

[TEST TONE] OK. So how did you react when the Japanese actually bombed Pearl Harbor?

We know the Japanese, by bombing Pearl Harbor, joined the Germans. Because the German already at that time not only occupied Poland, they also declared war on Russia. And we didn't know what's going to happen. We didn't know how we were going to survive. We didn't know how the Japanese will treat us. Everything was very, very confusing.

In Shanghai, there was, again, a large Russian colony of Russians. It was a very large. Much smaller, but very large Jewish colony. They were all refugees from the Civil War. And they were quite well-to-do.

There was also a huge colony of German Jews which escaped from Germany after Hitler came to power because Shanghai was a free city. You didn't need to have a visa in order to settle in Shanghai.

So it was really at that time an international city. You could find beggars which were in Russia before the war, counts, and nobility. You could find very rich people, which their business was opium. You could find people who came from America because they were in danger in America because they were-- we didn't know at that time the term mafia. Maybe didn't exist. But they were here, escaping from jail.

It was a colony. Very colorful for writers. But very difficult to find a niche in this colony. There were multimillionaires, there were criminals, there were forgers, there were spies, there were refugees, there were intellectuals, there were merchants, there were bankers, there were bandits, everything.

How did you live? Where did you live in Shanghai? Or how did you survive? And use the word Shanghai.

Yes we, the Polish refugees, consisted of many different groups. There were lawyers, there were writers, there were merchants. There were a whole yeshiva of religious Jews. We tried to get through all different channels with New York.

OK, sorry.

And with the channel.

Sorry, sorry.

The channel, the main--

Hold on, hold on, hold on. You have to talk to me, you keep talking over here.

I know.

And use the word Shanghai because we don't know. OK.

We tried to get in touch with the Jewish organizations in New York. And probably, they tried to get in touch with us, too. But we knew there was a law that no money from America could be sent to places which were occupied by enemies. So no money could be sent to Poland, even for the resistance movement. And no money could be sent to Shanghai, because it was occupied by the Japanese.

And we really couldn't survive in the beginning because it was a different country, a different language, a different situation. But we did get in touch. I cannot be precise, or whether somebody looked us up and tried to help us through Switzerland. And we got some support.

The Joint supported all the stateless refugees before the occupation. So they established some kitchens and some dwellings for the 30,000 German Jewish refugees. It was a very mixed up group. So it seems that they extended, from the help which they gave to the refugees before the occupation, to us.

We didn't get any money, but we had some meager funds to open kitchens and to rent very cheap rooms. That was crucial because after a month, two months, after a year, we got some jobs among the colonists, the European, and other citizens who lived in Shanghai.

Shanghai before the occupation had two very large settlements, a British settlement and a French settlement. And they were under the control of the British and the French embassies. But after the Japanese took over, they didn't have anything, any jurisdiction over their settlements.

But there were many Europeans who had stores, who had some professions. And through them, we did find some meager income. My wife got a job in the hospital. There was a very nice hospital created by the Jewish colony from Russia. And I started to get some work. There was a magazine, so I started to write some articles about art. A magazine in Russian.

And I started to try to get some commissions to paint paintings. Of course, nobody was interested in paintings. But I knew that everybody who is successful and prominent all over the world like to have his own face. And he thought, if it's painted well, and he has a smile, and he looks important, it'll end up in a famous museum, and he'll have eternity. So I did paint some portraits and I had a meager income.

You must realize that to eat twice a day or once a day is enough to survive. The main thing is not to be killed, not to be arrested, not to be threatened, not to be in jail. And since we weren't in jail, we did survive.

And the news from Europe were so devastating that nobody dared to complain about anything. Everything-- one meal, two meals, a little corner in a house was a gift from heaven. Because we knew that day by day, the Nazis were killing all we left behind, our families, our life, our cities, everything.

Of course, we were getting information from America. And they were devastating because the Japanese were moving, and moving, and moving, and one victory over another was in their grab.

But as far as America, you have to take it from a witness. We didn't doubt a minute that America will save us and the end defeat the Germans. We knew that they would defeat. And somehow, we had underground radios, and we found somebody who understood English, and we heard the speeches of Roosevelt. And we knew that we will survive unless the Japanese will kill us.

And then came a very sad moment when the Japanese, at least we heard that a U-boat of German Nazis came to Shanghai. And something started to change.

They left us alone in the beginning. They were so mean to the Chinese, and to the American, and English citizens that they left us alone. They didn't have time for us. And they were mean. All the Americans and all the British went to the camps. And the Chinese were humiliated terribly. And we were just shadows which they seemed not to see.

