began to emerge. The first hints that he had a despicable past came in 1982, when his name began to be mentioned during the trials of alleged war criminals in the US and the Soviet Union.

That same year, US war crime

prosecutors visited Edinburgh and interviewed him. Gecas, then aged 66 and a father of two grown-up children, steadfastly denied he had committed war crimes – but he did admit that he had been attached to the infamous death squads.

Prosecutors could not prove his guilt but there would be further revelations of his involvement. By 1986, he had been placed on an international wanted list by Nazi

Exposed: Antanas Gecevicus as a young Nazi and as law-abiding Edinburgh resident Anton Gecas

hunters at the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Israel.

Mr Murray says: 'In spite of everything, successive governments refused to act. Margaret Thatcher, for example, made it clear she was not interested in pursuing any more war criminals. She believed there was insufficient evidence to justify it. She was, of course, wrong in that respect.'

In 1987, however, the British Government bowed to pressure from international Jewish organisations and set up a criminal inquiry.

But it was no more than a PR exercise and, despite 17 alleged Nazi war criminals being identified in the UK, none were brought to justice.

Mr Murray says: 'I don't believe there was anything sinister about the reluctance to act.'

'It was suggested Gecas evaded justice for so long because he was a former member of the British intelligence services. I don't believe that.'

'I just think that because so much time had passed, there was a lack of any kind of will to do anything about it. However, many foreign Governments would maintain their interest and he was always on the radar.'

It was that which prompted STV to make the documentary, which was first broadcast in 1987.

GECAS, who refused to take part in the programme, remained tight-lipped – but two years later, when the documentary was to be repeated, he sued.

Mr Murray says: 'I had taken the decision before the first broadcast that we had a solid defence. I believed that – for it would have been a horrendous libel to call someone a war criminal and mass murderer without being able to back it up.'

'I believed that there was more than ample evidence to establish what he was and that he should have to face justice.'

'I went to Lithuania to find more witnesses to prove that.'

'The lawyer in me was motivated to protect my client. As a person, I really wanted to expose this man and lay him bare for all the world to see. I was successful in both ambitions.'

'In 1992, Lord Milligan agreed. His Lordship's judgment ran to 194 pages and the bottom line was that he was satisfied Gecas was guilty of war crimes.'

'Meanwhile, the pressure on him was mounting. The Soviets had warrants for his extradition – but unfortunately there was no treaty through which to enforce them.'

'And by the time the tide was turning and he faced the serious possibility of being returned to Lithuania to stand trial, he was too ill to travel.'

In September 2001, after suffering two strokes, Gecas died at the age of 85 in Edinburgh's Liberton Hospital – a peaceful death which had been denied his victims.

Writing in the *Baltic Times*, Lithuanian journalist Geoffrey Vasiliauskas was in no doubt about Gecas's guilt. 'Another Lithuanian Nazi suspect beats the hangman's noose,' he said.

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Jerusalem, who had tracked Gecas for years, says: 'I was very upset and frustrated that Gecas eluded justice and died unprosecuted.'

Mr Murray is, however, philosophical. He says: 'If I'm honest, I didn't have a sense of regret. I had done my part. The world knew Gecas was a war criminal and, in my mind, I always believed that he had gone on to face a higher authority than any court.'

● *Gecas: The War Criminal who Lived in Edinburgh* by Len Murray, Bearsden and Milngavie Members' Centre of the National Trust for Scotland, Milngavie Town Hall, Wednesday, March 19, 7.30pm. For information, contact keithmoody@tiscali.co.uk