

January 1, 1940–May 18, 1941

Lithuania

Upon release from the police station, I was taken by a cousin to his house. There I was hidden in the attic while papers were prepared. A few days later, I was given papers stating that I was born in Ejszyski. I was now free to move about and I became one of the community.

Sometime later, while walking with others on the main street, I saw the police officer who had arrested me. He spoke to another officer and pointed to me. Not long after, the policeman approached and asked for my papers. He checked them and returned them to me. I am sure he was looking for more money. But I was now “legal” so he failed. Corruption and bribe taking were rampant among the Lithuanian officials.

When Ejszyski had been under Polish rule, I had visited my cousins there a few times. Now it was different; I was a refugee in their home. Our cousins, a mother with two daughters and a son, received us with open arms. The mother, named Odese Schuster, was a niece to my maternal grandmother. One of the daughters, Rivka, had spent her young years with my maternal grandparents and with us. The other daughter, Shoska, was married. Their brother was named Chonia. The love and affection that they gave us was unbelievable.

The family had a third daughter, Matla, who had left with her husband for Palestine a few years earlier. They arrived there illegally as part of Aliya Bet, the second wave of the modern Jewish return to Palestine.

As soon as we arrived in Ejszyski, we wrote to my grandfather in Lida about our crossing. After waiting weeks for a letter from him, we received word from people who crossed the border regularly. His message was that we should not write to him any more. We obeyed his request.

Not long after my arrival, mother found an apartment and we all moved in, including my grandmother. To this day I do not know the financial arrangements mother made that allowed us to survive. I never asked and was never told. I can only assume that money was lent to mother by her sister. I base this on the fact that my father gave my aunt over six thousand dollars when she and her son Mitchell arrived in Boston after the War. In those days father had no checking account. So he gave me cash and I wrote the check to my aunt. I still have the cancelled check.

Ejszyski was small compared to Lida. The town was surrounded by small farm villages from which the peasants came to trade. The focal point was the town square, with stores and residences. Life there felt confined. The Jewish community was closely knit; every one knew each other. The community had an amateur theatre, a soccer team, and synagogues. Friday afternoon most of the work stopped and preparations for the Sabbath began. When the Sabbath weather was nice, the older people dressed in their best, sat in front of their houses, and watched the younger generation stroll. I had some friends from previous visits and I made many new ones. I became the referee for the soccer team and traveled with them whenever there was a game.

A few weeks after arriving in Ejszyski, I left for Vilno to join a Hachshara, a group of Zionist young people in training for emigration to Palestine. Training as a group was necessary to determine if the group would be compatible living together in a future settlement in Palestine. This particular group was made up of members of Hanoar Hatzioni. When I arrived I found people from all over Poland, including many national leaders.

At the Hachshara I worked in a bakery, which at that time was baking Matzos for Passover. We studied Zionist and Jewish history. For recreation we had discussions, Hebrew songs, and dances. I must mention that we drew lots to select people who would go back across the border to try to bring more people out. None of us thought about this twice. I did not have to go but the drawing of lots was something that I have never forgotten.

It turned out that I was at the Hachshara only a few weeks. I came down with pneumonia and left for home in Ejszyski.

While in Lithuania, I had the opportunity to travel and visit cousins whom I had never before met. These cousins resided in the town of Alita, which was part of pre-World War II Lithuania. Alita was about 30 kilometers from Ejszyski. One day I decided to go there by bicycle. I arrived on the outskirts of the town, not knowing where my cousins lived. I saw a young man and asked if he spoke Polish or Jewish. He answered in Jewish by asking me who I was looking for. I said the Ingel family and he answered "I am an Ingel." I was surprised and happy to find that he was my cousin. This was fate; to arrive in a strange town, not knowing the language, and for my cousin to be the first person I met.

The Ingel family were related to my maternal grandfather. I was taken by my cousin, whose name was Samuel, to meet his mother and sisters. Sam survived the war by hiding in the forests. He and his beautiful wife Leah came to the United States after the war's end. Sam Ingel and I were named after the same great grandfather Shmuel.

I visited with the Ingels for a few days and then returned home. This visit occurred after the Russians occupied Lithuania on June 17, 1940. Lithuania then became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were absorbed at the same time. So once again I was under Russian rule. In the course of one year, we Jews had pledged our allegiance to the Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian governments. Having to do this strengthened my belief in the righteousness of the Zionist cause.

