

OK, rolling transcript.

So, let me just fix his shirt a little bit. It's a little-

Did you have to do a lot of negotiations on behalf of these refugees with the Japanese authorities for permits and visas?

I know that our president, Mr. [? Ponvi ?], had to travel a few times to Tokyo. He was called over there to-- he never told me what was the conversation about. He said it was confidential. So, with respect to him, I didn't ask him any questions. I personally was involved a couple of times with Japanese authorities asking permission for extension of visas for certain people.

And there was a Japanese customs in connection with some religious matters. I had to go and negotiate with them to get certain permissions to allow to import some food for Passover for the religious people. Remember, out of a few thousand people we had there--

We have to cut because of the helicopter. We can hear that and we don't have it on anything--

OK, so unfortunately, I have to ask you the question again. But did you have to negotiate with the Japanese on behalf of the refugees for visas?

I personally did not have to negotiate with them. I know that our president did. As I told you, he went to-- he was called to Tokyo a few times by the government. Which department of the government, I don't know. And he would come back and say the negotiations were pretty serious. And they were always very accommodating. Whatever we-- what did we need from these people, from the Japanese police, mainly extensions of their visas to stay in Japan.

And some of the religious problems that the rabbis-- there were over 1,500 rabbis and yeshiva-- and the students that had some difficulties in the food problems, especially when it came to Passover. And I had to go and negotiate with the authorities. And it was very simple. It was very-- they were very understanding.

Could you tell me the matzah story?

The matzah story-- in 1941, I believe it was, in February, three rabbis came to see me. Why I was involved in these negotiations was because I was the only one of our eight or nine people in the [? Jew-Com ?] that could speak Yiddish, and English, and Russian. So they would come to me with their problem. They could only speak Yiddish.

And they came to me in February and they said, Passover is coming in April. I said, yes. Well, what about matzah? What about the wine for Passover? I said, well, don't worry about it. We are also Jewish. We will require matzah and wine for Passover. And we will get it from the Jewish communities in Shanghai or in Harbin, where they were very well organized baking matzahs and providing the necessary food.

They said, no, that's not good enough for us. I said, what do you mean? We need only matzahs, and wine, and other products that will be sent to us from New York, from the Organization of Jewish Rabbis over there. I said, well, what do you want me to do about it?

They said, well, we prepared a telegram which they asked me to send. And I'm reading the telegram and it says, we, 1,380 or something rabbis and yeshiva students in Japan, Passover is coming, please provide us with the necessary food, matzah and wine for Passover.

And I looked at the telegram and I said, what do you mean you say you're only 1,380 people? There are 3,000 of us here. Oh, yes, yes, yes-- they apologized. I said, I tell you what, I'll send the telegram and I'll change it. Instead of 1,380, I'll put down 3,000. And I also put 3,035, because we 35 people who live in Kobe also want to have it.

Oh, yes, yes, yes-- and I sent the telegram. It was in February. In April-- I forgot all about it, frankly. In February, I

came to my office in the community. And there was a document, an envelope full of documents. I opened it up and there were bills of lading on various projects, like matzahs, five caskets of wine, and many other products, fish et cetera, et cetera, that were shipped from San Francisco, by way-- the Organization of Rabbis in New York probably instructed somebody in San Francisco.

And they-- these products were arriving about a week before Passover. The ship was arriving a week. So, I knew that importation of anything into Japan in those days was strictly forbidden. You had to have an import license. So, I ran to the Ministry of Finance. And I introduced myself. I told him what it is. They said, well, write us a letter from the community that these products are not for resale, that they're for special purpose only, for you people, and that you don't require any money to pay for these products.

I said, no, the money-- it's all donated, it's all free of charge. I ran back to the community. I wrote the letter, brought it to them. And it was accepted. I was extremely pleased and happy. And I spread the news, the ship is arriving in two days, the Passover is in four days, you will have everything. And it was good. But another rabbi delegation came to me the next day and said, we have a big problem.

I say, what's the problem now? Everything is coming. They said, the wine, the five caskets of wine, if it is not touched by a religious Jew they cannot have it for Passover. I said, what are you talking about? The Japanese customs people will have to open them, and take a sample, and check it out, what's in those caskets. I cannot tell them that they are not allowed to touch it. It's discrimination, I cannot tell them. Well, you have to think of something. The question was-- I'll never forget as long as I live-- do you want us to have Passover without wine? I said no, I want you to have wine.

So, I called up a chief of the customs in Kobe. He was a very, very interesting man. I asked permission to have an audience with him. And my idea was-- I asked the rabbis first-- would be all right if the customs will allow you-- two rabbis that I'll bring with me-- to go to the dock to open the casket themselves? And I brought two empty bottles. We'll fill those bottles with wine and they should be the samples for them to see what's coming in. Will that be all right? Yeah, that will be all right. That'll be kosher.

