

[INAUDIBLE] putting the tapes in. [LAUGHS]

OK.

All right.

At the beginning of the Pacific War, when you had floods of refugees coming in and stuff, what was the mood like in Kobe? I mean, you already told me that people didn't really want to go to Shanghai, but they had no other option. Were people panicked or--

I don't think there was any panic. We told them--

I'm sorry, start over with "at the beginning of the Pacific War" or-- you need to place the time.

I think it was in August of 1941 when the Japanese military was advancing in Indochina and in other places. The military took over the jurisdiction over the life in Japan. No more the police. It was the military that took over.

And they came to us and they told us that-- the refugees. And all the residents that had permanent visas like ourselves were those that had transit visas for a few days only had to leave for Shanghai. And they gave us-- I think it was 30 days. Of course, we had about 2,500, 3,000 people in those days. And we organized, we-- the Joint Distribution Committee sent the money to buy the tickets for them to go to Shanghai.

I spoke to some of them. They were very, very nervous, upset. They knew there were about 20,000 refugees already in Shanghai. They knew that the climate was not as good as in Japan. They didn't know where they will be put, how they will live, what's going to happen to them. We told them, all we can do is we send telegrams to the Jewish organizations in Shanghai to get organized to take care of you, just like we are trying to take over here.

The representatives of the Joint Distribution and other American Jewish organizations were already there in Shanghai. They were taking care over-- looking after the German and the Austrian Jews. Also, there was a very strong, financially powerful Sephardic organization in Shanghai, the Jews from Iraq, Syria, Egypt. And they got organized to help the people in any way they could.

And there were houses of worship, and hospitals, and their life was very well organized.

When did you leave Japan?

Now, as I told you before, I was working for a Panamanian firm in 1941 after Pearl Harbor. Panama has declared war on Japan, as an ally of the United States. Being a Panamanian firm, the military came to my office and sealed it off, closed it. Enemy firm. Although, I was not an enemy subject, but the firm was.

And I was left without any income, without any money. My wife's family was in Shanghai. My own parents were in Shanghai. And I wrote them a letter.

They said, you better come to Shanghai, because in Japan, strict quotas on food was already instituted after December of 1941. Not only for us, but for everybody. It was hard to get food. We were all rationed with bread, and rice, and sugar, or whatever necessary.

And in February of 1942, my wife, my little boy who was five then, and myself, we went to Shanghai. They allowed me to go. I mean, I didn't need any visas or anything. I had a Japanese residential permit. And we left.

So during the war years, we were in Shanghai.

And how was life for you in Shanghai?

[INAUDIBLE]?

How was life for you in Shanghai?

Well, not so bad. I mean, you know, we were--

I'm sorry, could you start with "life in Shanghai" or--

You see, we were not-- I don't know if you-- in 1941-- no, '43, I believe, under the influence of the Germans, who were Allies of Japan after Japan has occupied Shanghai, that they should get rid of the refugees.

So they came out with a proclamation that anybody who came to Shanghai after 1937 has to be segregated. They have to leave the places where they were in a place called Hongkou. Hongkou it was called, segregated area, which we called it a ghetto.

We came to Japan to live in Shanghai before 1937, so we were not-- we were the Russian Jews. We were not subject to this proclamation. But all the others had to go there. Life was not so bad. We lived among the millions of Chinese. Business was going on. Food was plentiful. And life for the refugees was not easy, especially for those that were segregated in the so-called ghettos in the Hongkou.

They were looked after by the Jewish organizations. They put them into schools, into warehousing. There were thousands of them. They had no right to leave that area to come to where we lived in the concessions-- pre-French concession and English international settlement, because they were under the Japanese proclamation. And life was pretty tough over there. Schools were organized. As a matter of fact, my wife was teaching in one of those schools, teaching English to the kids who couldn't speak any English. German-speaking kids.

Life was organized in a way-- we had our synagogues, we had our hospitals. We had a pretty well organized communal life.

