

Camera roll 16.

You have a question?

Any postcards from your parents?

As long as I was in Japan, I received postcards from my father. He had to be very careful. He just wrote to me that they are surviving, and that he is very happy that I am in a safe place. But the moment when Germany attacked Russia, of course, Vilna was taken in the beginning and I didn't have. The postcard I still have.

But we can't--.

They were very lovely, very carefully written. We were a very close family. I was the only one son. I had very loving, loving parents, mother, father. And I will never forget. Maybe it was, in a way, the most important thing I have heard in my life.

Before I left, my mother told me-- my mother, who was a rather controlled woman and liked to talk in a very direct, tender manner, told me something which I think is unbelievably important. She embraced me and told me, my son, I hope you'll never, never be in a situation in which you will have to sacrifice somebody else's life in order to save your own. I think it's something which should be written as the first law of our life. And then we parted, and I never saw them again.

Is that OK, Mark?

I think so, because I don't think you're going to cut it. It's just a tiny fade in of an airplane and fade out.

Should I check for it?

Sure. But don't feel like you don't have it.

OK. Unfortunately, there was an airplane going overhead and it came on the soundtrack.

Do you want the airplane to go down in order to have a conversation?

[LAUGHTER]

Well, no.

Good.

[LAUGHTER]

So we won't sacrifice anybody for our benefit.

Right. Exactly. Could you tell me that story when you left your parents in Vilna again? What did your mother say?

Well, I mentioned to you that I think--

Sorry. Sorry, you're going to have start with--

My mother embrace me.

Say when I left Vilna--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Before I left Vilna--

You have to wait until John stops talking before you start. OK, any time.

Before I left Vilna, I parted with my parents, with my father, who was bedridden. And I embraced him. I still didn't have the feeling that I will never see them again. And then my mother took me to the door and kissed me, and said something which was so revealing years later-- my son, I hope you will never be in a situation in which you will have to sacrifice somebody else's life in order to save your own.

I think there is no phrase which is more ethical, more revealing, and more human than what she told me. And I hope, though I check my life and look back, that I wasn't always right. I wasn't always noble. I wasn't always on the level. But I never, never sacrificed anybody's life in order to save my own. So that's my consolation for a very dramatic and a rather painful past.

Thank you. So how long did you live in Shanghai? And how did you get out of Shanghai?

After I lived in Shanghai-- we have all kinds of calculations. Helen, which is my wife of the last 40 years, is sitting behind me and checking whether the dates are exact. I think I was there five or six years, a very long period. And--

I'm sorry. We can hear your voice on the soundtrack too. So, Helen, you have to be quiet. And Yonia, could you say how long you spent in Shanghai? I need the whole sentence.

In Shanghai, I mentioned to you-- when I look back, it looks like a long, long night, one night. But when I look at the calendar, it's close to six years. And in Shanghai I decided that I'm a painter. And a painter means not a man or a woman who paints, but it's the bridge to the essence of life, is the driving force.

And I decided, believe it or not, because of American magazines and of Time and Life. There was a description of Mexican mural painters and of Diego Rivera. And I decided that since I don't want to be a private painter, a portrait painter, a painter that decorates a wall in a private home, I want to paint history, I must go to Mexico.

And since I have heard about Diego Rivera from before, and he had such a wonderful write-up in Life, I said I'm going to Mexico and I am going to talk to Diego Rivera. And I'm going to ask him, please give me a wall. I want to paint the history of the young generation who got old in Europe during the terrible time of Stalin and Hitler.

Hold on one second.

How long were you in Shanghai?

Well, I think I was between 24-- and I was 30 years when I left Shanghai. I got about 25, and I left when I was-- I cannot tell you. I gave you the curriculum vitae. I was a young man. I was a very young man, very naive, very, very trusting. And dedicated to live for humanity, not to have just a private income, just be grateful for my life.

Have you painted a lot about the Holocaust?

I painted about the Holocaust. I had two shows. But I painted in a way which later didn't satisfy me. I painted what I saw, but I felt that there was something overlapping. There was the element of history, the element of fate, the element of vision. The eye cannot be a judge. It had to be a close dialogue between the eye and the intellect, between the heart and the senses.

So I painted, and I felt that I didn't reach a point in which I could say it expressed not only vision, but also experience. In other words, as the great English poets say, the eye is a window, but you have to see what's behind the window. And

my desire to go to Mexico was to find myself in terms of a challenge, because I didn't want to paint, as I said, still lives, portraits, walls, ceilings. I didn't want to be protected by the private elements of life. I want to be open to the horizon.