Life under the new Russian rule seem mostly unchanged. But mother began suggesting that I should visit different places and towns. (I made my trip to the Ingels on her suggestion.) One day I learned that mother's desire to see me travel had a purpose. My cousin Mitchell inadvertently told me that the Russians were looking for me in Lida.

This information came from my grandfather in Lida. He was told by a friend of my father's who worked for the police. It seems that our former maid Nadia saw me bury the flag of Hanoar Hatzioni and told the Russian police. To this day, Zionism is considered to be counter-revolutionary in the Soviet Union. Grandfather transmitted the information as a warning to me through my mother. Mother, however, did not want to upset me by telling me. So she suggested that I travel, thus keeping me on the move.

I would have done anything to protect that flag. The flag and our national anthem Hatikva meant a great deal to me. They gave us something we could see, hear, and identify with in our longing for a free Jewish State in Palestine. The only items I carried with me after leaving Lida were my grandfather's prayer book, which I had used for my Bar Mitzvah, the tefillin that my father gave me, and some pictures of people and places of my past. Without a past there can't be a present and without a present there can't be a future.

I recall two incidents of very little importance that occurred while we were in Lithuania. One day my younger brother got sore at mother and decided to leave home. Shlomo was twelve years old at the time. He walked out of the house and none of us said anything; we just watched him. After a while he saw that none of us were following him and he decided to return. The other incident was at a dance. I was told to say something in Lithuanian to a girl with whom I was dancing. Next thing I was slapped. To this day I don't know what that phrase meant.

Visas

On August 8, 1939, one month prior to the outbreak of World War II, our application for immigration visas to the United

States had been registered at the American Embassy in Warsaw. Father had entered the U.S. in 1937 on the Polish immigration quota. He subsequently obtained permanent residency. American law then gave him the right to apply for preferential immigration visas for his immediate family.

The war had interrupted the processing of our visas. I was told that, after the Germans occupied Poland, the application papers were sent to Berlin, then to Kaunas in Lithuania, from there to Moscow, and finally to Kobe, Japan. Now, in the middle of the summer of 1940, we heard rumors that the Japanese Consulate in Kaunas was granting visas to Japan for people who had valid permits to enter other countries. Mother, her sister Esther, and many other people were intrigued and began to make inquiries.

Soon, mother and my sister Mira left for Kovno (Kovno is spelled in many ways. Kaunas is the Lithuanian and Kowno the Polish spelling). I stayed behind in order not to be exposed to the Russians. In Kovno, the British consul acted in the name of the Polish Government in Exile and issued us temporary Polish passports on August 1, 1940. From there mother and Mira went to the Japanese Consulate to obtain a transit visa to the Dutch colonial island of Curacao in the Caribbean Sea. On August 9, 1940, the Japanese Consul, named Senpo Sugihara, issued the visa.

To this day, I am not certain why the Japanese took the trouble to issue visas to us Jewish refugees. I have heard speculation that the Japanese government was grateful for Jewish assistance in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905. Or it may have been that the Consul in Kovno, observing the distress around him, acted out of humanitarian motives. Whatever the reason, again God was with us.

Across the U.S.S.R.

There was at that time a short period during which the Soviet government allowed non-citizens with visas to other countries to leave the Soviet Union. The German-Soviet nonaggression pact was in force and Russia was more or less at peace.

The government travel agency Intourist obtained exit visas and made the arrangements for transportation, hotels, meals, etc. Intourist required payment in American dollars, despite the fact that possession of foreign currency was illegal. When mother observed to the Intourist agent that it would be illegal for her to obtain dollars, she was told that if the N.K.V.D. should question her, she should say that the money is for Intourist; then it would be okay.

As we prepared to depart, we recognized that my grandmother, being eighty-two and in poor health, could not make the trip. It was decided to leave her in Ejszyski with her niece and our cousin Odese. This was not an easy decision. The only solace I had was that, by this time, grandmother was not cognizant of what was happening around her. There are many times I think of her, with sadness and regret.

The thought of going to Japan was mind-boggling. Japan was known to me only from my studies in school. The thought of seeing my father again became more real. For a time nothing else mattered. I forgot about the war being waged around us as we prepared for the long voyage.

