

1  
00:00:00,000 --> 00:00:44,120

2  
00:00:44,120 --> 00:00:50,510  
Esther, tell me about the role  
of art for you in the ghetto.

3  
00:00:50,510 --> 00:00:53,280

4  
00:00:53,280 --> 00:00:55,860  
Especially for me?

5  
00:00:55,860 --> 00:01:02,310  
Well, we went into the  
ghetto at a period in my life

6  
00:01:02,310 --> 00:01:09,030  
where I was already an artist  
who has had many exhibitions

7  
00:01:09,030 --> 00:01:15,930  
and my day-to-day work  
was painting or drawing.

8  
00:01:15,930 --> 00:01:19,470  
Of course, the  
arrival of the Germans

9  
00:01:19,470 --> 00:01:28,140  
and all those terrible, terrible  
things that happened around me

10  
00:01:28,140 --> 00:01:31,530  
made me stop everything.

11  
00:01:31,530 --> 00:01:45,620  
The Germans marched into  
Kovno on the 21st June 1941.

12  
00:01:45,620 --> 00:01:52,730

And no one expected that because  
there was a nonaggression pact

13  
00:01:52,730 --> 00:02:01,280  
between Russia and  
Germany but probably

14  
00:02:01,280 --> 00:02:05,900  
it never was meant  
seriously is what I heard

15  
00:02:05,900 --> 00:02:09,560  
from time to time being said.

16  
00:02:09,560 --> 00:02:16,910  
And then when the German  
armies were disenchanted

17  
00:02:16,910 --> 00:02:25,700  
from invading England,  
they threw the armies

18  
00:02:25,700 --> 00:02:30,770  
in the direction  
of the bread basket

19  
00:02:30,770 --> 00:02:32,420  
as they call it of the Ukraine.

20  
00:02:32,420 --> 00:02:34,940

21  
00:02:34,940 --> 00:02:39,020  
And the first on their  
way was Lithuania.

22  
00:02:39,020 --> 00:02:42,830  
Lithuania has a  
border with Germany

23  
00:02:42,830 --> 00:02:46,580  
so that we had the first.

24

00:02:46,580 --> 00:02:50,210

Latvia got them a few  
days later and Estonia

25

00:02:50,210 --> 00:02:52,340

still a few days later.

26

00:02:52,340 --> 00:02:58,280

But I lived alone then.

27

00:02:58,280 --> 00:03:07,850

It was after a year that the  
Russians were in Lithuania

28

00:03:07,850 --> 00:03:10,400

and I had a really flourishing--

29

00:03:10,400 --> 00:03:20,440

30

00:03:20,440 --> 00:03:23,650

So you probably heard  
from other sources

31

00:03:23,650 --> 00:03:29,080

what happened in Lithuania,  
how everywhere there

32

00:03:29,080 --> 00:03:32,920

were terrible happenings.

33

00:03:32,920 --> 00:03:36,370

That Jews were  
slaughtered by Lithuanians

34

00:03:36,370 --> 00:03:41,110

even before the Germans came in.

35

00:03:41,110 --> 00:03:50,380

And when they came  
in, laws against Jews

36

00:03:50,380 --> 00:03:54,130  
went worse and worse every day.

37

00:03:54,130 --> 00:03:57,820  
But you are interested  
in the ghetto.

38

00:03:57,820 --> 00:04:02,380  
Before we go on, when the war  
started, did you hear things?

39

00:04:02,380 --> 00:04:05,980  
I mean you personally,  
where were you when it--

40

00:04:05,980 --> 00:04:08,680  
I was in Kovno.

41

00:04:08,680 --> 00:04:12,580  
I was in Kovno, where I went.

42

00:04:12,580 --> 00:04:15,330

43

00:04:15,330 --> 00:04:21,950  
In 1939 I was in  
Belgium on a study tour.

44

00:04:21,950 --> 00:04:24,620  
But what did you hear  
right at the moment

45

00:04:24,620 --> 00:04:26,100  
when the war started?

46

00:04:26,100 --> 00:04:29,990  
When the war started,  
the Lithuanians

47

00:04:29,990 --> 00:04:37,790  
started to kill Jews in the  
provinces, in the small towns.

