

Esther, tell me about the role of art for you in the ghetto.

Especially for me? Well, we went into the ghetto at a period in my life where I was already an artist who has had many exhibitions and my day-to-day work was painting or drawing. Of course, the arrival of the Germans and all those terrible, terrible things that happened around me made me stop everything. The Germans marched into Kovno on the 21st June 1941. And no one expected that because there was a nonaggression pact between Russia and Germany but probably it never was meant seriously is what I heard from time to time being said.

And then when the German armies were disenchanted from invading England, they threw the armies in the direction of the bread basket as they call it of the Ukraine. And the first on their way was Lithuania. Lithuania has a border with Germany so that we had the first. Latvia got them a few days later and Estonia still a few days later.

But I lived alone then. It was after a year that the Russians were in Lithuania and I had a really flourishing--

So you probably heard from other sources what happened in Lithuania, how everywhere there were terrible happenings. That Jews were slaughtered by Lithuanians even before the Germans came in. And when they came in, laws against Jews went worse and worse every day. But you are interested in the ghetto.

Before we go on, when the war started, did you hear things? I mean you personally, where were you when it--

I was in Kovno. I was in Kovno, where I went. In 1939 I was in Belgium on a study tour.

But what did you hear right at the moment when the war started?

When the war started, the Lithuanians started to kill Jews in the provinces, in the small towns. They accused the Jews of collaborating with the Soviets.

How did you hear about that or what did you see?

I was with a friend. We liked to be together. And some Lithuanians came to arrest us and took us to the Kovno prison and said that now they are going to take revenge on the Jews who had a big hand in what was done to the Lithuanian people by the communists. There were many communists among the Jews in the Baltic States, and they really collaborated with the Lithuanians. But I had friends, communists, Lithuanian artists, and intellectuals, who said we had to choose between Germany or Russia. We couldn't survive the war without taking sides.

So part of the Lithuanian people welcomed the Germans and the other part welcomed the Russians when they came in a year before. I even had a close friend, a Lithuanian artist, who was very, very active in communist life and her husband was a deputy in the Seimas-- this is the parliament. And these people, most of them managed to flee Lithuania to Russia when the Germans came in.

But all the nationalists, among them painters and intellectuals and even Jews who were Zionists, were in prison during the Russian occupation of Lithuania so that the whole country was divided, very much divided. But many Jews went out from the city to reach the Russian border to flee from the Germans, but the Russians had closed to the border so they came back to find in many cases that their flats were taken by Germans or by others.

Anyway, there was a decision that after what happened between the Jews and the Lithuanians they would not tolerate that Jews would live in the city of Kovno and the part of Kovno that lay on the other side of the river Viliya was designated as a ghetto and all the Jews had to leave town by the 15th of August. And I very much wanted to do some drawings of that exodus, but it was really dangerous to be in the streets. I could have taken a view from the mountain, yes, but we were afraid to go out into the street. I thought maybe I will reconstruct it in my memory, but as I told you, I don't have the talent of drawing from memory.

So we philosophized that the war would be over and we would never have to leave our homes, but of course everything

happened. This is where I learned the most terrible things that you think maybe they will not happen they really happen in there. Most horrible form.

I had the luck to be together with a neighbor with whom we became friendly during the time we had to be inside. And we had to find living space, eight quadratmeters to each, so that in a room there should be three to four people, yes, and I was lucky to be with friends. In our apartment of three rooms I think there were 15 people or so. My sister, with her husband and child, they went to another place. I had an aunt yet and cousins from the provinces who lived with her and I didn't go with them, I did go with my friends.

And the days in the ghetto started we were encroached there. We were closed up by barbed wire. And there were seven entrances to the ghetto. And during the first week we were completely isolated. And then the Germans decided to use the working force of the Jews.

Yes, the Germans demanded of the Jews to choose representatives and to form a Council of Elders an Aeltestenrat They choose the prominent lawyers and physicians, and when it came to choose the chief representative, no one wanted the responsibility. So at last Dr. Elkes, who was a famous physician in Kovno, very, very honored, he took the responsibility of being the head of the Council of Elders, of the Aeltestenrat. He was a very proud, tall person, and he even knew how to talk with the Germans and be respected.