And then came a change, they created a ghetto for all the refugees. And we were forced to live in a ghetto. But it was nothing, nothing in comparison with the ghetto. So we could come out. Some Japanese were Nazis. The majority looked at us not with hatred. They fear for the Chinese was so strong. The premonition that they would lose the war was so strong, too, that they really didn't have time for us.

So we lived in the ghettos. They were very sad. But it was no comparison. I didn't live in the ghetto. Since my wife worked in the hospital, which was outside of the ghetto, I lived together with her. But I was the secretary of the union of the refugees. So I had the chance to come out from the ghetto and to go in into ghetto, and to do all the things which was necessary for the survival of the refugees.

We were a very close and very tight community. And we lived in the constant expectation that the war will come to an end. And this terrible premonition that our war will be won, but our life will be-- half of our life will be destroyed. And that's true.

Let me ask you. How long did you live in Shanghai? And how did you find out about the Holocaust and the atrocities that were happening? And also if you could tell me--

There were letters from Russia.

Wait.

Hold on, hold on.

Hold it. You also told me that when you actually found out about that there were Jews killed, that people in Shanghai committed suicide.

There were radios, there were information from America. There were. It came from different sources. I'll give you an example. I'll give you an example.

Got it. Hold on. You have to tell me what you're talking about. So you have to say, we found out about the Holocaust.

We found out that the German destroyed the whole Jewish community which consisted of 3 and 1/2 million in Poland. We found out. We couldn't believe it. But we found out. There were facts that came from Russia. They came from underground radios. They came from different sources.

But a crime, an international crime, cannot be hidden, like the crime which took place in Kosovo. You cannot hide it. We knew what happened. And we knew that we will--

How did people react when they found out?

Well, there were-- our life was cut in two. The memories were more alive than reality. Reality was just a period of waiting. It's like you sit in a railroad station and wait for your train. The time in the railroad station, in that time, the waiting time is almost minimal. It's what is going to happen later.

I tried to paint portraits, I tried to write, and everybody tried to function. But it was-- Life emotionally? What is the question? Try to repeat it to me. So I'll try to be as precise as possible.

The response to hearing about the Holocaust.

When we heard that in Eastern Europe is liquidated one Jewish colony after another, we felt that we lost everything we know, that we knew. But at the same time, we felt that our life, our life was a gift. Because it was a miracle.

And we didn't have any illusions that it was an accident. We weren't better than the rest, we weren't richer than the rest, we didn't have more connection. So we tried not to struggle with the question, why? Why do I deserve to be alive when my brothers died? When my family died? We tried not to question this because it was an accident.

And we tried, everyone in his own way, to accept the accident and to give our life a meaning, a certain new meaning. It's very difficult to define what is a new meaning. But I would say not to have in the future only a private life. That would be aware of mankind, of our people, of history.

Everyone felt that he has, as a survivor, a certain obligation. We couldn't, we didn't use the word mission. Because we weren't geniuses, we weren't Shakespeare, we weren't Dantes, we weren't prophets. We couldn't use the term, it was too big for us, mission. But everybody, in his own way, has to add something to the future of our people, of mankind. And as strange as it sounds, to the brotherhood of man.

And for me, it was very clear that from now on, art is not going to be my profession, it's going to be my life. And I wanted to paint something that had to do not with a still life, not with a portrait, not with a sunset, not with rainbows, but with the struggle of man to live, to exist, to build, and to hope.

So and I later read the phrase that to believe is a biological necessity. I understood it. To believe is a biological necessity. This feeling was very strong in everybody. And everybody asserted it in his own private, personal way.

But when I came to meet you the first time, you also-- you said that some people's response was to actually commit suicide.

Yes. When the war came to an end, and we had the embassies, the American embassy, the English embassy, the Russian embassy were installed, people tried to get in touch with their relatives or to get in touch with the embassy directly. But not all.

Some people didn't want to go back and didn't have the feeling to struggle for any-- lost the feeling that it's worthwhile to struggle for a new future. And for the first time, there were many, many suicides of people. They didn't want to live. It was not all a breakdown of their private life. It was a breakdown of their view on the world.

As I said, to believe is a biological necessity. If you don't believe in anything, how can you live? So they just embraced the world of shadows, the past.

Moving back to Japan, how did you live in Japan? Did the Joint help?

Yes, yes.

But tell me that story. When you got to Japan, how did you?

We stayed--

Start with when we got to Japan.

When we got to Japan, we knew that it wouldn't last long. It would never become our home. It wouldn't last longer than they war in the country. It was a stop for a short while. So we really enjoyed the beauty of Japan. And Japan still wasn't in the war.

