

[TEST TONE] Do again, when we're rolling and stuff, about memories and how you've forgotten all the bad stuff.

OK. So what were you going to tell me?

Well, I was going to tell you that in-- I haven't taken you to Central Asia. And this is a story in itself. But when we finally ended up in Tajikistan, which is the southernmost republic-- was the southernmost republic in the then-Soviet Union, we ended up in a city called-- which then was called Stalinabad. Today, it is called Dushanbe, which was also its original name.

And there, after a while, we lived in an Armenian family that was absolutely our own family. That was, we really-- I felt that I had a new family and that I was the son of them. I became the greatest of friends. There is a little boy who became my good friend and used to read fairytales to me when I was sick. My mother had a friend in his wife. So this was just another experience of tremendous friendship.

All of us had basically the same feeling, that we are all victimized by the Soviet regime. Those Armenians were deported themselves to Central Asia from Armenia.

The Armenians, you may know, are people who are extremely skilled in business. This Armenian about whom I'm telling you was a watchmaker back in Armenia. And in Central Asia, he also went back to the same trade. But he also became a jeweler.

And during the war, most trading was illegal in Russia. It was barter, it was buying and selling, money had no value. So people were trying to accumulate as many real objects as possible.

Not big, so diamonds, of course, were very valued. My mother still had some from back home. And when we needed money, we sold them slowly to whoever was willing to buy. And he was our best customer, that Armenian, and eventually, he had a private house in Stalinabad.

And he said to my mother, listen, why don't you move in to me? Because I'm about to lose one room because our house was declared too large for our family. So I would love for you to stay with us and we can continue our financial relationships.

Well, little did we know at the time that we were moving in with the biggest trader in Stalinabad. He was the richest man around. His son was an NKVD official. He had most of the NKVD on his payroll. And whatever one wanted to do, one could do through him.

And the irony of it all was that one of his side businesses, in a sense, the business which was the cover-up for everything, was a booth with soda on the main street of Stalinabad. At that time, sugar was in an extremely short supply. This drink was simply colored water, rose-colored water with sugar in it. And some foam. I don't know how he got this foam into it. Some gas that he pumped into it.

And people would line for miles to have a glass of this sweet water because everybody was starved for sugar. He would buy sugar by carloads at the same time when we couldn't get rationed sugar at all.

So he had enough fantasy to call this drink Curacao, which just so happens that this Curacao-- I have a picture of it, actually-- this Curacao was the destination of my father and my uncle when they were leaving Lithuania on the Sugihara visas. So my mother worked there as a clerk selling this soda, this Curacao.

Amazing. Well, let me ask you now. Going back to being packed into the freight trains and being taken from your home-- and you talked about memories.

Yes, well, you know, now, I find out-- was to my surprise that I know, and as I think hard trying to recall those images-- because there was some solitary confinement for a while, even in the camp-- that I retain in my memory only the

brighter scenes and sort of erased from it the darker scenes.

I have difficulty finding the tragic-- in my memory-- to find the tragic moments. But have no trouble at all recalling the pleasant moments or the funny moments. So it's a curious mechanism, you know, sort of self-defense mechanism that we have, trying to erase what is unpleasant and retain what is nice.

And one other general remark, you know, is that I'm convinced now that in life, everything is a question of luck. We were immensely lucky in all kinds of ways throughout the war. I mean, considering the place where we found ourselves in that is at the very vortex of this horror. To get out of it in the shape in which we got out of it took an immense amount of luck.

And you know, luck is really a question of coincidence. You happen to choose to turn left when you have a choice to go straight and to go right. You don't know why you are going left, and yet, the turn left turns out to be the lucky one. And this was with us throughout this whole experience.

In the camp, which was a light camp compared to so many other camps, where people did not really die except of natural causes. Of course, some died because they were malnourished, but no more so than the Russians around us.