When you look back on your time in Poland and in Vilna, and even in Shanghai, were you a different person then? Was it a different--

Well, I'm ashamed to say the beliefs are the same, but the person is different. Now, the beliefs, I still believe in progress. I still believe in compassion. I still believe in mankind, in spite of all the viciousness I saw. But the person is a little different. The person is more careful. The person is a little bit more suspicious. And the person is more private.

I cannot give my time to everybody. I cannot spend my time with everybody. I want to save it for painting and writing. So maybe there's a selfishness. It made me a little bit more selfish.

I have always in front of me my father, who was a great scholar, but he was so giving to his students, gives them day and night. He loved mathematics and physics, but his students were even more important to him than any scholarly accomplishment. To me, it's very important to save my life for painting and painting and writing and painting. And somehow I feel maybe you should be aware of the people around you. And I am aware, though not as much as before.

Why do you think it's important to tell the story of what happened to your parents and to you?

Because I felt that people should live aware of the grandeur of existence, of the grandeur of history, of the grandeur of feeling and seeing and making conclusions. I spoke once to a friend, a nice, loving person who said, nothing makes sense. So I said, how can you say it? Your heart works for you. Your brain works for you. Your liver works for you. Your memory works for you. Aren't you grateful for that? How can you nothing makes sense? You just don't see sense. Sense makes sense when you reach out for sense and you improve a little bit.

And to write, to compose, to paint is an addition to life. It isn't only life. It's an addition to life. It's the life on an level of timelessness. And I would like to live my private life, my private big windows, but the window in me is much bigger than the window I put in here, with Helen's help.

OK. Do you remember the Wandering Jew exhibit? The photo exhibit in [? Kovai ?]? Did you see that?

I don't remember it. I was in two exhibitions organized by the artist, but this show I don't remember. The shows were very important shows, but they were important as a resistance against despair and nothingness. But as art accomplishment I don't think they were very important. You probably saw the catalog that I figured there. I wasn't happy with my work. I was happy doing it, but I felt that something was missing.

What role do you think luck played in your being here today?

What role?

Luck played. Luck?

Luck.

Well, when you get up in the morning it's good luck. When you enjoy your meal, when you enjoy friendship it's good luck. As a painter, I am an outsider in American art. I'm an outsider, and I shouldn't be. I was an outsider when the Russians wanted propaganda. Painting is not propaganda. Painting is sharing of your experience without any superimposed answers.

I here felt that after the terrible, terrible disappointment in Europe-- concentration camps in Germany, gulags in Russia, death camps in Germany, the Lubyanka in Russia-- that the artist turned into a more abstract, a more nonobjective kind of painting. And I found in the works of Jackson Pollock, or of de Kooning, who had some European background, or of Rothko, I found some very exciting accomplishment.

But I felt that there are other experiences. There are more direct human experience, which cannot be painted in the style of Mondrian, or cannot be painted in a very subconscious manner. There are some experience which have a more direct, not a verbal, but a more direct conversation with events, with recognizable forms, and with historical rhythms. Not only aesthetic rhythms, but historical rhythms. And I painted this way.

And I find that there can be a Jackson Pollock, and there can be a de Kooning, there can be a Rothko. But there should be room for other experiences too, because they are a part of a very rich-- you cannot only play a violin. Why not a piano? You cannot play only Bach. Why not Mozart? Not only Mozart, but Stravinsky. I felt there is a certain rigidity in the field which I feel has to be the most experimental and the most free art.

So it is not luck. I didn't join the movement in America because I felt that I represent something which has validity too. I don't care whether it's saleable. But it has a real validity in the roots and the experience of art. So I am an outsider.

Do you still paint about the Holocaust?

I paint about the rhythms of history-- uprisings, genesis. I don't illustrate. I don't perceive paintings in terms of verbal, though I am not afraid of verbal expression. But I paint the storm of history. And if you ask me where are you, I'll tell you. I'm in the storm of the eye as a painter.

I don't paint on a very safe-- I like to see myself on a boat. It goes right and left and is driven by waves. And I call the waves the rhythms of reality. I cannot paint something which is as static as final as classical painting, as Mondrian, has a horizontal and a vertical. I don't negate those paintings. I enjoy them. But they don't add to my development and to my sentimentality. I'm not ashamed to be sentimental. I'm sentimental in a very prosaic manner.

OK. Great. Let's take a little break here.

You got more?

Yeah, just one more question. Do you have any constant dreams or nightmares about your experiences during the war?

I told you that to paint is to share the experience. And some nightmares are very haunting. Not the last 10 years, no. But I had two experiences. One I was running and running and running, and somebody was behind me. And I was sure that he'll catch me. And I would wake up and Helen would tell me, why are you screaming? So it's an old dream.