What is the story behind your leaving to come to America?

The story of my coming to America. When I came to Shanghai in 1932, '33, '34, I always was thinking, I would like to go on and live in America. This was even before I was married. And then I sort of-- I went to the American embassy, I applied for a visa, and I thought, well, if it comes, it comes. If it doesn't come, it doesn't matter. I have a pretty good life in Shanghai.

But then in 1948, when the Chinese Communist army was advancing on Shanghai, we, the Jewish community people, got together, and we got organized, say, we cannot stay under the Communist occupation.

And I thought to myself, if I want my visa to go to the States to be processed upon, to be worked upon, I will not stay under the Communists, because it was during McCarthy times. It's not going to be easy to go to America. And already at that time, I had three children. I said, we have to give the children education, a life of their own to live.

And the only way we could go, we could leave Shanghai was to Israel. The state of Israel was established in '48. We, Jewish community leaders, got together, and we sent them a cable, telling them that we have a few thousand people that want to go to Israel. And they sent a ship after us.

And just before the Chinese Communists occupied Shanghai, about three months before that, the ship came, and we, about 800 of us-- that was our first group-- went on a ship to Israel. But we had to travel around the Cape of Africa, around Cape Town, because at that time, Israel was at war with Egypt. The ship could not go via the Suez Canal. The ship was under a Panamanian flag. The captain was a Greek. The crew were Italians. There were 800 of us.

It was a difficult time. We [INAUDIBLE] over 52 days. We went from Shanghai to Singapore, from Singapore to South

Africa, then all the way to Italy. In Italy, an Israeli ship picked us up, took us to Haifa. I stayed there. I had a very difficult time in Israel-- to settle down, to [INAUDIBLE].

In 1951, I got a request, an invitation from my former friend who was the president of the Jewish community, Mr. [PERSONAL NAME], to come to Japan if I want to. He had a store open in Japan. And since I could speak Japanese and I knew the text-- he was in the textile business. That's when I came.

And before I left for Japan, I went to the American embassy, and I told them, I am going to Japan, and I have an application for a visa for me and my family. Would you please transfer my papers to Tokyo? And they said, OK. Came to Tokyo, went to the American embassy. The file was there. I had to start from the beginning.

And when I came to Japan, it's at that time that I met Mr. Sugihara. He was working in the same store.

They called me in to the American embassy. And Ms. [? Bernard, ?] who was in charge of my file, said, you still want to go to America? I said, yes. Why? I said, well, I have children, I have the future for my children will be there. A free life, a free-- it was a good life. I can't stay in Japan all my life. I have to go to America.

So she kept on-- yeah, I was Russian-speaking, so the first question she asked me-- are you a communist? This was during the McCarthy time, remember. I said no. So she said to me, how do I know? How can you prove it to me?

I said, Ms. [? Bernard, ?] let's change places. If you were me and applying for a visa to go to America and you were asked if you were a communist or not, what would you say? Would you admit, even if you were a communist? She says, you cannot talk to me like this. I said, you are asking me a stupid question. I'm sorry. But I have a lot of friends, I come from a religious family, and I want to go to America.

Then one day-- she called me every month. The same question-- are you a communist, are you a communist? I said, no. Well, how come you speak Russian? I said, I was born in Russia, I could speak Russian. Anyhow, we'll let you know. And it went on. And I was not in a hurry to go to America at that time. Our oldest son was still--

I need to get back to our story, OK?

I understand.

Let's see. Could you help for a second?

Sure.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

When did you find out about the Holocaust?

I found out about the Holocaust already when I was in America in 1956.

So you didn't find out at all--

Oh, no, no. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Earlier, much earlier. In 1949, '48. Before we left for Israel, we knew already about what was going on. We didn't know the enormous situation, what happened. But we heard about the Holocaust. You want to know what happen--

So could you start again? You found out about it while you were in Shanghai.

That's right.

OK, so start-- tell me that.