I'll tell you a funny story about Stalinabad. When we finally got out with my grandmother to Central Asia, where the Polish Army was forming, we came two weeks too late. By that time, the whole army of General Anders, that was the first Polish Army in Russia, was evacuated to Iran.

So we came to the small railroad station between Samarkand and the Caspian, Krasnovodsk, on the Caspian Sea, where there was nothing. There were a few mud huts and the railroad station. This was all there was there. And that was one of the places where the Polish Army was forming.

And this is where we found out that we would not be joining them because there was no Polish Army left in Russia. And one of us-- there was a group of Poles who were in the same situation-- had a map of Russia. And he looked at the map and he saw a city called Stalinabad, which in Tajik means the city of Stalin. But we didn't know that. And he didn't know it.

And he said, you know, Stalinabad, that sounds a little bit like Marienbad and Karlsbad. Now, these were Czech resorts before the war. And so he says, maybe it is also some kind of a resort place. Why don't we go to Stalinabad?

Well, for this idiotic reasoning, we got to an extremely nice place. Because it was the end of a railroad line. It was very difficult to get things out of it. It happened to be in an extremely fertile part of the Tajikistan. A great deal of fruit, a great deal of vegetables, some meat. We happened to land with this Armenian family, which helped us enormously. There was a Polish [POLISH], which helped us with clothing and with food.

And I began my higher education there in a very odd way. I was selling-- You know, I finished only nine grades in Poland because I was 15-- 14 when I entered school in the spring of 1939. I was supposed to go into my second-- as a sophomore into high school. And so all I had there was nine years.

I was at the bazaar in Stalinabad trying to hock a dress, which we got through the Polish network. And the woman, good-looking, pleasant woman came up. At that time, Stalinabad was full of Russian refugees, or evacuated people from Moscow, from Leningrad, from Kiev.

And this woman turned out to be from Kiev, a Jewish woman, a professor of French at the local institute, pedagogical institute. At that time, there was no university. And we started talking to each other. By that time, I knew Russian fairly well.

And she says to me, well you seem like an intelligent boy. What are you doing here selling dresses in this bazaar? So I told her more or less my story. And she says, well, you know, come over to my office tomorrow, I'll see what we can do for you.

And I went to this institute, and they said, well, is there anything you would like to study? Now, studying was like having a job because every student had a fellowship there. This was the Soviet system. So I said, yes, I want to study English because my father is in America. And I hope that eventually, I will go to America, too.

And she said, well, I'll see what I can do about this. And the group of people from the English department came, they gave me books to learn, to study from, to make up the high school which I didn't have. And they said, come back in two months and we'll give you an exam, which they did.

And this exam I passed. And I was all of a sudden admitted to a local university in a sense, to the faculty of English. That is what they called the faculty of English, which means the department of English. And I stayed there for two years and a half. And my beginnings in English go back to Stalinabad. The year was 1942.

So this is what I mean, the luck which-- now, I didn't go to Anders. That is, I didn't join the Polish Army. This was considered a tremendous catastrophe and a tragedy that we were left behind. And all our friends and everybody else moved to Iran with Anders's army.

Well, if I had gotten into Anders's army, who knows where I would be today. I could be rotting in the deserts of Northern Africa or at Monte Casino, where this Polish Army was completely decimated. So one never knows what is lucky in one's life.

That's right.

And there are hundreds of stories like this I can tell you.

So when you left the camp and you went to try and--

To join up with-- yes, when I left the camp, I tried to join up with. You see, let me start a little bit earlier.

My aunt and my cousin left that place where they were in the Urals to join the army. And they made it in good time. Their commandant was not dismayed by it because they had the same documents that we had. But somehow, Polish citizenship was not questioned, and they were released early.

They made it. They joined the army. She joined the army. And the boys went along as her son. And they went to Iran. But they left a grandmother in the Urals all alone. And actually, her own, my aunt's parents were also there.