Anyway, I said that they should send me two rabbis, the most distinguished older looking men with white beards, et cetera, et cetera. They came. I took them to the customs man. And he was very, very interesting. He was a younger man, about 40s.

I came up, gave him my card. And I spoke to him. I said, do you see these two people? He said, yes. Did you ever see such people in your life? He says, no. I said, they are Jews. I am also a Jew. But you see the difference? I have no beard, I have no clothing, I have no hat. And he says, what is it? I said, they are our teachers, our rabbis. They're holy men. Oh, is that right? Very, very nice.

I said, the wine that's coming in is also holy. Only they can touch and only they can drink. Even I cannot touch it. He said, well, how can I help you? I said, well, here are two empty bottles. Please allow us to go to the dock. I'll go with them. They'll open the caskets. They'll take the samples of wine. And then everything will be all right.

He called up, in front of me, he called up the dock. I gave him the name of the ship and which dock, et cetera, et cetera. He says two very unusual people are coming. Allow them to do what they're asking to do, open the caskets. OK. We went there and they were very polite, very nice. We did what had to be done. Just before we left his office, he called me back and he says, come back, come back.

I came back to him. He says, look, I want to try this holy wine. I've never drank holy wine. I said, don't worry, you'll get it. So anyway, everything has arrived. And it was a relief, because for thousands of people that were waiting there, we had to organize trucks to deliver all these products to their homes. It was a big job to do. It was that. And I took a big basket and put their wine, and gefilte fish, and matzahs and everything that we received and they brought it to him.

He was very grateful. I say, historically speaking, this is the only time in the world I think that a Japanese man has a kosher Pesach holy day. Anyway, that's one of the things. It was pleasant. It was not hard.

Also, I had to do some negotiations-- they were not with the Japanese police, but some of the fellows, the young fellows, the Polish immigrants came to me and said they would like to volunteer-- the war was raging in Europe-- to volunteer to the British army. They were Polish citizens. And Poland was an ally of England.

And they asked me to go and talk for them to the British consulate, very confidentially, that they want to volunteer to the British army. So, I went there. And when I started to talk to the British consul-- Mr. Thomson was his name, I believe-- he stopped me right away. He says, don't ever come and talk to me about getting your people into the British army in this consulate. Japan is an ally of Germany. And I don't want my Japanese employees even to suspect that we are getting volunteers into the British army.

I said, but don't you want these people to volunteer into the British army? He says, yes. This story we're going to do it. You bring to me a list of their names. We will meet-- by telephone we would arrange a meeting at a bar somewhere over a bottle of beer. Give me the names and their addresses and leave everything to me. I said, OK. And we did it for a couple of weeks. About 30 boys volunteered. I used to call them up. We would meet over a bottle of beer. And I'll give him the names and addresses. And they were gone.

I found out later that the British-- the British ships were still sailing between Japan, and Hong Kong, Singapore, India. And he would place these people on those British ships as cooks, as assistants, as workers. And that's how they were transferred into Singapore, further on to Italy. Some of the boys, I found out after the war, were killed over there on the Italian front in the British army.

And that's how it was. Until one day this famous old man, the rabbi, came to see me. I was very concerned. It was in the evening, about 10 o'clock in the evening. He came and he wants to talk to me.

So, I thought maybe he was sick or something. I came down. And he was sitting there they calmly. And he says, I came here at 10 o'clock at night to ask you a question. I said, what is the question? He said, you see, we are Polish citizens. Yes. We are allies with the British. Yes.

What if we were not Polish? What if we were British? What would have happened to us? I said, well I think if we were British, the British government would arrange to send ships off after you and take you to some of the British colonies. Canada was still a British colony, Australia, many British colonies, and they would take-- he says, that's right. That's why I came to talk to you. We went for the British government, since we are their allies, to send ships after us and to take us out of here.

I said, I cannot go and talk about this. Who am I to talk the British government, the British consul. He says, well, he says-- he knew everything. He says, I know you're arranging things for our boys to join the British army, so you can do something about it. How he knew about it, I don't know.

Anyway, I called up the British consul and I said, look, do me a favor. I will bring tomorrow a man who is from the 18th century, the way he's dressed, the way he looks. And please do me a favor, listen to him. He was very upset, you see. He says, I'm a British consul, I know how to do my-- to do what I have to do. I said, look, I'm just warning you. And I'm asking you to have a due respect for this man. He's an old man.

He said, just tell me when you're coming and that's all there is to it. The next day, the rabbi, with his son, came to see me. We took a taxi to go to the British consulate, which is on the sixth floor in Kobe. I called him up and I said, we're coming. He says, OK.

We arrived there. And I was very, very surprised. The British consul himself was waiting at the bottom of the building. They opened the door of the taxi for us, which was very unusual. You know the British, they way they were. And we went upstairs. He listened to him.

