

Interview w/ Samuel Bak

Oct 28, 1985

Fortunoff Video Archive

1. early pictures \ family, home town
 2. born — Vilna 1933 52 yrs old
- 3 daughters / married / s.
 - est 80,000 prewar Jew pop.
 - liberated 1/200 survivors in the city by Red Army
 - lottery no. - no of miracles, strange circumstances
 - 12 at war's end
 - survivors = ^{closed} club of talkers never to be revealed 2 outsiders
 - groups of people in the DP camps talking to one another

very benign

for a child

- Outbreak of war: home → hotel for refugees
- his father a dentist; place diamonds into false teeth
- Soviets confiscated maternal grandparents apt
- only their aquarium was salvaged
- both grandparents now reunited
- mother disregarded warnings of German. Four refugees
- cannot give up her life! anyway, people exaggerate
- Summer 41: in a dacha w/out parents
- returned to bombs falling → into the cellar for 1st time
- lived in 1st new apt building in Vilna
- his father asked to help rescue people in bombed building next door
- he found head of murdered girl
- imp. to protect children from these experiences
- father taken to work camp while they still remained in their apt
- Judenrat demanded all their gold to pay ransom
- mother gave everything away
- sold father's tuxedo: 1st thing to go! in return for sack of potatoes
- "What War One Day Like?"
- seldom ventured outside into streets "Ponary" was still beautiful place where his aunt had a dacha; no knowledge yet of the slaughter
- both grandfathers taken away forever - rounded up in streets
- rainy day: police tell them 2 evacuate w/only suitcase
- Xenia their Russian maid stayed w/ them
- mother panicked: suitcase, me & pillow
- Grand all Jew. neighbors standing below; raining
- saw caravan of Jews on the road in the rain; procession

- carrying a ~~to~~ rain-soaked pillow as he threw away
- arrived in poorer part of town: Old Bhetto
- "day before" it was evacuated / killed off local Jew. pop.
- looked like original inhabitants had just left: food, coffee, cats, clothes scattered around
- mother disoriented; he shivering from cold / wet
- mother didn't take necessary things
- given a coat of someone's grandchild who had just been killed
- quickly became extremely crowded
- recalls comic incident: forgot the keys of her abandoned apt
cried an evacuated woman.
- man hanged himself then in tree; mother protected him from it
- allowed out of the ghetto to visit mother's aunt who had been
forcibly baptised by ^{Polish} Russian court; married off to son of clergyman
- instrumental in their survival
- raised in Benedictine Monastery school; sisters agreed to hide them in closed part; just in front of their old apt!
- brought over his father, another aunt, etc 6 all-told
- given daily lessons in Catholicism; he was allowed to listen to organ playing; loved the sculpture / stained glass
- supposed his parents were pleased: if Catholicism would help him later; or maybe not, just placating the nuns
- meanwhile Aktioner going on inside the ghetto
- then down to ~ 20,000 (admits his hist. knowledge spotty)
- nuns worried about their own security; too near to army blocks.
- father/uncle built hide-out in monastery
- Russian bombs struck → Army accused nuns as collaborators
- they escaped by climbing into roof space below ceiling
- drank dirty snow from the roof
- father tried to escape but found German soldiers everywhere
- 3 days of fasting; tried to escape thru neighboring roofs
- "zaczaj" to get out via rooftops
- father pretended he was a priest (nuns → street)
- went to their aunt again; eventually joined a work brigade to reenter the ghetto
- 1/2 yr to yr later

