

How does it sound to you over there?

OK--

So, you hear a room noise?

Yeah.

It's that the pool? OK.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

[INAUDIBLE].

[INAUDIBLE] [? coming from. ?]

Yeah. I think we're good to go.

Actually, let's just ask Mimi. Maybe we can turn it off.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Will we?

Just a moment. Rolling on transcript.

OK.

Can you tell me where you grew up and how you ended up in Japan?

I was three years old in 1916, when my parents-- I was born in Lithuania in Vilna, Lithuania, when my parents decided-- actually, they were forced to because they were worried about the anti-Jewish pogroms over there to leave Lithuania. And they went to Harbin, China. In those days, it was Manchuria.

Why did they go to Manchuria? Why did they go to China of all the places? I often asked my father, and the answer was there was no where else to go, number one, and, number two, my mother's sister, her husband, and their family already were in China for the last five years.

He was originally a soldier in the Russian army, and when he was discharged he was allowed by the-- the tsarist government in those days, in order to so-called Russify the part of China which they occupied, allowed the Jews to go there and have a religious life and communal life and everything without any problems. So, after being discharged from the army, he was working in supplying the Russian army with the livestock, whatever they needed, and he did pretty well. So there was nowhere else to go, and we went there.

It took us 33 days. I was three years old. My brother was four years old. My father, my mother, and their parents to reach China. Now, after six years in China, my father was-- I don't really remember what exactly he was doing, but we were making a decent living, more or less. I do remember we lived in the outskirts of the town, and we had a cow. Father was milking the cow and selling the milk, and it was-- as a children, I was growing up in a Jewish school.

After about six years in that school, my father enrolled me and my brother in the Russian school, where I learned to speak Russian. Then in the year of 1929, I believe, after seven years in the Russian school, father decided that we should learn English because-- he didn't speak any English at that time-- because he understood that the international language, business language, was English, perhaps even higher education. Going go to university one day, we could afford to do

that. So he sent us to Shanghai.

Shanghai was an international city. I went there to a British school without knowing a word of English, but lucky I was able to pick it up, and then in about six months I could speak English pretty good. And I got my first job when I was 16 in a firm that was importing textiles from England, from Poland, from Czechoslovakia. And then Japan came into the picture as a manufacturing place for the manufactured textiles, woven textiles.

I got the job, I learned a little bit of the language, and they sent me to Japan to open an office there in 1930. I was 17 years old. I went to Japan, opened an office, and I used to get samples of English materials from Shanghai, which I would bring to the Japanese suppliers, Japanese manufactures, to copy them. And that's how I landed in Japan.

I went back in 1936 and got married. My late wife was also born in China. My children were born in China, and this is how I landed in Japan, in doing that job, and that's the time when we got organized. We had a small Jewish community there. We were organized, and then we started getting telegrams and information about the Jews fleeing from Poland to Lithuania. And from Lithuania they got Japanese transit visas, and this is where the Jewish community was helping in getting those visas, guaranteeing their stay here, and this is how we started.

OK--

Just getting a plane coming in.

OK. Rolling on transcript.

OK. So, could you explain to me how you became involved with JEWCOM and who funded JEWCOM? And where did the name come from?

In 1937 or '38-- I think it was '38-- we were a small Jewish community in Kobe, Japan. As I told you, I established an office. We were buying textiles from Japan, shipping to China. Some of the other people that lived there were doing almost in the same kind of business. About, I would say, 20 of us with the families with its own with children, wives, children, and we were just young people getting together, playing cards at night, and we were just getting together, social life.

And then there was a gentleman by the name of Mr. Ponve. His original name was Ponevejsky. He was from Russia, also via China came to Japan. He also had an office buying textiles that were shipped to China to his brothers that lived in China. He was a very active man, a very fine man who wanted to organize things, and he got a few of us together and he said, look, we got to get organized.

First thing, we're Jews. We have to have a synagogue. High holidays, Passover, and other holidays are coming. Let's get together. We got together about 15 of us. We talked about everything, and we decided that each one of us had to contribute so much money in monthly fees, and he invited a very interesting man. His name was Sam Evans.

He was the only Jew that became a Japanese citizen. He lived in Japan for a long time. He was in chandlery business to the ships that were flying between Japan and America, England, et cetera.