And the rabbi said, we are the Polish citizens, allies of Britain. And that was a very bad time. That was the time of the Dunkirk evacuation when the British were having a very difficult time against the war with the Germans. And anyway, he listened to them. And he said, well, I can't make this decision. I understand your problem. I'll have to refer this matter

to the his Majesty's ambassador in Tokyo-- Sir Robert Craigie was his name, if I remember correctly. And I'll let you know.

We thank him. We went out. As we were going out, I asked the rabbi-- I said, rabbi, if-- by any chance, if there will be such a thing, if they will send ships after you, which is highly problematic, where would you like to go? He said, we want to go to Jamaica. I said, Jamaica? I, myself, didn't know at that time where Jamaica was. I said, why Jamaica? Why not Canada? Why not Australia?

Well, he says the climate over there is a very good one. I knew there was something fishy over there. I went home. I opened my atlas. And I looked where Jamaica was. It's very close to New York, you know. So they thought maybe if they went to Jamaica, eventually they'll be brought by the Jewish organization to the United States. And that was the end of the Jamaica story.

They never went to Jamaica?

Oh, no, the British never sent ships after them. It was all forgotten. And then things started to develop. It was, I think, in June-- in September, three months before Pearl Harbor, the Japanese military took over the jurisdiction over them from the police. And we were instructed, the Jewish community, to send them all out of Japan to Shanghai. It's the only place they could go without visas, without documents. And we had to send them all to Shanghai.

Did you realize how important your work was? Did you realize how much hope you were supplying these people?

No, I just knew that I had to do what I had to do. I was there in the right place and the right time. And not only I. I was the youngest one. All my friends that were helping-- this one was doing that and that one was doing this. And I knew I had to do it. My wife was very active in this, looking after the children. And we had to help.

What was going on in Europe at that time, we had a vague idea. But remember, this was before the Holocaust. The Holocaust came much later. And what happened, the tragedy, the millions of people that were destroyed, that's another tragedy that we didn't know at that time.

They were very, very worried and scared to go to Shanghai. Because there were, already at that time in Shanghai were about 20,000 Jewish, refugees from Germany and Austria that were allowed to come to Shanghai over five, six years time. And they knew that they will not be looked after like we were looking after them. And the climate was-- they heard the climate was not good in Shanghai and the food problems. But we had to tell them, listen, you have to go. And they went.

What was the atmosphere like in Japan right before they dropped the bombs on Pearl Harbor?

It was gradually--

So tell me-- in Japan, before they attacked the US.

I was in Japan in 19-- at that time, I had a new job. I had a job. I was running an office. I was hired by women who came from Panama, a Panamanian citizen when I met him. He hired me to be the manager of his office. It was very unusual circumstantial evidence, which was called Curacao Panama Trading Company. Of all the names, Curacao was there. At that time, of course, it was way before the Curacao visas were here. And it was a Panamanian registered office.

And my job was to oversee about-- we had about 20 Japanese employees. We were doing a lot of buying of Japanese products for shipment to South America-- Panama, Chile, Peru, and Curacao. At that time, Japan was not as industrially oriented as it became later, after the war. We were buying all kind of sundry goods-- toys, shirts, shoes, rubber boots, [? bath ?] clothing, all simple things that the Japanese were manufacturing right now, with textiles, of course, cotton.

And I was in charge of that office. And then my boss, Mr. Picker, Max Picker, was originally from Romania. He went to Panama when he was 18 years old. And eventually, they established a very interesting office. And he was leaving-- left

me in charge of the office. And at that time the refugees started to come in, in 1940-- in 1940 it was.

I said to him, Max, where are your parents? He says my parents are in Bessarabia, in Romania. I said, what? Look, this is burning under their feet. Look what's going on. People are running away. Jews are being arrested and et cetera. And Romania is an ally of Germany. I said get them out of there-- his mother, his father, and two sisters, young girls. He says, look, I'm well-to-do. I am able to do it. I'm writing my letters to my father asking him to leave and to come to Japan. I said, just bring him to Japan like all the others, via Moscow, via-- I'll take care of them and then we'll see what happens.

He says to me-- he shows me a letter. He says, I'm writing to my father and this is his reply. He stayed with me about three months so there was time to correspond. His father writes to him, where will I go? I'm an orthodox man with my wife, my children. I have my business. What kind of business, I don't know. I'm not going to leave my little place and go to Japan. What is Japan to me? What is-- I don't know. I'm staying here.

I said, Max, write to him. The Earth is burning under their feet. They must leave. Tell him to come here, then we'll worry about it. He says, look, I'm going to write him a letter. He showed me a letter. The correspondence was all in Yiddish.