48  
00:04:37,790 --> 00:04:43,800  
They accused the Jews of  
collaborating with the Soviets.

49  
00:04:43,800 --> 00:04:46,660  
How did you hear about  
that or what did you see?

50  
00:04:46,660 --> 00:04:49,410

51  
00:04:49,410 --> 00:04:55,630  
I was with a friend.

52  
00:04:55,630 --> 00:04:59,640  
We liked to be together.

53  
00:04:59,640 --> 00:05:04,050  
And some Lithuanians  
came to arrest us

54  
00:05:04,050 --> 00:05:15,480  
and took us to the Kovno  
prison and said that now they

55  
00:05:15,480 --> 00:05:21,840  
are going to take  
revenge on the Jews

56  
00:05:21,840 --> 00:05:28,350  
who had a big hand in what was  
done to the Lithuanian people

57  
00:05:28,350 --> 00:05:29,880  
by the communists.

58  
00:05:29,880 --> 00:05:36,360  
There were many communists among  
the Jews in the Baltic States,

59  
00:05:36,360 --> 00:05:41,640

and they really collaborated  
with the Lithuanians.

60  
00:05:41,640 --> 00:05:46,980  
But I had friends, communists,  
Lithuanian artists,

61  
00:05:46,980 --> 00:05:52,200  
and intellectuals, who  
said we had to choose

62  
00:05:52,200 --> 00:05:54,480  
between Germany or Russia.

63  
00:05:54,480 --> 00:06:00,300  
We couldn't survive the  
war without taking sides.

64  
00:06:00,300 --> 00:06:07,320  
So part of the Lithuanian  
people welcomed

65  
00:06:07,320 --> 00:06:12,180  
the Germans and the other part  
welcomed the Russians when

66  
00:06:12,180 --> 00:06:15,150  
they came in a year before.

67  
00:06:15,150 --> 00:06:21,480  
I even had a close friend,  
a Lithuanian artist,

68  
00:06:21,480 --> 00:06:31,500  
who was very, very active in  
communist life and her husband

69  
00:06:31,500 --> 00:06:34,200  
was a deputy in the Seimas--

70  
00:06:34,200 --> 00:06:37,410  
this is the parliament.

71

00:06:37,410 --> 00:06:45,060

And these people,  
most of them managed

72

00:06:45,060 --> 00:06:52,620

to flee Lithuania to Russia  
when the Germans came in.

73

00:06:52,620 --> 00:06:58,560

But all the nationalists, among  
them painters and intellectuals

74

00:06:58,560 --> 00:07:02,220

and even Jews who were  
Zionists, were in prison

75

00:07:02,220 --> 00:07:06,870

during the Russian  
occupation of Lithuania

76

00:07:06,870 --> 00:07:13,500

so that the whole country was  
divided, very much divided.

77

00:07:13,500 --> 00:07:20,550

But many Jews went  
out from the city

78

00:07:20,550 --> 00:07:25,110

to reach the Russian border  
to flee from the Germans,

79

00:07:25,110 --> 00:07:29,580

but the Russians had  
closed to the border

80

00:07:29,580 --> 00:07:34,200

so they came back to  
find in many cases

81

00:07:34,200 --> 00:07:39,570

that their flats were taken  
by Germans or by others.

82  
00:07:39,570 --> 00:07:44,820  
Anyway, there was a  
decision that after what

83  
00:07:44,820 --> 00:07:49,440  
happened between the  
Jews and the Lithuanians

84  
00:07:49,440 --> 00:07:53,220  
they would not tolerate  
that Jews would live

85  
00:07:53,220 --> 00:08:02,520  
in the city of Kovno and  
the part of Kovno that

86  
00:08:02,520 --> 00:08:05,910  
lay on the other  
side of the river

87  
00:08:05,910 --> 00:08:09,870  
Viliya was designated  
as a ghetto

88  
00:08:09,870 --> 00:08:17,070  
and all the Jews had to leave  
town by the 15th of August.

