

Camera 14.

Can you tell me what life in Poland was like before the war started?

My family came to Poland from Russia. Escaped in '24, 1924. And we settled in Vilna, which was not too far from the Russian border. My father was a physicist. And he was raised in Russia. And he believed that the moment the system in Russia will change, we will be back in Russia. But we never went back to Russia.

And Poland was very different. We felt in Poland that we are Jews. That we are second-rate citizens. And I, for me, it was a very painful and a very lasting realization. Because I didn't feel it in my hometown in [PLACE NAME].

But Vilna had a very large-- a third of Vilna were Jews, a third were Poles, and a third of Vilna were Belarusian, Russians and Lithuanians. It was a very cultured city. It had a big university. It had many conservators. And I had to learn a new language, which was Yiddish. And I had to learn a new language, which was the language of the country, Polish.

And I was very fascinated with the new experience. The experience of the Civil War in Russia affected me. I always looked for some disaster, for some changing of armies, for some part of the city burning. But the war was over. And slowly, slowly I got adjusted to a new reality.

It was very important to me that at a very young age, I started to paint. And since I was a very restless and a very unhappy child-- not because of my home, but because of the political and social situation in Russia --my teacher had a great deal of problems with me. And one day when I was in the lower grades, and I had difficulties with adjusting to a new language, she gave me a little piece of paper and said, draw. And that decided about my whole future.

I started to draw and I forgot about the whole world. And my teacher said, you never drew before? I said, no, but-- and then she came over with another teacher who was the art teacher in my school. He was a very interesting, a very unusual personality. He was, by profession, a soldier in the occupational forces of the Prussian army in Vilna.

And after the revolution when the army retreated, he stayed in Vilna and became a teacher in the Yiddish schools. I guess he became a teacher in the Yiddish school because he believed that we spoke a straight German accent. He [?] could ?] understand it. And in order to get adjusted to Yiddish, he used German words with a few Hebrew words in between. He was a very loving and a very unusual and a very creative person.

Can I stop you here? OK. Can you tell me where you were when World War II broke out? What were you doing? Who you were with?

After graduating from the University of Vilna, I went to Warsaw. And the last two years before the war I spent in Warsaw. When the war broke out, I waited to be mobilized. But I never got the card from the army because Warsaw was bombarded. The city started to get up in flames. And my landlady told me, what are you waiting for? You're a young man. You know what the Germans are going to do with you. I said, but I'm also a soldier of the Polish army. I waited for my card.

Well, she told me that she is working with a-- she was a doctor, dentist. She working with a Polish dentist. And she told me that her husband is working for the headquarters of the Polish army. It wouldn't be the resistance in Warsaw. And all young men should go to the Eastern border of Poland. So I took two or three paintings. And I said, well, wherever I go I'll show my paintings. I'll make a living. My wife, my first wife, was a nurse.

So we just packed and left the country, left the city. We didn't have any penny, because the bank were closed. The trains didn't move. So we walked out from the city. And outside of Warsaw we met many, many, many people. Most of the time, young people who didn't want to be captured by the Germans and went to the eastern part of Poland believing that some sort of resistance would be organized.

Where did we get food? Where did we get water? Where did we get places to sleep? The little towns on our way were burning and the people left them. They ran out. In the countryside, the peasants came out and they gave us food. They said take it, eat it. We don't want to wait with all our cows and pigs and horses for the German. You're our brothers. It was an atmosphere of fear and expectations. On the way, we were all the time bombarded by the German's Luftwaffe. Many people were killed.

Finally, we went to the eastern part of Poland, to the eastern and southern part of Poland. And at that time, we all of a sudden got the news that Poland will be divided between Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany. And we didn't know what to expect. We cross the river Bug and we ended up in the city of [? Rovna. ?]

Could you hang on a second? How are we doing on sound?

[INAUDIBLE].

What is that other [INAUDIBLE]?

OK, so let's go back to you knew that Poland was going to be divided by the Germans and the Soviets.

Shall I start from now?

Yeah.

Now, you were interested where we slept. We slept in the woods. We were young people. It was not too difficult. The most frightening thing was what's going to happen after the Germans capture us. But since we cross the Bug, we were in the power of the Russian marching forces.

As you know, I was born in Russia and I was educated in Poland. But I spoke fluent Russian and I became aware that the whole approach of the Russian army was, strangely enough, anti-England, anti-France, and pro-Germany. Germany is our ally and they didn't want to hear anything about the violence of the new system in Germany.

It was a very, very painful experience. I didn't have any money and my wife didn't have anything. We started to look for work. And there were big posters all over the city of Brest-Litovsk that writers, musicians, painters, actors would get a job, but they have to pass an exam. Since I was a painter, I decided that I would try to pass the exam and see what's going to be offered to me.