News started to filter through after the war was over, what was happening. And the refugees at that time who lived in Shanghai, the Polish refugees, most of them have lost their family. So whoever they left behind, they started getting information that they were destroyed. And we got together, and we organized prayers in the synagogue for the memorial of those that were destroyed in Europe.

At that time, the state of Israel was already established in '48, and we knew that the number of Jews who were left alive from the camps that were freed from the various camps in Europe were on their way to Israel. So that's where we were going to go.

OK. So did you lose any close relatives, or friends, or anyone in the Holocaust?

I must have lost because they were living in Russia and occupied by the Germans, but I never was in touch with them, so I don't know.

Let's see. Could you tell me about the interview with the police where they asked the question, why do the Germans hate the Jews?

In 19-- when was it? In 1941, I believe, we received a telephone call from the Japanese military in Tokyo. We were in Kobe. That the Japanese military wants to talk to our representatives of the Jewish community, of the Jewish refugees that were, at that time, in Kobe. So our president who talked to him, he told me afterwards, he said, what kind of people, we have 3,000 people? What kind of-- what-- what do they want? Who do they want to talk to?

So the answer was, we want to talk to the-- send us three people, the highest. What do you mean "the highest?" Whatever. He said, we have so many different kind of people-- teachers, rabbis, Zionists, of all kinds.

Send us the three that are the highest. He says, I'll send you three rabbis. He says, what's a rabbi? He said, well, they're all teachers. How high are they? He says, they're next to God. That was exactly-- I was listening to the telephone conversation.

And so he asked me-- Mr. [PERSONAL NAME] asked me to ask three rabbis to accompany me to go to Tokyo, and there will be an interview-- you may call it interrogation, in some way, of the Japanese military want to talk to you. I was very nervous about it, but I went there, because I could only trans-- the only one I could translate from the-- the rabbi spoke in Yiddish. And somebody had to translate into English or Japanese.

Some of our Japanese friends, two of them, met us at the station in Tokyo. It was a nine-hour trip by train. And they took us to a Japanese officers' club, naval club in Tokyo. And we went there. They asked me-- they met us. They said, who are you? I said, I'm a Jewish [? medic. ?] I came over to interpret.

So this man said, we don't need any interpreters. I said, but how will you understand what they are talking-- they are talking in Yiddish. They said, our interpreters know very well German, and they will translate, so we don't need you.

I quietly told the rabbi-- I said to one of them, Rabbi [? Kalish ?], I said in Yiddish, I said, you don't know any German, you know only Yiddish, because I want to be there. I didn't know what they were going to do. They put me in a separate room, and I came back 10 minutes later.

They said, we need you, we cannot understand. So I went in there, and it was a pretty scary situation. There were four Japanese admirals in uniform sitting there with their shaved heads and their swords on the table. And all rabbis.

The rabbi opens the conversation, thanking them for allowing them to come to Japan. And it was a very profound, very interesting talk. I didn't know [INAUDIBLE]. I translated. I didn't know if they understood what they were saying, but anyway, whatever it was-- finally, one of them said, why is it that our Allies, the German people, hate you Jews so much?

So the rabbi said, well, they don't only hate me. You're next on the list. He says, what do you mean? He said, because we are also Asiatic people like you are. He said, what are you talking about? He says, you see, the Germans don't like anybody who is not like them, who is not blond, blue-eyed, and pure of blood.

So the general asked him, what are you talking about? He says, I read in the newspaper that in Berlin a Japanese employee of the Japanese embassy wanted to marry a German girl, and he was not permitted to do so, because he was not blond and blue-eyed. And you're next on the list.

So I don't think they liked the answer. But then anyway, it went on for a little bit more. And then they said, we'll let you know. And it took about two hours. They left.

Then they came back, and they brought some food that they knew that the rabbis could eat-- some fruits, some bananas, and some tea. And they apologized for having kept them for so long and travelled for a long time. They were not young people, these rabbis. And they also had two Shinto priests, Japanese priests.