I was anxious to get out of Russia; the reports coming out of Lida were sad. Many people were being arrested and sent to Siberia for the crime of being a businessmen, a land owner, a Zionist, or a so-called enemy of the State. The Russians finally showed their true colors and it was not pretty. For some, banishment to Siberia turned out to be their salvation. Hitler could not reach them and they survived the War.

In all of Europe, not more than two thousand Jews were able to escape to Japan. Among them were my mother, brother, sister, and myself. My aunt Esther, her husband Boris, and son Mitchell also were among this small group.

At the end of January 1941 we left Ejszyski for Vilno, where we boarded the train to Moscow. On the train I remained in the compartment in order to avoid being seen by people who might recognize me. There were rumors that some people were taken off the train, although I could not verify this.

Arriving in Moscow, we were put up in a very nice hotel. We went to the American embassy to obtain the visa to the United States. There we were told by the Acting Chief of the Consular Section, a Mr. G. F. Reinhardt, that as we were to leave Moscow shortly, there was insufficient time to process our formal application. The embassy would therefore transmit our papers to Mr. Samuel Sokobin, the American Consul at Kobe, Japan. A copy of the transmittal statement was given to mother.

We now had a few days to spend in the capital city of Russia. We took advantage of the time to see Moscow under the supervision of an Intourist guide. Among the sights were the Moscow subway, the Museum of Religion, Lenin's Tomb near the Kremlin Wall, and a short tour of the city.

The Museum of Religion was primarily an anti-religion exhibit mocking the major religions of the world. Sacred items were displayed in a way that made fun of them. The subway was large and clean. This was my first experience on a subway and I certainly was impressed. Lenin's Tomb was quite a sight. We stood in line for some time to enter the mausoleum, where soldiers in dress uniform stood at attention. Lenin looked alive as the visitors were marched quietly by, somberly paying their respects. There were always lines waiting to enter the mausoleum. From what I saw, the city itself was dreary. The Moscovites moved fast and quietly.

Departure day finally came. We were ready to board the Trans-Siberian Railway for an unknown future. I don't recall the exact day we left Moscow. According to my passport, we entered Japan on February 24, 1941. It took more than two weeks to travel through Siberia and to cross the Sea of Japan. It seems then that we must have left Moscow during the first week of February 1941.

On the train, Mother, Mira, Shlomo, and I were given a compartment. We had privacy as we settled for the long and unknown journey. I keep saying unknown because we were not sure what the Russians would do; no one trusted them.

When we departed it was very cold. Heading east to Siberia we knew it would become colder yet. We traveled through the

Ural Mountains, passing through the towns of Chelyabinsk and Omsk. Many times the train had to back up in order to get more power to climb a grade. Every time this happened, we thought our journey had come to an end.

We crossed the great Yeisei River at Krasnoyarsk and arrived in Irkutsk, the capital of Eastern Siberia, located near Lake Baikal. Just before reaching our destination of Vladivostok, we passed through the Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan. This was supposed to have become a Jewish region within the Soviet Union, the Communist answer to Zionism. The experiment failed miserably.

For two weeks we did the best we could to pass time; playing cards, socializing, and hoping for the best. The train made stops on the way but we were forbidden to get off. When we reached Siberia, the frost became so bitter that opening the car door without gloves made one's hand freeze to the door. I remember seeing chained prisoners walking outside in deep snow, soldiers with bayonets guarding them. It was a sad sight.

On the train were Jews from Germany, Poland, and other Eastern European countries. The German Jews were the worst; they used to say to us that Hitler should get us. They felt we were inferior to them. We complained to the Russian conductor. He admonished the Germans and said they would be taken off the train if such talk were to continue. These same Germans who held us to be inferior made sure they were first in line for visas to Palestine when we arrived in Kobe.

I remember well one conversation I had with a Russian on the train. Talking about Russia, he remarked that it did not matter to him if Stalin or the Tzar ruled Russia, as long there was bread on the table. It is quite a statement.

With God's help, we made it to Vladivostok, the largest Russian port on the Pacific Ocean. To get there, we had traveled through a good part of Europe and all of Asia. After being confined on the train for almost two weeks, we were on solid ground again. We were all excited that the ordeal of traveling through Russia was finally coming to an end.