89  
00:08:17,070 --> 00:08:19,770

90  
00:08:19,770 --> 00:08:29,040  
And I very much wanted to do  
some drawings of that exodus,

91  
00:08:29,040 --> 00:08:34,090  
but it was really dangerous  
to be in the streets.

92  
00:08:34,090 --> 00:08:40,080  
I could have taken a view  
from the mountain, yes,



93

00:08:40,080 --> 00:08:44,740

but we were afraid to  
go out into the street.

94

00:08:44,740 --> 00:08:48,930

I thought maybe I will  
reconstruct it in my memory,

95

00:08:48,930 --> 00:08:52,500

but as I told you, I  
don't have the talent

96

00:08:52,500 --> 00:08:54,435

of drawing from memory.

97

00:08:54,435 --> 00:08:56,950

98

00:08:56,950 --> 00:09:02,850

So we philosophized that  
the war would be over

99

00:09:02,850 --> 00:09:06,450

and we would never have  
to leave our homes,

100

00:09:06,450 --> 00:09:09,690

but of course  
everything happened.

101

00:09:09,690 --> 00:09:17,490

This is where I learned the  
most terrible things that you

102

00:09:17,490 --> 00:09:23,370

think maybe they will not happen  
they really happen in there.

103

00:09:23,370 --> 00:09:25,950

Most horrible form.

104

00:09:25,950 --> 00:09:30,900

105

00:09:30,900 --> 00:09:37,050

I had the luck to be  
together with a neighbor

106

00:09:37,050 --> 00:09:40,920

with whom we became  
friendly during the time

107

00:09:40,920 --> 00:09:45,030

we had to be inside.

108

00:09:45,030 --> 00:09:59,850

And we had to find living space,  
eight quadratmeters to each,

109

00:09:59,850 --> 00:10:03,310

so that in a room there should  
be three to four people,

110

00:10:03,310 --> 00:10:08,230

yes, and I was lucky  
to be with friends.

111

00:10:08,230 --> 00:10:12,070

In our apartment  
of three rooms I

112

00:10:12,070 --> 00:10:14,215

think there were  
15 people or so.

113

00:10:14,215 --> 00:10:17,480

114

00:10:17,480 --> 00:10:22,940

My sister, with her  
husband and child,

115

00:10:22,940 --> 00:10:24,790

they went to another place.

116  
00:10:24,790 --> 00:10:30,110  
I had an aunt yet and cousins  
from the provinces who

117  
00:10:30,110 --> 00:10:33,170  
lived with her and I  
didn't go with them,

118  
00:10:33,170 --> 00:10:34,730  
I did go with my friends.

119  
00:10:34,730 --> 00:10:37,440

120  
00:10:37,440 --> 00:10:41,510  
And the days in  
the ghetto started

121  
00:10:41,510 --> 00:10:44,360  
we were encroached there.

122  
00:10:44,360 --> 00:10:50,150  
We were closed up  
by barbed wire.

123  
00:10:50,150 --> 00:10:54,980  
And there were seven  
entrances to the ghetto.

124  
00:10:54,980 --> 00:11:01,680  
And during the first week  
we were completely isolated.

125  
00:11:01,680 --> 00:11:06,500  
And then the Germans  
decided to use

126  
00:11:06,500 --> 00:11:10,970  
the working force of the Jews.

127  
00:11:10,970 --> 00:11:25,080

128

00:11:25,080 --> 00:11:32,160

Yes, the Germans demanded of the  
Jews to choose representatives

129

00:11:32,160 --> 00:11:42,870

and to form a Council of Elders  
an Aeltestenrat They choose

130

00:11:42,870 --> 00:11:47,850

the prominent lawyers  
and physicians,

131

00:11:47,850 --> 00:11:56,400

and when it came to choose  
the chief representative,

132

00:11:56,400 --> 00:11:59,670

no one wanted the  
responsibility.

133

00:11:59,670 --> 00:12:06,330

So at last Dr. Elkes, who was  
a famous physician in Kovno,

134

00:12:06,330 --> 00:12:12,150

very, very honored, he  
took the responsibility

135

00:12:12,150 --> 00:12:19,380

of being the head of the Council  
of Elders, of the Aeltestenrat.