He writes to them and says, look, I understand you don't want to go, and this and that, but if you ever decide to leave your place where you live and to come to Japan and then we'll worry about what to do next, send a telegram or a letter to this man-- he gave my name and address-- and then we'll see what happens. I said, Max, do you have on you any photographs of your parents and your sister? He says, yes. He says-- I have it-- documentation, et cetera. And he left with me his photographs. And he left. He went back to Panama.

And when Russia, the Soviet army occupied Bessarabia, part of Romania, that was one of the cities they occupied, where his parents lived. I got a telegram from him. I remember it so well. It says, the book that Max wanted to send me, I need it very urgently. I understood. Russians, Soviet army occupied that place. How am I going to get him out of there?

So, I found out-- some of the refugees were very-- they knew the ways around things. And one of them told me that the Chilean consulate in Kobe, you can buy from him Chilean passports. And if you send those Chilean passport to these people with their photographs there, their names, they might be able to travel to Moscow, from Moscow to Vladivostok, and then you bring them to Japan.

I want to see the consul. He was a very mean young fellow. I said to him, this is the situation. We have to help. We have to find a way to get the Jews from there. He says, you Jews, you think you can do everything for money. I said, I'd like to buy some passports. I know you're doing it.

He says, it will cost you \$5,000. I said, that's a lot of money, \$5,000. He said, see you, Jews, you say money is not important and when it comes to the lives of people, you bargain with me for money. I said, I'm not bargaining. I said have a heart. Have a decent human heart. People have to get out of there.

He said, all right, \$4,000, and bring it to me in cash, American dollars. In those days, it was not allowed to have American dollars. I'll find a way. I left to him the names and the photographs. I came to him in a few days. He gave me three passports. I brought the \$4,000. He gave me three passports, Chilean passports for these people.

And he says, you must promise me only one thing. If you ever bring him to Japan, I want those passports back. I don't want them to be left with them. I said to myself, to hell with you. I said, yes, of course I'll go and do it. For me, it's get them out of there.

Then I have a problem. I have three foreign passports, Chilean passports for three people, father, mother, and two girls. How am I going to send it to them? The Russians will-- I had a good friend of mine in the police, a Japanese-- a Russian speaking man, Mr. [? Kundo. ?] He was a very fine man.

I said to him, look, my boss was here. He's from Panama. He left me-- I couldn't say what the passports-- that's not done, you know. I said, he left me three passports for his family in Romania. How to send those passports to him-- to them? They should be able to get out and come to Japan. He says to me, give me a couple of days, I'll talk to the governor of the province. Maybe he'll give us some advice.

He came back in two days and he said, this is what the governor said. Send those three passports to the Japanese ambassador in Moscow, asking him to transmit those passports to these people in the occupied city. Or write to them they should come to Moscow to pick up their passports at the Japanese embassy. Maybe that will do it. I said, OK.

I sent those passports. That was about a month before Germany attacked Russia. And that was the end of it. They died. They were destroyed in Hitler's camps in Romania. I found it out about 20 years later. I was on my-- already in America. I was travelling. I found out that Max was in Caracas, Venezuela. That was the way he went, from Panama to Caracas.

I went there. I called him up. And it was a very interesting reunion. And he said, where are you staying? He came to my hotel in Caracas, Venezuela. And with a young-- he was not married when I knew him in Japan, but at that time he was already married. And he had three children. He lived in Caracas. He was a very well man to do.

And he came in a car with the driver. And there was a boy next to him. And he said, my boy will be barmitzvahed in about six months. Do you know what is his name? I said, no. He says I name him after you. I was so touched, you know.

I said, look, Max, your parents were destroyed. I know. I used his money to buy the passports. He was very, very upset. He was very-- I said, did you ever tell your children what happened? How you tried to get them out of there, and you couldn't, and they were destroyed? He says, no, I haven't got the heart to tell them. I said, I want to tell them.

He invited me for dinner to his house. And the beautiful woman to whom he was married, had two grown up daughters, 16 and 14, and a little boy of 13. And I came to his house. And in the bedroom I saw two big photographs of his father, his mother, and his sisters. I said, did you ever tell your children what happened? He said, no. I don't have the heart. I don't know if they'll believe me. I said let me tell them.

I took the photographs to the dining room, put them on the table. I said, children-- they spoke good English. I said, children, do you know who these are here? Says, yes, it's our grandfather, grandmother, and our aunts. They were destroyed in Hitler's camps in the Holocaust.

I said, let me tell you, I was a witness. Your father tried his best to bring them out of Romania through Japan. We don't know what would have happened, but he did try. But your grandfather for some reason or other didn't want to leave this place where they lived. But I want you to remember your father is not responsible in any way for the destruction of his parents and your grandparents.

Oh, they were upset. They were crying and this and that. And that's the story, one of the stories.

Let's change tapes.