So what we did before going down south to join the Polish Army, we went to the Urals to fetch my grandmother. She was sick at the time. And so we lost three months waiting for her to get better. And during those three months, we lost the Polish army. So she left and she came to this country with her son in 1942. And we, my grandmother, and my mother, and I stayed until '46.

And how did you-- could you fix your tongue on the tie? Sorry. And then how did you finally get out?

From Russia?

Yes. Well, we got out. You see, the problem was that we had no documents. Everybody who was in those resettlement camps would receive, upon amnesty, would receive the sheet of paper saying that the so-and-so is a Polish citizen who was released from the camp. That was our only document.

There came, in 1943, or no, actually the whole thing began in 1942, when the advancing German troops came to the Smolensk region in Russia and uncovered graves of 10,000 police officers in a camp called Katyn. K-A-T-Y-N. Which they dug up. And they discovered unmistakable proof that these 10,000 officers were shot by the Russians. They were all shot, all in the same way, in the back of the neck.

The Russians said, this is all nonsense. This is all Hitler's propaganda. This was all done by the Germans. We left the 10,000 right there. We could not evacuate them because we had no time. And they were shot by the Germans. And the Germans are simply planting false evidence.

All evidence was pointing against them. There was a Red Cross delegation that came from Switzerland, and that examined these graves, and also found that the Germans were innocent in that. The Polish government in exile had no choice but to accuse the Russians.

And the Russians used that as an excuse to sever all diplomatic relations with the Polish government in exile. They announced that all the Polish documents issued before the war were invalid. The documents issued to those who came from the camps, those sheets of paper, were invalid.

And therefore, these people were without documents. And in order to survive, they had to accept Soviet citizenship. So this was the second time that we were faced with the choice of accepting Soviet citizenship. Those who did not, who decided not to, and there was some of those, were imprisoned very often. And they had a very, very tough time. Most people did accept it because they simply saw no choice, knowing what would happen if they don't.

And there again, a small piece of luck. Or a large piece of luck. My father and my uncle, when they were in Vilna, went to Kaunas, which was at that time still the capital of Lithuania and where the embassies were.

To the British embassy, which at that time represented Polish interests in Lithuania. That is, the Polish embassy was no longer there. Poland did not exist. The Lithuanians did not recognize the Polish government in exile. But the British embassy took over. And I'm sorry about this.

Do you want a glass of water to have right here?

Well, no, I'm all right. I'll just try to control it.

So to come back to this story in Lithuania. Since my father and my uncle were there, they went to the British embassy in Kaunas. They got themselves proof that they were Polish citizens issued by the British embassy as the representative of Polish interests in Lithuania on British stationery.

It was a piece of paper, which I still have here. I think I sent it to the Holocaust Museum, with a British official stamp, the rampant lion. And the wording was also in English. He got the very same documents for my mother and me. And they were sent to us in the camp. And for some reason, they were never requisitioned, so we had them.

When the Soviets, in 1943, decided that no Polish document was valid, we went to the police, to the NKVD, and we said, but we don't have any pre-war documents. We don't have any documents issued by you after we left the camp. What we have is a document issued by the British. Let's see it. So we showed them this document.

And there, they were completely taken aback. Because England was a great ally. There was a document there was a British lion on it. And they were not going to get into trouble over that.

So after some going back and forth, we eventually received a so-called permit to live in the Soviet Union for people of foreign nationality. Not saying which foreign nationality it was because we had none at the time. So it was kind of a Nansen passport.

Maybe I should take a drink, a glass of water. I'll bring some here.

Set it right here.

Yeah, I'll have it right here, you know.

So where were we? You were.

So we were on those documents which were issued by the Russians to us.

Tell me again the response of the Russians to seeing the British lion.

Well, when we brought them these documents, they really were completely dumbfounded. They had no idea what to do with them. They never saw a document like this before. Nobody of our friends had anything like it. What they saw was the English writing and the British officials stamp.