136

00:12:19,380 --> 00:12:25,140

He was a very  
proud, tall person,

137

00:12:25,140 --> 00:12:33,070

and he even knew how to  
talk with the Germans

138

00:12:33,070 --> 00:12:35,186

and be respected.

139  
00:12:35,186 --> 00:12:38,160

140  
00:12:38,160 --> 00:12:43,800  
And I knew several  
of those people

141  
00:12:43,800 --> 00:12:47,310  
who were in the  
Council of Elders

142  
00:12:47,310 --> 00:12:50,760  
because I was a stranger in  
Kovno, a complete stranger.

143  
00:12:50,760 --> 00:12:54,390  
I came to visit my sister  
who had just a baby,

144  
00:12:54,390 --> 00:12:58,620  
and as I was in Europe  
and it was the summer,

145  
00:12:58,620 --> 00:13:04,710  
and I was invited  
by my uncles to pass

146  
00:13:04,710 --> 00:13:17,100  
the summer in the  
country, so I was around.

147  
00:13:17,100 --> 00:13:23,250  
But I had stayed  
a year in Kovno.

148  
00:13:23,250 --> 00:13:28,900  
And I couldn't go back to  
Belgium as I had planned.

149  
00:13:28,900 --> 00:13:34,980  
And I had an exhibition of

Palestine pictures with me

150

00:13:34,980 --> 00:13:39,510

that I planned to exhibit in  
Belgium where my professor had

151

00:13:39,510 --> 00:13:41,560

promised to help me.

152

00:13:41,560 --> 00:13:46,680

But as I was stranded  
in Kovno I wanted

153

00:13:46,680 --> 00:13:54,780

to work so I got myself  
inscribed in the local academy.

154

00:13:54,780 --> 00:14:01,860

So I had models and I could  
go and continue my work.

155

00:14:01,860 --> 00:14:06,600

And I had an exhibition  
at the Lithuanian artists'

156

00:14:06,600 --> 00:14:11,280

house of my Palestine  
pictures, and many

157

00:14:11,280 --> 00:14:15,540

of the Jews and the Jewish  
schools came to visit.

158

00:14:15,540 --> 00:14:18,120

And these were my only contacts.

159

00:14:18,120 --> 00:14:23,700

And it happened so that  
in the Council of Elders

160

00:14:23,700 --> 00:14:29,790

there were a few people that  
I knew from my exhibition,

161  
00:14:29,790 --> 00:14:36,420  
so I confided in them  
that I was deeply

162  
00:14:36,420 --> 00:14:40,710  
fascinated for what  
I saw in the ghetto

163  
00:14:40,710 --> 00:14:46,040  
and I would like to draw some  
scenes if they could help me,

164  
00:14:46,040 --> 00:14:51,990  
if they knew people from  
whose windows you saw things.

165  
00:14:51,990 --> 00:14:58,320  
And really some of these people,  
for instance Dr. Rabinovitch,

166  
00:14:58,320 --> 00:15:04,920  
is responsible for the  
raid on the potato field.

167  
00:15:04,920 --> 00:15:15,030  
He saw it from his window at the  
house of the Council of Elders

168  
00:15:15,030 --> 00:15:21,000  
and I had asked him to  
tell me about it because I

169  
00:15:21,000 --> 00:15:24,420  
wanted to draw that scene.

170  
00:15:24,420 --> 00:15:30,570  
And the house of the  
elders was very nearby

171  
00:15:30,570 --> 00:15:34,590  
where I lived, and he  
came and he said, Esther,

172  
00:15:34,590 --> 00:15:40,830  
we have a raid on a potato  
field just from my window.

173  
00:15:40,830 --> 00:15:43,110  
So I went with him  
with my paper--

174  
00:15:43,110 --> 00:15:45,360  
I still had my material--

175  
00:15:45,360 --> 00:15:49,050  
and I did it in a few hours.

176  
00:15:49,050 --> 00:15:56,040  
And people were going around  
there and milling around there

177  
00:15:56,040 --> 00:15:58,110  
and they saw me  
drawing, or somebody

178  
00:15:58,110 --> 00:16:00,960  
took the took the  
drawing from me

179  
00:16:00,960 --> 00:16:05,370  
and went to show it  
during the conference

180  
00:16:05,370 --> 00:16:08,130  
of the Council of Elders.