And from then on, the conversation, for about three or four hours, went on a Talmudic/Japanese Shintoism conversation, the differences between religion. It was very interesting.

After it was over, then one of the generals said, go back to your home, you have nothing to worry about. We will not do to you what the Germans have done to your people. Go home and don't worry. That was it.

Great.

Why did they do it? I don't know. I cannot answer. After all, they were Allies with the Germans.

Sorry?

If he would take a sip of water, please?

Could you take a drink of water?

Yeah.

Thank you.

What role do you think luck played in the refugees--

Who?

Luck.

Luck?

Yes. In saving all these people?

I don't know if it was luck. Their coming to Japan-- this is the part I am concerned with-- was due to the fact that they received the Japanese transit visas from the Japanese consul in Lithuania.

Why he gave those visas even after we found out, I read about it, that he was told not to do it, but he continued doing it. Mr. Sugihara did. Why he did it, I will never know the answer. Political? Humane? I don't know. I cannot answer you this.

I can only answer what-- I was once asked the same question by the Japanese interview on television. They came to see me here about six years ago. They asked me the same question. Why do you think it was done? I said, I want to talk to

you off camera. I said, I'm a Jew. I'm not a very orthodox, religious person, but sometimes I think this was the hand of God.

What do you mean? I said, by doing that, giving visas, over 1,500 rabbis and rabbinical students were saved from death, so they could spread all over the world after the war was over and teach our people the words of our Torah, of our education. What's a Torah? They didn't know what it was.

In my room, I have five Books of Moses in English. I brought it to them and I showed it to them. I said, this is it. This is the basic of our cultural education. And if it wasn't for these people, it wouldn't have been taught to our people all over the world. But it has been. That is the reason, in my opinion. Sometimes I think that's the reason.

OK, could you tell me that one more time without referring to the Japanese crew or the-- just answer the question-- try it one more time without telling me the story about the Japanese TV crew, OK?

I'm sorry.

Answer, why did Sugihara give out visas?

Oh. I don't know the answer. I was asked--

Start with "I don't know why Sugihara gave them--"

I don't know Sugihara gave those visas. I read the books about it. There's a new book-- I don't know if you read it. It's called In Search of Sugihara. The man who wrote this book, Rabbi Levine from Massachusetts somewhere, he's asking the same question. Why did he do it?

I think that Mr. Sugihara wasn't able to answer this question if he were alive. But he's not alive anymore. And I'll tell you honestly, not having known this man and read about him, I don't think-- whatever he would have answered would have been the correct answer. I just don't know. It's a puzzle. I don't know why he did it. Political? He was a spy to begin with. He had his problems, he had his things to do, and maybe that's one of the things he had to do. I don't know.

When you worked with him in Japan, did you ever ask him?

I asked him a few times. He wouldn't want to talk to me about it. He just refused to talk to me about it. He was a very, how shall I say, bitter man. He was very self-enclosed. He didn't want to speak to anybody.

I think he felt himself, what they say in Japan, he lost face, having been working for the Japanese government, a consul, and all of a sudden, he's downgraded to be an employee of an American person and in charge of the Japanese employees. And he kept them all at-- he wouldn't even associate with them. Not that I knew of. A few times I asked him, let's go and have dinner, we'll talk about-- he refused.

Are there any stories that I have not asked you about that you feel are important about what it was like to have been a refugee or your interactions with the refugees?

Let's see. I told you about the one-- it was in August or so of 1941 when the orders came that they have to leave-- the refugees had to leave Japan for Shanghai. The orders came from the military that the ships that would take them-- every 10 days, there was a ship and about 500, 600 people were arranged to buy them tickets to go to Shanghai.

The ships would not come to the dock. The ship would drop anchor far away, and small boats would be sailing towards the docks where they were supposed to gather to go on those small docks afterwards to be transferred to the big ships.

And the orders were-- they had baggage with them, little suitcases, whatever they had, that they had to put on the floor. And the Japanese customs police or whoever it-- military would look at their things that they were taking with them. You know, just a procedure. And on the floor.