And so they decided that they could not issue us Soviet citizenship, I mean Soviet passports. But that they would give us those special documents called a permit to dwell in the Soviet Union for people of foreign nationality. What we were supposed to do is to register with the police every three months and to notify them of any change of address.

But other than that, I was not-- since the Polish army was gone, I was not drafted into the Soviet Army even though I was already of age. And I was not drafted into the Polish Army, which was formed later on by the Russians themselves, which was the Communist Polish Army, which entered Poland together with the Russian troops. And which also saw a great deal of life loss en route.

So this is why I keep harping on this question of completely unforeseen coincidental circumstances, which really amount to nothing else but pure, sheer luck. And as a result, not only did I survive this war coming from this hell, which was the place where it all started, but I also never served in any army from the day was born until the day I die. You know, it's very unusual.

When did you find out about the Holocaust?

Well, that was really not until much later. We didn't know much about it. Except, you see--

Sorry.

There's--

Once we get rolling, we have to take that glass. Where were you? And when did you find out about the Holocaust? And how did you respond?

Well, I found out about the Holocaust in all the details only after I came to this country, which was in 1946. But as I begin telling you, we developed a habit of not trusting Russian press and not trusting Russian stories. And the Russian press was reporting much of it. Not all of it, but much of it, they did report.

I don't remember any Russian mention of Auschwitz, for instance. I don't know whether they knew about it. They must have known about it, but they did not write about it, specifically. They wanted the war to be their war, to be what they call the Patriotic War. And this was the important issue.

And the Final Solution, the killing of the Jews, was absolutely secondary. Because this-- they probably felt that this would diminish their role in that war. They saw themselves as the central power of fighting Hitler.

And in many ways, they were because they actually defeated Hitler. I mean, bombing helped from the West. But you know, we know very well that bombing until now doesn't do very much to help the cause. So the Russians were dying by the millions. And they were fighting the Germans throughout the length of the Russian front. Immense lengths from up north from Leningrad down to down to the Caucasus.

So part of this was not that they didn't know, but they simply didn't want to divert attention from their war to somebody else's war. This was a war against a beast, Hitler, who did not make any distinction between a Russian, a gypsy, or a Jew. Everybody was scheduled for extermination. And they would not play up the Jewish angle for any money, you see.

And this is probably the reason why it was not reported. And what was reported, we took with a grain of salt. Because we were sort of inured to the propaganda, which was constantly being printed in Soviet press. So even when they wrote true stories, we tended to disbelieve them. Especially stories of the Holocaust, which tended to be fantastic.

So when we came to America in 1946, my father and his brother, my uncle, already knew all about it. But they didn't want to let us know earlier in Russia.

My father knew that my mother's family was exterminated in Lwow. And well, all our families. That is, the Schenkers and my mother's family, suffered immensely. But especially my mother's family. And all this came as a total surprise to us as we came to this country.

What was your reunion like with your father?

Well, we came-- the reunion with my father. We came in an odd way for reasons which perhaps are too long to explain. We ended up coming on an American liberty ship, a freighter that happened to be in Odessa in February, 1946. We boarded that liberty ship.

We were the passengers. There was a couple of Ukrainians on it, and a very young Jewish boy, who was picked up by the Soviet Army somewhere and whose father happened to be an American. So the seven of us-- there was some other person, too-- made this trip on this rather large freighter.

The trip took one month, through the Mediterranean, the Atlantic. Lovely weather throughout. And we landed. We were supposed to land in New York. Then it was changed to Virginia. And then eventually, we landed in South Carolina, in Charleston, South Carolina.

We docked on April 7, 1946. Charleston was like a bouquet of flowers. Every Magnolia tree, every tulip tree, everything was in bloom. Cherry trees. And my first impression of America and my expectation for America was that it would be nothing but a big bouquet of flowers.

Well, we went to lunch-- my father was waiting along with my cousin. There was a reunion. You can imagine what kind of reunion it was. And we got on the train and went to New York, where my father was living. And of course, then I realized that not all of America is an immense garden.