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Summary

This is an interview with Samuel Bak, an internationally known painter, who spent several months in the Vilna ghetto as a young child. The interview looks back into this history and at his paintings as a child and adult. Samuel (Shmuel) Bak was born on August 12, 1933 in Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania). Bak was the only child of Yonas, a dental technician, and Mitya, a bookkeeper and art student. He was also the only grandchild of his two sets of grandparents who were also from Vilna. His family was very secular except for his mother's mother who was somewhat religious. He and his mother were among the relatively few Jews of Vilna who survived. He attributed his survival to luck, courage, and the help of others. His mother had two brothers, but he did not explain what happened to them. His father had one brother who escaped into Russia and later spent time in the gulag and one sister who was killed at Babi Yar.

His life began to gradually change after the Soviet invasion in 1939 following the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Bak was six years old. Refugees streamed in from other parts of Poland, and he had to share his bedroom with one of the refugees. When the Russians arrived the house of his maternal grandparents was "nationalized," and they moved in with his paternal grandparents. Bak remembered bombing and having to hide in the cellar of his house. After the German invasion of Russia in June 1941 the Vilna ghetto was established, but he and his mother were able to escape before the ghetto was hermetically closed. His great aunt found a place in a convent for his mother and him to hide for about six months before the Nazis took it over. They returned to the ghetto after the major deportations. His grandparents were among those killed, probably at Ponary. When the ghetto was liquidated in September 1943 his family was sent to a labor camp that was about ten kilometers outside Vilna. He was in the labor camp for six months and hidden for three until liberation by the Russians in July 1944. His mother and father dramatically helped to rescue him as the Nazis were about to murder the children. Unfortunately, his father was killed shortly before liberation. His mother did not like Soviet rule and after about a year was able to escape to Poland. Bak did not speak of it, but at some point he and his mother made their way to the United States.

The interview also discussed Bak's life as a painter. Apparently, from the young age of three he was considered a child prodigy. By the time he came to the Vilna ghetto (he was almost nine) he was already known by some and was encouraged to show his paintings. The paintings he did in the ghetto tended to have classical themes rather than those of ghetto life. Since he came to the United States he has exhibited in Lithuania and the United States. In fact, he was honored with a special Bak wing in the Jewish Museum of Vilnius. In the last part of the tape he surveyed the paintings he had in his home and talked about them. Some did have ghetto themes though painted somewhat abstractly.