Sam Evans was a very interesting man. He was a very well-to-do man. When Mr. Ponve involved Mr. Evans to be helping us, together they put up some money, and we rented the home, a small home, two stories. Downstairs was a synagogue, which could hold about 40 to 50 people, no more.

Upstairs were two rooms. I guess next to the synagogue were a small office, like an office. We had it there. We were keeping documents, papers, et cetera, and the name of the organization was called the Jewish Community of Japan, in brackets Ashkenazim, because Ashkenazim are Russian Jews. There were also quite a few people who lived in Kobe at that time. They were Sephardic Jews, Jews from Egypt, Iraq, Syria.

They had little to do with us because they considered themselves in a so specific higher scale. They were British

citizens, French citizens. Well, we were absolutely stateless people, Russian immigrants depending completely on the Japanese police with the permits that were needed by us for traveling, for marriages, whatever we needed just to have an organized life. And for the purpose of telegraphing and using shorthand, the Jewish Community of Kobe became JEWCOM, and that's how the name JEWCOM was born.

From 1938, '39, we were just having prayers there during the high holidays. We used to play cards, and the girls played mahjong upstairs. It was a little restaurant, and we just create-- it was a club, until we started getting requests and started getting telegrams from Lithuania. We knew there was a war going on in Europe. We knew that Poland was divided between Russia and Germany, but at that time Lithuania was still an independent country, and a number of Jews from Poland, mainly religious Jews, escaped to Lithuania. Not escaped. They actually smuggled themselves out, and then we started getting telegrams asking us if we, the Jewish community, could guarantee their transit via Japan.

For that, we had to go to the police and get their permission. I remember very well one Sunday, Mr. Ponve, the president, came to me and he asked me to be his secretary. I was the only guy who could write and speak English besides other languages. So he asked me-- he showed me a cable, which was-- I couldn't understand it. From Lithuania, all the places which said we have seven people names sounded German. They were German Jews.

The need a Jewish community guarantee. All their transit through Japan. They were on the way to Argentina. They had visas. They were financially able to support themselves. All they needed was that we should guarantee that during their stay waiting for the ship to go to Argentina, that they were politically healthy, and that they didn't need any assistance, et cetera, et cetera.

Mr. Ponve went to the police, and they told him it's all right. You can cable them. They could come. And they came. I didn't ever see them. Once, I think I saw some of them. They were on their own.

We hired a Lady, a German Jewish lady who lived in Kobe, Mrs. [? Hochheimer. ?] She spoke good German, of course, to help them as much as they could because they didn't speak any English, only German, and she did. She took care of them. She met them at the ships, and she took them to Yokohama, and they were gone. After that, we started getting cables with number of names, and those were the Polish Jews that found their way to get Curaçao visas, to get Russian exit visas.

Russia already occupied Lithuania. It became a Russian-Lithuanian republic, and we saw what was coming. We started getting many, many, many names, and it was our job, our duty, our desire to help them, and that's how it started.

How did you get funding, or how did you help them? And how did you--

Well--

How did you provide them with housing and things?

We had a couple of our people, a couple of our members that were going around with the Japanese brokers looking for houses, not in Kobe itself because it was difficult to find homes there. When we found out we saw there were hundreds of people are coming, it became a very, very difficult problem, especially there were hundreds of Talmudic scholars, young people. They had to stay together. I remember very well we asked our friends to find homes and measure the floor because in Japanese homes in those days there was no floors. They were what they called straw mats. "Tatami", they called it in Japanese, and measured them so how many people we could put to sleep on the floor with so many people.

I mean, no beds, nothing, and that that's how it started. It was not easy. Lucky, our ladies, a woman my late wife herself, they got organized too. They collected clothes because some people were coming with children who needed help. Also, they were organized in such a way so that if medical assistance was required, children especially, they would get organized and take the children to the hospitals, to the doctors, and it was well organized.

OK.

And this is how we came. The Japanese police, water police so called, that used to go to the port of Tsuruga, where the ships were coming in from Vladivostok, they required that the Jewish community guarantee their stay. And the way we could do it is by putting our stamp. We had a metal stamp, the Jewish community, on it in Japanese, and in English, and Hebrew that we would stamp.