We enjoy the beauty of Japan, we traveled a little bit. We went to Tokyo. We went to Kobe. In Kobe we stayed. We went to Tsuruga, to the other places. We saw Japanese painting, Japanese sculpture, Japanese houses. We really enjoyed it. It was a beautiful rest. The only thing was that--

For everything, and how did you eat?

Well, they provided that with little houses.

Who provided them?

Joint. And plus, plus the Jewish community.

Can we start over? Can we start over? Can you just start by saying the Joint provided us.

Now, one second.

With houses, where we-- everybody, the families had their room. The bachelors--

Sorry. Could you start with the Joint, when we were in Japan.

Japan, as a country, from the first step was an overwhelming experience. The beauty, the cities, the cleanliness, the order. And even the funny things about Japan. When we would go to different cities, we would try to remember our

address.

And the old refugees who came to Japan way back told us, don't worry about getting lost. Wherever you go, there will be a Japanese policeman behind you. And if you're lost, he will direct you to your home. So we didn't have to worry about addresses. There was always, wherever we went, somebody was looking after us.

And how did you eat and where did you stay?

They Joint provided us with small living quarters. And we had our own kitchen. Life was very normal. They gave us a little bit of money. We could go to the Japanese market. You couldn't get too much food. The Japanese were with a diet. So we had no right to. Because they were preparing for war, everything was restricted. So we had very meager meals.

But we didn't suffer in Japan. We were aware that it won't last. And as I mentioned, after six months, all of a sudden, they took us and without explanation, without any warning, we were shipped to Shanghai.

OK. And so let me know, in Shanghai, did you paint and have any art shows? And what was the subject of your painting?

In Shanghai, it was under the tremendous pressure of war, of loneliness, of uprootedness, a human being makes the decision what is his place in life? From a formal point of view, I was a stateless, penniless refugee.

But from a more metaphysical point of view, I was a human being who could be a part of history. And that's what I wanted to be. Even this part isn't mentioned in a book, or in a dictionary, or the history, but to me, this part of playing a part in a history was very important.

And I felt, as I mentioned before, that I'm going to paint history, I'm going to paint struggle, and going to paint the fluctuation of events and transformations. I'm going to paint something very dynamic, very haunting, very tragic, and very promising.

How to do it? I didn't know. I was a young boy. So I painted here and there, painting realistic portraits. But I wasn't satisfied. And I knew that sooner or later, I'll find my own way of coping with aesthetics. Aesthetics, which include also ethics, a certain pride of being a human being.

I did see bad men, the good men. I saw virtues, I saw evil. And I know that the man is not good or bad by nature. But I knew for sure that he knows, he really knows the difference. And he has a chance to choose between good and evil.

And though I couldn't define exactly what is good, I knew what's evil. Murder, lie, betrayal. And I have hope that I will never, never be involved in it.

Great.

Going again.

OK. Who did you leave behind and why? And what happened to them?

I lived in Vilna. I didn't have any relatives in Poland because our very large family lived in Russia, in different places in Russia. So we left Russia, my father and mother. We settled in Vilna.

And we had only-- so I left my father, my mother, and my father's brother lived in Warsaw, and his wife. So the closest family was very small. But we had many friends and people whom we loved. And they all perished.

Why did your father not go?

My father was ill. And we couldn't think about making a passport for him because he had multiple sclerosis multiplex.

He was quite a well-known person, he was a beloved teacher. And when the ghetto was created, and together with the ghetto, there was a group of Partisans which lived in the woods.

And I've been told that they came a certain day and offered my mother and father to join the Partisans. Well, the father couldn't do it because he was bed-ridden and my mother wouldn't leave him. So they stayed in the ghetto without any hope.

And the ghetto was liquidated in 1943. And the largest part of Vilna was exterminated 60 miles from Vilna, in Ponar. That was when Germany already started to lose the war. They decided to do their final commitment to exterminate the last remnants of the Jewish people in Poland, in Lithuania, in Latvia, and Estonia.

Did you communicate with them at all while you were in Japan? And when did you last hear from them? And when did you find out that they were killed?

No, there was no way of communicating with them. I found out exactly everything about them because my father was quite well-known. He had many students, ex-students. He was like I, a socialist. And there was a socialist movement. So had a member of the socialist underground.

And later, after the war, they wrote to me about my father. And some of them live in New York. And they told me exactly, day by day, how he lived, how he struggled, how he retained, together with my mother, dignity and hope.

And of course, their son, their only son wasn't with them. He didn't protect them and didn't die with them. So I cannot elaborate about that.

But didn't you get some postcards from them when you were in--

We have to change tape here.