- remembers utter cleanliness of the rooms → filthy of ghetto
- attended school for 1 day before that; Soviet-style indoctrination; mother took him out
- ghetto children all had shaven heads; so mother refused to send him there; not until DP camp in Ludenberg did he attend a school
- NO MENTION OF YIDDISH K-G!
- had a cut in their new lodgings; lived from food coupons
- father worked for German unit as dentist
- then this was prohibited on racial grounds
- then became an ^{expert} welder; Germans created gas fueled cars
- coopted skilled Jews to work there;
- saved them from liquidation in Sept '43
- mother an accountant in Judenrat
- he spent the days drawing / printing: illustrating Bible stories
- spent hrs. reading; read Russian, Polish; learned Yid. in ghetto
- (spoke Polish at home); mother found him a tutor for math, geog.
- tutor showed off his art to Kaczerginski / Dutkewicz
- 9 yrs. old had 1st exhibition; 2nd opening
- day before smaller ghettos liquidated; few survivors dumped in courtyards of Vilna ghetto - passed thru them on his way to his opening; he felt only pride then
- became "Little Mozart" of the ghetto
- thinks some of them still exist, somewhere
- Kaczerginski gave him old oyo from 19th cent - asked him to draw in blank pages! Drew Tom Sawyer, Samson inside oyo
- took it w/ him to a camp for slave laborers in gas-fueled trucks
- "Hakape Camp" now surrounded by barbed wire
- proud to have been taken out of ghetto.
- knew the end was near; Soviet advance; mass liquidation
- his best friend was shot - dropped from hiding place
- more friendship in ghetto than before / after
- both extremes came to the fore
- Samuel was his prewar friend
- children under 12 in work camp exempted from work
- women worked on ^{repairing} uniforms

- men chopped wood for fuel; others no welders
- still had his oyd w/him in '43
- ~ 80 children there w/him; lots of snow
- get as far away from uniforms as possible
- every Jew made responsible for others //
- everyone wore metal ~~numbers~~ dog tags: appell ee dog
- if anyone was missing, 10 were shot on either side
- set up gallows to see hanging of 3 people who had escaped
- when the rope tore father begged for clemency; SS men shot him
- other numbers also ~~are~~ hanged
- again rumors circulated abt. German losses; ∴ would want to eliminate all trace of Ponary, atrocities
- once surrounded by trucks / morning came to shouts that all women & children had to come out
- grabbed away by a friend before they gave themselves up.
- could see / hear everything going on outside
- then Germans separated women from their children
- shooting, screaming (cries at this) - 2nd convoy tries to separate them; ~~at~~ all of this over after 2 ~~hr~~ or 3 hrs
- unbelievable sound of crying people
- parents went mad to see 2-3 ~~at~~ surviving children when all the others had perished
- ∴ so many had been killed, mother figured this was time to escape
- father bribed Wehrmacht guard
- no exact tally existed → back to aunt
- aunt's maid walked by camp w/ mother's basket as sign that she was alive; how, then, to take Sam out
- hid him in sack used for wood; joined work force that carried chopped wood; crossed whole camp w/ Shmuel in a sack; hundreds of other sacks
- staged a mock fight to distract the Germans
- friend then threw him out the window / maid waiting for him on other side; walked very slowly alongside camp.
- mother was incredulous
- never saw his father again (cries)

Now what? - found ~~top~~ lodgings for a lot of \$

- child cannot scream when rats bite him; so old lady refused to risk it; cross a bridge; mother prob. wanted to jump off
- asked her many yrs later; would have taken him too
- returned to monastery; heard that some nuns had returned from German labor camp; bldg. had severe central archive of confiscated papers; ~~nuns~~ Jews worked there on papers
- miraculously, one of their non-friends admitted them
- nun returned hr. later w/ 2 Jews; a hiding place already existed
- nuns ~~forced~~ appealed to them to admit 2 more
- was like a miracle: food, protection
- no noise at all; only at midnight could they creep out for toilet; Lithuanian defrocked priest brought them their food
- knew that ghettos, labor camps were liquidated
- ~~father~~ discovered father's death only after liberation; shot few days before Red Army
- his ojo discovered in Huzkape; bloodstained ojo is in Vilna Municipal Museum

(future flash 1966: director of museum visited him to confirm that book could be suitable for retrospective)