So one of our members of our community would go to the dock to the ship to Tsuruga, and he would provide the stamp, guaranteeing each paper with their host community stamps. That's how we started.

Must have been very expensive.

Expensive? Well, at the beginning, if you were coming in the first 50, 60, or so, we could handle. But then we understood that it was impossible for us to financially support getting houses, and clothes, and food, and everything. So we sent a cable to the Joint Distribution Committee in New York.

We knew of the existence of the Jewish organizations over there, and I remember very well the cable we got from them was, money no object. Save Jews. And they remitted us the first \$25,000, which was a lot of money in those days, and that's how it started. Then when the first group of refugees started to come from Lithuania, in Lithuania the Jewish community was very organized, and representatives of the Joint Distribution and other traveling assistance organizations like HIAS, [INAUDIBLE] were there, the representatives from. And they came together with the refugees to Japan, and they got themselves organized to set everything up.

And they kept their records because the orders were conjoined to financially support each refugee. The orders were to give each one of them one yen and \$0.10. In those days, it was about \$0.30, \$0.28 American money, and that was enough for a family of four or five for them to go and buy the food that they required for their existence, but that was interesting. In those days, already difficulties started in Japan.

Everybody was rationed. Rice. Not only foreigners. Japanese also, so you couldn't buy that much rice. You couldn't buy that much bread, but the representatives of the police came to us and they said, how many pounds of bread do you require every day? A pound per person, and every week we had to give them the numbers of people that we had living there, and every evening a truck would drive out with fresh bread, a pound per person. Of course, they had to pay for it something like 40 Japanese cents, which was like \$0.12 or something like that in American money.

Why were the Japanese so accommodating?

[SIGHS] I don't know. I don't know. I read the book. I'm sure you also did. The Fugu plan. He explains over there the so-called Fugu Plan, which was a plan that the Japanese-- let's go a little bit back.

In the Japanese culture, the way I read, the way I understood, it is a thing that is called giri. "Giri" in Japanese culture means, if I do you a favor, you owe me a giri. You owe me a better favor. That is in their culture, and they go back into the history in 1904 during the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese were running short of money to continue with the war, and they were afraid they were going to lose the war to the Russians.

So they sent a man with the name of Takahashi, Baron Takahashi, to America to borrow some money. They needed a few hundred million dollars to continue with the war effort, and he was turned down, this Baron Takahashi. And the story is that at one dinner party he was sitting next to a man and he was very upset. He said I failed in my mission, so the man asked him what was your mission.

He says I came to borrow money, and he says, what do you need the money for? He says, well, we're having a war with Russian.

He says you're having a war with the Russians, yeah? Yes. This man goes by the name of Schiff. He was a very, very well-known financier in-- [INAUDIBLE] Law was the name of the financial firm in New York, a banking firm, and he offered the Japanese government a loan of the money that required for them to continue with the war effort. And by that

some of my Japanese friend told me Japanese owed the Jewish people a giri. They needed them a favor which was done to them to continue the war and to why did Mr. Hirsch offer them the money to offer them the money, because at that time there were terrible pogroms, killings of Jews in Kishinev, which is now Romania, I believe, and it was a very scary time for the Jews.

Jews were murdered, and this man who was Jewish, Mr. Schiff, said you only need the money to fight the Russians, huh? He says yes. I'm a Jew, and I'm going to help you, and he did.

I think there were four loans that came through for hundreds of millions of dollars.

Whoa.

And the Japanese never forgot it. So one of the things that I think was that they wanted to pay the Jews somehow, and the second thing is that there was a plan, which was evolved during the many years when Hitler started his anti-Jewish things in Germany, to bring 50,000 German Jews to settle them in Manchuria, which was then occupied by the Japanese on the border with Russia. The Japanese at that time, I think, thought that was going to be a war with Russia one day, and they wanted to have some people that were living on the border they could eventually use as soldiers but at the same time that would develop the place, develop the country, and at the same time they were so sure that if the Jews were there, whether they're from Germany or Austria, the American Jews who helped them.

And that was one of the reasons they were good to the Jews as to show them. I remember very well in 1940 or '41 there was a party in the house of president, Mr. Ponve, who was on his way to America. He was leaving, and there was a dinner party at which were present the governor of the Hyogo Prefecture, where we lived, and other representatives of the Japanese police and authorities. There was one man who was in [INAUDIBLE] uniform, but I was told later that he was a major of the Japanese army, and they made speeches.