At Vladivostok, Russian customs guards searched for valuables. Mother had been given a gold watch by someone, perhaps by her sister. The guards confiscated it and gave her a receipt. Mother was told the watch would be returned to her when she returned. After the guards checked our papers, we boarded a small Japanese cattle boat and were on our way to Japan.

Japan

As soon as the Russian officials left the boat and we were in international waters, everyone on board spontaneously began singing the Zionist national anthem *Hatikva*. The boat ride was hard. The seas were rough and most of the people were not accustomed to spicy Japanese food. I was among the few that endured the trip without any complications. On the second day we arrived on the west coast of Japan, at the port city of Tsukuga. It was a small port, clean and beautiful. All of a sudden I was in a new world.

We entered Japan on February 24, 1941. My first impression was of a fairyland, with small houses, flowers, clean streets, and very polite people. I had my first banana; never before had I tasted anything like it. As a matter of fact I ate so many bananas while in Japan that I developed a rash.

On the day of our arrival we boarded a train for Kobe, just two hours away. Arriving in Kobe, we were put up in a house with other people. This home was our shelter for the next few months, until our departure for the United States and our reunion with father and with mother's brothers and sister.

In Kobe we completed the process, begun almost two years earlier in Poland, of applying for a visa to the States. We filled out the necessary papers. Father was required to send an affidavit guaranteeing that we would not be a burden on the U.S. government. The affidavit had to be signed by a financially sound person who would guarantee us work. Through his work in the Prime Restaurant, father knew Mr. Simon Rosen, a well-known dress manufacturer. Rosen signed the af-

fidavit. Many years later I met him as he was a member of Temple Emeth.

We had to submit to physical examinations. We were also asked questions. One question remains with me: "If a whole roof needs 200 shingles, how many does a half of roof need?" The answer they were looking for was none: a whole roof does not need any shingles. After two months of waiting, we received our passport to freedom on April 30th. Life would have been much more enjoyable in Japan had we known the outcome of our application. As the world situation worsened, our apprehension rose with it.

The Joint Distribution Committee was responsible for allocating the financial support given to the Jewish refugees in Japan. The J.D.C. was a Jewish-sponsored organization in the United States devoted to helping the refugees. As soon as we were settled in Kobe, offices sprang up representing the different Jewish organizations: the Zionists, religious groups, etc. The Zionists were in charge of obtaining certificates to enter Palestine. The religious groups were in touch with their brother organizations in the States and in Palestine.

I spent my time walking through the city, going to stores, and waiting for the visa. We had a language barrier. Some Japanese spoke Russian or German. I spoke to them in Jewish. I didn't understand them and they didn't understand me; so I also spoke with my hands, which was an international language. Somehow we understood each other.

I never worried about getting lost as there was always someone who knew where we lived. You have to understand that we were physically different from the Japanese and so instantly recognizable. On the whole the Japanese were very friendly to us. There was no anti-semitism. If they did not like us, it was because we were white and European. We felt tension building up in Japan, but we did not know the reason. In December of that year we got the answer at Pearl Harbor.

The Pacific

As I mentioned above, we received our visa on April 30, 1941. A few days later we left Kobe for Yokohama. In Yokohama we stayed in a hotel while waiting for our ship. While checking out I found a five dollar bill on the floor. I remember it clearly as I thought it was a good omen.

On May 6, 1941, we departed Japan on the Japanese ship Heian Maru. The trip was pleasant. I had a destination. Once in the United States, my status as a refugee would cease to exist. It was a good feeling.

The ship cabin we occupied was in the middle, without windows, but we were glad to be there. During the voyage a religious problem arose. Crossing the International Date Line, the Rabbis on board were not sure on which day Sabbath fell. They sent a telegram to Palestine for an answer. I am sure the issue was settled but I did not inquire as to the result.

The ship traveled northeastward on the Pacific toward the Aleutian Islands. Finally, on May 18, 1941, we arrived in Seattle, Washington, U.S.A.

My aunt Esther and her family had to stay behind in Japan as they had not yet received their visa. Sometime around Pearl Harbor they were interned in Shanghai for the duration of the war. My uncle Boris became ill, died, and was buried in Shanghai. Esther and Mitchell arrived in the States in September 1946.