And the other dream was very funny. I'm in my class. I'm a young boy. And my teacher of Latin asks me to read a passage of Virgil. And I said, I don't have to do it. I'm a teacher myself. He said, once a student, always a student. Read it! And I get scared and I wake up. So how can you relate it to dreams? I don't relate it. But they are real.

That's great. What happened to your wife, Nute?

My wife, she loved paintings. But life--

Tell me the story. You both left Shanghai together and went to Mexico?

We went to Mexico.

Sorry. Start with Shanghai.

What?

Tell me the story of you and your wife, starting with Shanghai.

I tried to make a living by painting and by writing. There was a Russian magazine, and I wrote about the painting. A

weekly. And my wife was in the hospital. She was in there. She was a nurse also in Warsaw. It was very tense life in Mexico. There was almost no moment of peace. But still, people who were not single had a little less comfort than people who had a family.

And then we went to Mexico. And somehow we parted in Mexico. And she went to America. As I said, she lived in Berkeley. She passed away half a year ago. And I lived in Mexico. And in Mexico I had the good luck to meet Helen. She is my wife till now.

When you were in Shanghai, you did some painting. One was of a [? Semek ?] Kushner?

I had several paintings. I cannot show them because a few days ago they came and they took it to the exhibition.

That's all right. But can you tell me what they are and the significance of those paintings, and what happened to the people that you painted?

To the people who are-- I don't have any portraits. I had only one portrait I painted of my ex-wife. And this portrait I don't have anymore, because Helen and I send it to her daughter in Canada from another marriage.

Can we take a little break?

In Shanghai?

In Shanghai, beside painting portraits, in order to get a living I did many, many drawings. I couldn't use paint because the quality of oil paint was very bad and the paintings would get dark. So I used Chinese ink, which is very flexible, and I painted figures of refugees, concentration camps, portraits of imaginary, historical people. And when I look back at them, I feel they are very honest, direct remarks about my surrounding.

The basic difference between what I do now and what I did then is that I was then aware of exciting, meaningful, captivating details. And now I have a concept how to relate details into a moving, dynamic composition. My people are not separated. They are related to each other-- emotionally and from a point of view of composition.

Just one last thing. You started to say in Shanghai I drew pictures of people running, fleeing. Could you do that one more time?

Elaborate more time?

No, no. Just list what you painted. You said in Shanghai--

In Shanghai, I painted people running, fighting, begging, dying. They were always in a very realistic environment. You could see the sky. You could see the walls. You could see the chair, the floor. And you could see their features. I didn't have a chance or I didn't know how to relate them to something which I didn't see, but had to be invented. Not only the person, but how one person is related to another, and how the people are related to their environment, to the movement of events.

Excellent. Do you guys have any questions?

You feel what you imagine and what you actually event. You have to add something to life in order to come out according to what I feel with a painting. Otherwise you come up with a document. And a document is not enough, the inventiveness of the person should be inside and outside when you paint.

If you don't record it, I'll tell you something. I had here a friend-- are you promising?

We're rolling.

[INAUDIBLE]. I like crazy people. So I said, why was he crazy? So he said my sculpture. So he would say, from looking nothing will happen. OK.

[INAUDIBLE].

Yeah, we had very difficult times in New York. Helen felt that if I don't get some recognition some place, I will lose my mind. And I told her I will never lose my mind because I don't know how to lose my mind. My mind is me. How can I lose it?

It's very difficult to come when the country's new, when you love it, and it's so promising, and you cannot find a place for yourself. You cannot find a gallery. You cannot find a job. But I never doubted. I knew that's a part of the game. And I decided this is an experience. And if I am going to handle that experience, I will be all right.

And I try to handle. I always said-- it sounds like a joke-- it's still better than a concentration camp. They don't give you a gallery. It's still better than to be in Russia under Stalin. And it helped. Because I was very young. You cannot take it now. But I was very young. I was very trusting. I had friends, good artists, and they liked my work. And they were supportive.

I got my first job because [PERSONAL NAME] took me and said he is as good as I. And he already was selling for 100,000. So they gave me a job. And then the director told me, you are a very good teacher. I said, of course. He said, but you don't know what's the best thing in you. I said, I want to say my knowledge, my honesty. So I said, your accent. [LAUGHS]

So I enjoyed working. He has always a way of going a step farther than the momentary. So I related my person to another person. So there was a relationship. And I related the bad moments to the promising moments. I had a way, experience of cheating the pessimistic thoughts.

[INAUDIBLE].

[INAUDIBLE].

OK. Great. And you call it.

Room tone.

End room tone.

More seconds of room tone, please. Thank you.