I went there a couple times to see them often, especially this old man, this old rabbi. And I went with him to help him. Of course, he didn't speak any-- the language. And he's holding in his hand a small packet. I said to him, Rabbi, the orders are you have to put it on the floor. He says, I'm not putting it on the floor. It is a Torah which I smuggled from Poland to Lithuania, from Lithuania to Japan, and now. It's a Torah. I'm not going to put it on the floor.

I said, Rabbi, you are dealing with Japanese military. They don't understand those things. Put it on the floor. He says, no. Let him kill me, but I'm not putting it on the floor. Go and talk to him.

I went to the officer in charge, and I explained to him, and he says, tell him to put it on the floor. I said he wouldn't do it. He says, what is it? I said, look, this is what you call a sacred thing. It's a Torah. What's a Torah?

I came to the rabbi, I said, can you open it and show it to him? It was wrapped in some towels and blanket, whatever. A small thing like that. He says, yes. He opened it up, and he opened the Torah, and the man looked at it. He says, what is it?

And I said, this is written in Hebrew, and it is Jewish culture, Jewish education. He says it is holy. He wouldn't put it on the floor. Shoot him, he's not going to put it on the floor. He says, OK. And one little thing, you know? And don't put it on the floor.

Then one day also, a few times I was asked by the police to come. They couldn't understand the language. They arrested some people for little things. And to translate. One day they called me. I went there, and there are two young students shivering. I say, what happened? I said, can I talk to them? Policeman said, yes, we arrested them. I said, why?

They were on the top of the building of the [? Daimaru ?] department store, which had a little zoo over there for children. And one of them had a camera, and they were taking pictures of each other. And the department store is facing the ocean. And the ocean over there, not far, was sailing a Japanese military ship. I said, well, they don't understand all this thing. I said, it was a misunderstanding.

Open the camera. I said, take the film that's there, throw it away, and let them go. The fellas never been-- they're from a small city in Poland. They've never been in an eight-story, beautiful building like this department store. They said, OK, but there's another problem. I said, what's the problem?

He said, we searched them, and on one of them pockets, we found an envelope which contained \$10. Dollars are not allowed in those days to be circulated in Japan. It was like a black market. You have to change them into Japanese money.

And these \$10 were in an envelope. And on the envelope was a name of a person and an address in English of someone who lived in Japan, one of our residents. So I said, what is this? They said, look. I said, this could be serious because dollars are not allowed. You are breaking the law.

I said, the important thing is they're going to bring that man whose name is on the envelope, for sure. They're going to ask him questions and you. And if you tell the same story of how you got the \$10 and how his name appeared on the envelope, then it will be all right.

But otherwise, if you tell different stories, because he will be questioned separately, there might be a little problem. Oh, they started to cry and yell. If we did, we broke the law, they might send us away from our school. I said, well, let's see what happens.

So just at that time, the man was brought in, the local resident. He saw them. He looked at them, and then they said, look, we are religious people. We have to pray, it's 5 o'clock in the afternoon.

And I said to the police, is it allowed that they pray? They said, yeah, let them pray. They came to the window, and they started to [INAUDIBLE], you know. And they started to yell. And one of the prayers in Yiddish, they started to say to

this man, you tell him like this, because we told him like that. It should be the same.

And he understood right away. He said, I also want to pray. They gave him the permission, and he told them what he said. They took them both to separate rooms for interrogation. And in 10, 15 minutes, they said, they told the same story!

Because they rehearsed it, you see. And they let them go, and they said, that's all right, don't worry about it. Only thing is sign the paper that you will change the dollars tomorrow in the Japanese bank into Japanese money. And that was the end of it. It was not a serious situation.

Great.

Let's change tapes.

That's it?

We have to end.

We're at 36, yeah. How much time? Uh-- that-- I mean, with 30 minutes, 36 seconds, I would-- yeah, OK.