And I knew several of those people who were in the Council of Elders because I was a stranger in Kovno, a complete stranger. I came to visit my sister who had just a baby, and as I was in Europe and it was the summer, and I was invited by my uncles to pass the summer in the country, so I was around. But I had stayed a year in Kovno.

And I couldn't go back to Belgium as I had planned. And I had an exhibition of Palestine pictures with me that I planned to exhibit in Belgium where my professor had promised to help me. But as I was stranded in Kovno I wanted to work so I got myself inscribed in the local academy. So I had models and I could go and continue my work. And I had an exhibition at the Lithuanian artists' house of my Palestine pictures, and many of the Jews and the Jewish schools came to visit. And these were my only contacts.

And it happened so that in the Council of Elders there were a few people that I knew from my exhibition, so I confided in them that I was deeply fascinated for what I saw in the ghetto and I would like to draw some scenes if they could help me, if they knew people from whose windows you saw things.

And really some of these people, for instance Dr. Rabinovitch, is responsible for the raid on the potato field. He saw it from his window at the house of the Council of Elders and I had asked him to tell me about it because I wanted to draw that scene. And the house of the elders was very nearby where I lived, and he came and he said, Esther, we have a raid on a potato field just from my window.

So I went with him with my paper-- I still had my material-- and I did it in a few hours. And people were going around there and milling around there and they saw me drawing, or somebody took the took the drawing from me and went to show it during the conference of the Council of Elders. And he brought it back to me and said that everybody was very much impressed and they asked me to go on with it.

And, well, I went to several places. And then when things calmed down, Mr. Tory, who was secretary of the Council of Elders, invited me for an interview and told me that the Council of Elders will help me to continue with this work as it is very important for the archives and that the Germans have taken away all the photographic equipment so that this was the only way to preserve some of the views. I accepted, of course, because this is naturally what I did best, yes. It was not illustrations and it was not graphic work, it was what I did the best, drawing from nature.

And I started to go to places, and from time to time he called me to take me to places where by my own initiative I couldn't have gotten because you needed a certain permit, or places were closed down. So for instance, the remains of the hospital. The Germans burned it down with all the people in it because there were a few cases of typhus. So all the patients and all the doctors and all the nurses were burned down with a building.

And then part of the ghetto was torn off from the territory of the ghetto and 1,000 Jews were marched off to the fort. The Germans told them that they had taken them to other working places, but-- Of course, we tried to believe and we believed because no one could no one could understand that they took people and then just shot them in the hundreds, in the thousands, even that it happened a few kilometers from us.

It was inconceivable, because after all, we lived in Europe after the war, after the World War. Germany was conceived by us as one of the most cultured countries. We just couldn't believe it. We believed what the Germans told us, what we wanted to believe. And it went on through the years and it goes on till today because it is inconceivable that such horrors are being done.

When you went to the hospital--

Yes, there were many abandoned houses. It was already in winter and there was a great shortage of firewood, so the Council of Elders with Mr. Tory arranged for a permit to go and collect books and whatever could be burned in the abandoned houses. And they got a permit to go over the street, just over the street. This was the bridge that was built over that street. And that bridge stood there for two months and still I succeeded in drawing it, yes. If I had waited, I couldn't have done the bridge.

And we came to the spot, and he took me And. He said, Esther, I want you to make a few drawings of the burned hospital. They went to the houses to collect and I stood in the street and started to sketch. And then a Lithuanian came over and said, you stop it immediately. So Tory heard him and he came over and I stopped. Then when he went away I went up to a house and I found some place from where I did two drawings and they are among the drawings reproduced in my album.

And then there was another important thing. There was a room in the ghetto where--

Tell me about drawing the bridge first.

About drawing the bridge? All right. Well, I went around and asked people how can I get to do the bridge? And at that time I did some volunteer work by collecting clothes and water and the food for the orphanage. And there was a young man working there who received what we brought. And then I met him at the house of Dr. Rabinovitch because his wife had told me that she had friends living near the bridge and there I met that young man and he said, all right, I'll take you. And tomorrow he took me to one place and I drew it from both.