181  
00:16:08,130 --> 00:16:11,160  
And he brought it  
back to me and said

182  
00:16:11,160 --> 00:16:14,790  
that everybody was  
very much impressed

183



00:16:14,790 --> 00:16:19,140  
and they asked me  
to go on with it.

184  
00:16:19,140 --> 00:16:23,620  
And, well, I went  
to several places.

185  
00:16:23,620 --> 00:16:26,920  
And then when  
things calmed down,

186  
00:16:26,920 --> 00:16:32,560  
Mr. Tory, who was secretary  
of the Council of Elders,

187  
00:16:32,560 --> 00:16:38,230  
invited me for an  
interview and told me

188  
00:16:38,230 --> 00:16:41,710  
that the Council  
of Elders will help

189  
00:16:41,710 --> 00:16:48,130  
me to continue with  
this work as it

190  
00:16:48,130 --> 00:16:51,580  
is very important  
for the archives

191  
00:16:51,580 --> 00:16:54,460  
and that the Germans  
have taken away

192  
00:16:54,460 --> 00:17:00,820  
all the photographic equipment  
so that this was the only way

193  
00:17:00,820 --> 00:17:03,520  
to preserve some of the views.

194

00:17:03,520 --> 00:17:07,869

I accepted, of course,  
because this is naturally

195

00:17:07,869 --> 00:17:10,540

what I did best, yes.

196

00:17:10,540 --> 00:17:14,020

It was not illustrations  
and it was not graphic work,

197

00:17:14,020 --> 00:17:19,510

it was what I did the  
best, drawing from nature.

198

00:17:19,510 --> 00:17:23,800

And I started to go to  
places, and from time to time

199

00:17:23,800 --> 00:17:30,070

he called me to take  
me to places where

200

00:17:30,070 --> 00:17:33,910

by my own initiative  
I couldn't have gotten

201

00:17:33,910 --> 00:17:36,790

because you needed  
a certain permit,

202

00:17:36,790 --> 00:17:39,710

or places were closed down.

203

00:17:39,710 --> 00:17:43,975

So for instance, the  
remains of the hospital.

204

00:17:43,975 --> 00:17:47,680

205

00:17:47,680 --> 00:17:55,600

The Germans burned it down

with all the people in it

206

00:17:55,600 --> 00:18:00,590

because there were a  
few cases of typhus.

207

00:18:00,590 --> 00:18:05,560

So all the patients and all  
the doctors and all the nurses

208

00:18:05,560 --> 00:18:09,100

were burned down  
with a building.

209

00:18:09,100 --> 00:18:16,480

And then part of the  
ghetto was torn off

210

00:18:16,480 --> 00:18:23,710

from the territory of  
the ghetto and 1,000 Jews

211

00:18:23,710 --> 00:18:26,350

were marched off to the fort.

212

00:18:26,350 --> 00:18:29,470

The Germans told them  
that they had taken them

213

00:18:29,470 --> 00:18:32,560

to other working places, but--

214

00:18:32,560 --> 00:18:35,020

Of course, we tried  
to believe and we

215

00:18:35,020 --> 00:18:40,060

believed because no one could no  
one could understand that they

216

00:18:40,060 --> 00:18:43,990

took people and then just  
shot them in the hundreds,

217  
00:18:43,990 --> 00:18:48,850  
in the thousands,  
even that it happened

218  
00:18:48,850 --> 00:18:51,680  
a few kilometers from us.

219  
00:18:51,680 --> 00:18:55,240  
It was inconceivable,  
because after all, we

220  
00:18:55,240 --> 00:19:01,030  
lived in Europe after the  
war, after the World War.

221  
00:19:01,030 --> 00:19:06,970  
Germany was conceived  
by us as one

222  
00:19:06,970 --> 00:19:09,760  
of the most cultured countries.

223  
00:19:09,760 --> 00:19:11,650  
We just couldn't believe it.