Ponve thanked them for being so attentive and a reception allowing the Jews to come to Japan. And he said, you're going to America. Tell your American and Jewish brothers there how good we are to you, that they should reciprocate in some way. It's history, but it never worked out.

They were thinking of bringing in 50,000 Jews to make the so-called Israel in Manchuria, but it never worked out because the American Jews did not go for it because they were already very anti-Japanese because the Japanese were going deeper into China, atrocities against the Chinese, and they were very much against them. So it didn't work out.

Why did they do it? It was called the Fugu Plan, the plan that hopefully would be workable, but it never worked out.

OK.

Why did they do it? To me, I think I will die with this question that I will never answer. Really, really why they did it, but they did, and the Japanese consul gave the visas. Why did they give the visas, transit visas which he was told not to give? He was instructed to stop issuing visas, but they kept on issuing visas. Why? I don't know.

I don't think anybody knows the real truth. It's for politics. It's whatever.

OK, very good. Let's see. What was it like for all these refugees to come to Kobe, Japan? What do you think it was like? Were they full of fear? Were they happy?

They were full of fear. They didn't--

You have to tell me who you're talking about.

OK.

You have to start with who you're talking about. In other words, the refugees who came to Japan. You have to start with

something like that.

When the refugees started to come to Japan, I met some of them. I spoke to them. They said they were running away, they were afraid, they didn't know where to go, and that's the only place where to go. That's one reason.

Another reason was they thought-- they hoped. Everybody had relatives in America. That's the only place they could go was Japan, and the only way that could go to America, if they would get the visas to come to America, would be from Japan. That was another reason.

But what do you think it was like? Do you think that they were happy or full of fear?

They were scared, they were anxious, but I saw some of them. They would come to the community to the JEWCOM for their mail or for some problems. They had some problems-- food problems, immigration problems-- and we could help them. We helped. We tried to help them as much as we could, and they were worried what's going to happen with us.

We didn't know at that time. Remember it was 1940 or '41. It was before the Holocaust. They knew that Jews were being oppressed and put into camps in Germany, Austria, and Poland, but I don't think anyone at that time knew what was coming, that the Holocaust was coming. And they were just running away, and they came to Japan, and I'll never forget.

I went twice to Tsuruga to meet some of them with the stamp to put on their documents, and the ship was coming close, and I was the only foreigner among the Japanese police and customs people that were sitting there to check their documents. And I could see this ship, and it was a small ship, and there were people crammed, small children, women, old people. You know, it was a pitiful sight, and I could see they were talking to each other and pointing to me.

I was the only foreigner that was there. Then finally the ship came back [INAUDIBLE]. They were disembarking, and one of them comes up to me and says to me in Jewish, are you a Jew? I said yes.

A Japanese Jew? I said yes. He says I got a big problem. I said, what is your problem? Don't talk to me now. The Japanese are watching us. Get in line.

Whatever there is a problem, we'll see. We can straighten it out. He says, no, it's a matter of life and death. So I said, I tell you what. You go to the bathroom over there and wait for me. I'll be there, and tell me your problem.

I went there. The guy was crying. I said, what happened? What's the matter? Are you all right? He says I'm all right, but all my documents are false.

The Japanese visa is false. The Curaçao transit visa. Everything is false. They'll find out, and they'll send me back to Russia. I said, well, get in line and don't worry. When the time comes closer, we'll see what we can do because I already knew. I was told that some of the visas were false, some of the documents were false, and somehow the Japanese closed their eyes and let these people through.

Anyway. When I came back, a Japanese policeman came up to me and he says, what were you doing talking to this man in the bathroom? I said, well, he was not feeling well. I had to give him some medicine.

Did you give him the medicine? Yeah, I gave him some aspirin or something. OK. He was in line. He was shivering, the poor guy. The others were also worried, but it all went through all right because we put that stamp.

I think that was guaranteeing their stay. 10 days, two weeks, three weeks, whatever was necessary. They were staying in Japan. I'll never know the real answer why they did. It's hard to say why. It's history.

OK. Do you have enough?

Two things. I just ran out of transcript tape, and I'm just hearing a little something. I'm not sure if it's--

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