A delegation of Russian artists came from Minsk. Why from Minsk? Because this part of Poland was included in the Russian Republic of Byelorussia and the capital was Minsk. So the delegation, the Russian delegation came not from Moscow but came from Minsk. And we had to pass an exam. And the exam was very simple. We had a model and we were supposed to draw the model.

Since I was quite well-versed in the Russian literature and in the Soviet approach to art, I knew more or less what they expected from me. They expected to do almost precise, like a photograph. And I wanted to pass the exam because I wanted to work, so I did it.

I mention it because next to me was a famous Polish artist. And of course, he didn't know anything about the requirement of Socialist Realism. So he did a very beautiful drawing but in a stylized cubistic style. And I told him you won't pass the exam. And so he asked me why, don't you like my drawing? I say I love your drawing, but it is not good for propaganda. He didn't pass the exam, which was-- I passed the exam.

And so I got a little two rooms and I could get paint. You must realize that the Russian artists didn't have to his [? exposal ?] a free market where you can buy canvases and paint. He had to be a member of the union. And through the union he would get paint, he would get necessary materials, and he would get some support. So for the moment, we were very happy. We got two rooms. And I got canvases and paint. Then came the saddest part.

Let me interrupt you. I'm going to have to-- we're going to only need like 30-second or 20-second stories-- very short stories --and yet your emotional response.

All right.

And I have-- I need short answers, OK? So when did you go back to Vilna, you and your wife? Or how did you get-- you had to cross Bug River. Was it frozen, or?

I'll tell you, you'll have to cut my answers because when you reach 80, 85 years, everything is very long.

[LAUGHTER]

When you are 30, you can spit up. I traveled by using horses. I didn't travel by planes. So please forgive me. To make it short, I had to leave Brest-Litovsk because at a certain point, the Russian required from us to decide whether we want to go back to Poland or whether we want to stay in Russia. And if we want to stay in Russia, we had to accept Russian citizenship. That was one obstacle because I didn't want to become a Russian citizen.

The second obstacle was that we had to paint one of [? 18 ?] subjects. The [? 18 ?] subjects had to do with the life in Poland. And everything was very negative, very negative in the subject. I couldn't paint anything negative about Poland. Because Poland was defeated by a very evil force, by Germany. And though I had very many objections about the system in Poland, it was better, it was more noble than Germany.

So I said to one of the artists, I cannot paint any one of the subjects. And so the artist asked me-- I remember her name, [PERSONAL NAME], why don't? I said, I only paint flowers. I only paint still life. It was a lie. But anyway, they tried not to make any negative conclusions from my resistance. And I painted some still life and the background or some portraits anyway. They are chosen from the group of artists three artists, and I was one of them to go to Moscow.

And then, so I had-- I didn't know to go to Moscow or not. I didn't know. I knew that I didn't want to be a citizen. And all of a sudden, it was 12 o'clock at night. Somebody knocked at my door. And it was the artist. She was a female artist. She was a very lovely person. And her husband was [PERSONAL NAME]. Also a very lovely person. We never spoke about politics, but we became friends.

And she opened the door. And I remember it like it would have happened yesterday. "Please disappear. Run. You are in danger." I said, [PERSONAL NAME], why? She said, don't ask me. You are in danger. Take your wife and go to the train. And remember, if you are arrested and you mention my name, I'll denounce you. I'll tell that I always expected that you are a spy. Please run.

So I understood that somebody denounced me. For what? That I wasn't happy with the Soviets. That I was in Warsaw a member of the Socialist Party. That I didn't want to take citizenship. I don't know why they denounced me. It's very funny to think that this little boy who was, at that time, 22 years was a danger to Stalin. But that was the system. So we left everything and went to the train. Did I answer the question? Too long.

Yeah. But that's all right. That was good. It was a very good description. Yeah. Can you try and look at me? You seem to be looking over your left.

Because he got very interested. OK, I'll look at you.

The conversation is with me.

OK. I know. And so once you were Vilna, how did you live? What did you do?

Vilna was already, at that time, Lithuania. The Soviets took Vilna and gave it to Lithuania, and then took it back. That is a historical event. Because we tried to get to Vilna, but Vilna was Lithuania. So we crossed the border. And we were arrested by the Soviets because it was illegal to cross the border. And we were in jail. And in jail, everybody who was

arrested went to Siberia for seven years.

Why didn't I go to jail? Because I told my wife-- my first wife at that time --that we should, in order not enrage the Bolsheviks, we should say that we don't run from them to the Lithuanians but that we came from the Lithuanians to them. So we were fortunate.

The judge, he was a captain, said, oh, you like us. And instead of getting seven years, we were free. Even more, he wanted to know what my profession. And I said that I am a painter. So he asked me whether I need money. So I said no. So he said I know that painters are very bashful people. And they let us go.

So we went to another little town. And then we made a second attempt to cross the border. And we came to Vilna. So you can see life is full of miracles. But in the war, miracles are reality. A reality is, in itself, a miracle too. I came to Vilna. And a few days later, the Bolsheviks took Vilna again from the Lithuanians.