224  
00:19:11,650 --> 00:19:13,930  
We believed what  
the Germans told us,

225  
00:19:13,930 --> 00:19:16,850  
what we wanted to believe.

226  
00:19:16,850 --> 00:19:23,720  
And it went on through the  
years and it goes on till today

227  
00:19:23,720 --> 00:19:29,200  
because it is inconceivable that  
such horrors are being done.

228  
00:19:29,200 --> 00:19:32,470

229

00:19:32,470 --> 00:19:34,510

When you went to the hospital--

230

00:19:34,510 --> 00:19:42,820

Yes, there were many  
abandoned houses.

231

00:19:42,820 --> 00:19:47,380

It was already in winter and  
there was a great shortage

232

00:19:47,380 --> 00:19:54,310

of firewood, so the Council  
of Elders with Mr. Tory

233

00:19:54,310 --> 00:19:59,620

arranged for a permit  
to go and collect books

234

00:19:59,620 --> 00:20:06,880

and whatever could be burned  
in the abandoned houses.

235

00:20:06,880 --> 00:20:10,930

And they got a permit  
to go over the street,

236

00:20:10,930 --> 00:20:12,680

just over the street.

237

00:20:12,680 --> 00:20:17,620

This was the bridge that  
was built over that street.

238

00:20:17,620 --> 00:20:22,360

And that bridge stood  
there for two months

239

00:20:22,360 --> 00:20:28,750

and still I succeeded  
in drawing it, yes.

240

00:20:28,750 --> 00:20:32,860

If I had waited, I couldn't  
have done the bridge.

241

00:20:32,860 --> 00:20:35,920

And we came to the spot,  
and he took me And.

242

00:20:35,920 --> 00:20:39,880

He said, Esther, I want  
you to make a few drawings

243

00:20:39,880 --> 00:20:42,820

of the burned hospital.

244

00:20:42,820 --> 00:20:45,250

They went to the  
houses to collect

245

00:20:45,250 --> 00:20:48,700

and I stood in the street  
and started to sketch.

246

00:20:48,700 --> 00:20:51,490

And then a Lithuanian  
came over and said,

247

00:20:51,490 --> 00:20:54,370

you stop it immediately.

248

00:20:54,370 --> 00:20:59,846

So Tory heard him and he  
came over and I stopped.

249

00:20:59,846 --> 00:21:04,040

Then when he went away  
I went up to a house

250

00:21:04,040 --> 00:21:08,020

and I found some place from  
where I did two drawings

251

00:21:08,020 --> 00:21:13,870  
and they are among the drawings  
reproduced in my album.

252

00:21:13,870 --> 00:21:19,870  
And then there was  
another important thing.

253

00:21:19,870 --> 00:21:23,875  
There was a room in  
the ghetto where--

254

00:21:23,875 --> 00:21:26,530

255

00:21:26,530 --> 00:21:29,050  
Tell me about drawing  
the bridge first.

256

00:21:29,050 --> 00:21:30,580  
About drawing the bridge?

257

00:21:30,580 --> 00:21:33,220  
All right.

258

00:21:33,220 --> 00:21:36,310  
Well, I went around  
and asked people

259

00:21:36,310 --> 00:21:39,250  
how can I get to do the bridge?

260

00:21:39,250 --> 00:21:45,550  
And at that time I did  
some volunteer work

261

00:21:45,550 --> 00:21:57,250  
by collecting clothes and water  
and the food for the orphanage.

262

00:21:57,250 --> 00:22:01,120  
And there was a young

man working there

263

00:22:01,120 --> 00:22:03,670  
who received what we brought.

264

00:22:03,670 --> 00:22:07,330  
And then I met him at the  
house of Dr. Rabinovitch

265

00:22:07,330 --> 00:22:11,410  
because his wife had told me  
that she had friends living

266

00:22:11,410 --> 00:22:14,920  
near the bridge and there  
I met that young man

267

00:22:14,920 --> 00:22:17,830  
and he said, all  
right, I'll take you.

268

00:22:17,830 --> 00:22:23,820  
And tomorrow he took me to one  
place and I drew it from both.

269

00:22:23,820 --> 00:24:27,243