- lived in /with books: 1 of them would trans. from 1 lang → another these old protocols; doesn't remember what he did
- lived right below German HQ
- 2 wk long bombardment; hand-to-hand combat in streets
- sees humor in situation: Mumy, re Germans bombing the Mona Lisa in the Louvre? Made everyone laugh
- Germans escorted to bldgs.
- returned to their room; Polish militia saw the smoke & discovered them; tried to get the Germans to deal w/ them but killed by stray bullet

DAY OF LIBERATION

- whole city in flames; bodies covered w/ flies
- smell of rotting human flesh
- returned and more to their Christmas zunt
- "funny" bridge now down; crossed by boat
- mother found ~ 200 survivors

- then learned father's body sighted in Poznań
- no help for Jew. survivors under Soviet control
- ∴ needed to find work
- mother became cleaning lady in grocery for NKVD → book-keeper → assistant director
- little school organized in immediate aftermath
- meets Kaczerginski/Sutcliver who tried to help
- Peretz Markish showed up w/ pair of socks for June
- Bulc was known thru Sutcliver's memoirs
- then mentions sculpture of Moses given to Gen (found broken in Gen's office after his suicide ??)
- mother learned of plan to take him to ^{Moscow to school} ~~Russia~~ for talented children
- ∴ mother decided to flee Vilna
- spent his days printing; mother found ^{Polish} Prof. of Academy to give him lessons; she became ~~the~~ only pupil; ≠
- mother decided to head for American-Zone
- ~~another~~ sister & daughter also survived; when they returned to Vilna his mother couldn't believe her eyes
- all 4 of them crossed into Poland in '45
- lottery game of taking 1st train to Lodz instead of 2nd because mother was witness for a karyesoo trial
- attended school for ~ 2 weeks in Lodz
- way ahead of other children & the only ~~child~~ Jew
- everywhere they went she found him printing instructors
- in Lodz found him a very good teacher for watercolors
- aunt became adept at black market
- enough left over to pay teacher
- Is this is a still life or may I eat it? would ask her cousin because family folklore
- mother rescued them once again by avoiding Russian control & bribing the conductor
- Russians discovered the Jew. organization was forging papers
- 2nd wagon was where house-on-wheels!
- mother worried for the girl & for herself
- When I think of what my mother went thru, she was a real hero.

- she recognized that Soviet officer who found them out was Jew, addressed him in Yid. & he took them out of there
- she berated the American rabbi (breaks down zevin) for suspecting them of feigning their Jewishness
- spent 2 yrs in Landsberg
- arrived in Israel after war had already begun
- mother remarried survivor of Dachau from Landsberg administration
- ~~lived~~ surrounded by other survivors

- Dumas & Scott could never have imagined things that happened to me → nourishing his art
- became a Wandering Jew; I really don't know why
- had no ability to est. myself somewhere
- in a certain way all his experiences have become leitmotif \ w/ I am printing ... in a symbolic way
- of a world that was shattered ... effort to put pieces together even tho it is impossible
- as if it was whole ... & live w/ it
- even happy, gay color have gone thru some catastrophe

- considers himself fortunate that his daughters grew up in Israel
- his celebrity as painter got him on radio, TV
- thru these media could tell his story to his children indirectly
- "this stupid feeling of guilt" (rejects Woody Allen)
- you don't know why → someone died because of me!
- it took me yrs to liberate from this crippling feeling
- nothing was my own personal choice; imposed on me by some games of destiny
- asked his daughters to see Shoah; cried thru it
- knows that others like himself were crippled for life
- had problems of a religious nature
- developed in monastery very strong feeling for Jesus, suffering, guilt, forgiveness
- after liberation he would go to church w/out telling his mother; smell the incense, listen to choir
- began his own dialogue w/ God

2/6/04

Landsberg approaching in v's'n - 12

- only if God asks forgiveness I'll do my v's'n - 12
- refused 2 go thru w/ it
- recited then "as a believer"; still angry at Him
- very diff for him to participate in Jew. ritual
- cannot see pos. side of it

2/11/39

- so terribly unjust to be the chosen people
- but I also understand how profound, new diff things for diff people
- "I think I am religious because I'm so mad ^{with} ~~at~~ him!"
- # I most probably am religious...