But in the meantime, I found out that there was a Japanese honorary consul who gave to the refugees many visas to Curacao, who was a Danish free colony and everybody could go to Curacao. But it was important that in order to get to Curacao, they had to cross Japanese territory. So he was kind enough to give a permit to cross Japanese territory. And if you had a permit to cross Japanese territory, you could apply to the NKVD for a permit to cross Siberia, to cross Russia. Do you get the complications?

Yes.

I didn't create them. History created them. And I am not responsible for history. So I tried to get a visa. But the consul didn't-- the consulate, the honorary consulate was closed and I couldn't get a visa. But I found out from my friends from the socialist movement from the Bund that many had two and three visas so they could share them with other people.

So I got a visa. But the visa didn't have my name, didn't have my photograph. So since I'm an artist, I put in another photograph. I forged the stamp. And my father was a physicist, so I created a chemical mixture and we took out the old name and put in my name and the name of my first wife. And that allowed us to go through Russia to Japan.

Now, in order to get a Russian visa, we had to go to the NKVD. Shall I continue?

Sure. But try and talk to me again.

OK, OK. I went to the NKVD. Everything in my passport was faked. Only my photograph and my name was real. I put in another city because nobody could leave Vilna. Because the Russians said, well, you're in Vilna. It's already a liberated city. Why do you want to run away? So we could only get a visa as refugees. So in my passport was written that I'm from some little town in Poland.

I walked in to the NKVD and to my dismay, the man at the table was a student whom I knew from Vilna. He was probably a communist. So he got the job of checking who is going to get a visa and who is not going to get a visa. He graduated from the same gymnasium as I, and he knew me quite well. So I said, that's my end or the end of me.

This I cannot foreshorten, because people survive because of politics and cruelty in concentration camp. Some human pulse is always ticking and ticking. And because of that, the world didn't come to an end. He looked at me. He recognized me. And he said, oh-- and he mentioned this little town. And said, OK. You don't want to live in Russia. Go ahead. Go ahead to the capital this country.

But he gave me the stamp. And I will never forget his name. I tried later to find out. His name is [PERSONAL NAME]. And because of him, I'm alive. He gave me the stamp. And he knew that he's committing a crime against his system and against his beliefs. But the human element was stronger.

And then, I got the visa for my wife, myself. And some other people for whom I falsified the documents got visas too. And then we cross Siberia on false documents. And we came and then to Vladivostok. And from Vladivostok, we

crossed with a Japanese freighter, [PERSONAL NAME]. We came to Japan to the city of Kobe.

Had you ever been to Japan before? Or what did you expect and what did you find when you got?

One word I would add. From the train, which crossed-- the train, it took about three days and three nights. Many people, many refugees disappeared. So probably the NKVD still checked who is dangerous and had to go to Siberia. And who is no danger there and had to go to the capitalistic countries because they're worthless anyway. Luckily enough, I was one of the worthless people. And I reached the shores of Japan.

And what did you expect Japan to be like? And what did you find when you got there? And how did you live? And what did you do?

I didn't know what to expect. It was so clean. It was like a painting of Vincent van Gogh-- little houses, beautiful skies. Two groups of people met us at the train. Russian Jewish refugees from the First World War settled in Japan, escaped from the Russian revolution, and became quite prosperous.

And a group of Japanese which decided they're our blood brothers. Because according to the Jewish history, 10 tribes-- in Israel, there were 12 tribes. 10 disappeared. We don't know what happened to them. They got assimilated. And two of the [INAUDIBLE] survived. So they decided they are-- there are many legends. Members of the disappearing 10 tribes. And we were very happily received by them, and received by the Russian Jews.

And we got some support from the Joint and from the colony of Jews. And Japan was so beautiful for the eye-- mountains, clean skies. But of course, our heart was with our relatives behind us. And the news were terrifying. And as a painter, how could I survive emotionally? That was more important than even physically.

So I got some money and went to a store to buy paint and paper. And the storekeeper didn't understand a word of Russian, of German, a few words of English. So some young man came over to me and he showed me a brush. And then he gave me a brush. He was Japanese. And he showed me the two brushes kiss each other to understand that he is a painter too. And he helped me to find the paint.

But in Japan, we waited for a possibility to go to Canada and to join the Canadian or the formation of the Polish army in Canada in order to fight the Nazis. But there was no contact. There was no communication with the other world. It was very clear that Japan is preparing for war. We saw Hitler's pictures. We saw German slogans. And we had a strange mixture that the country was preparing for war.

The old people were very nice. The young people were marching and screaming and yelling. And after spending six months in Japan, all of a sudden we were all taken by force to the ships and sent to Shanghai. We came to Shanghai and two days later, the attack on Pearl Harbor took place.

How did you [INAUDIBLE]?