**TRACK 01 - Intro to Recording**

Today is Sunday, the 20th of January 2013. This recording is of artist and Holocaust survivor, Samuel Bak. It is being made at his home, outside of Boston, Massachusetts. This recording is a production of Story Preservation Initiative. All rights reserved.

**TRACK 02 – Vilna, Poland 1933**

My name is Samuel Bak. I was born in 1933, an ominous date. That’s when Hitler came to power in Germany and this certainly was shaking up the world, very much the world in which I lived. I was born in Vilnius. Today Vilnius. Today it is the capital of Lithuania. But then it was called Vilna, and it was part of Poland. The frontiers in Europe have moved a lot since then. Since I was born in that time, so many things have happened. We live today in a very different world. But then, I remember an extraordinarily happy childhood, interrupted by sudden war; completely destroyed by the arrival of the German army; then the Russian Army; then the loss of a large part of my family; then my becoming a displaced person; my getting to Israel, as a refugee, in ’48, with the creation of the State of Israel; and then my moving out from Israel in ’56 to study in France painting, dedicating my life to painting. Not doing anything else besides painting, until this very day. Living in various countries, every time keeping my roots available in a small suitcase that I was taking from one place to another. Ended up finally, about 20 years ago, in the United States, where I became a citizen. My family, my grandparents and their parents, and the parents of their parents, all of them were what you call Litvaks. It means these were Lithuanian Jews. The Jews arrived to Lithuania mostly from Germany, mostly from the region of Alsace. In the 14th and 15th century, Lithuania was the last country in Europe to become Christian. There was an interest to transform a rural – very rural and a very primitive country – into a more productive society and a more structured society. The Jews were offered then, by the local authorities, a lot of autonomy, and very wonderful conditions of life. So that’s when they moved to that area, bringing with them the ancient German that became the Yiddish, which was our language. My families, when I was born, were of the middle class. One grandmother was a successful businesswoman. My father had a lab for dentures. We lived, I guess, a rather comfortable life. I was the first grandchild born to both grandparents so, in spite of being born into a Jewish family, I was called the little Yeshu’a, which means little baby Jesus, because I was so much responding to the desire of all the aunts, uncles, grandparents, and so on, of having this little baby come and bring them joy. I was a very spoiled brat, but also with a certain talent for painting. Actually, what happened is, I had a great uncle, the brother of my grandmother, who was a very renowned poet, writer, musician, a personality, in Berlin. Once my grandmother sent to her brother drawings that I made at the age of three or four, he immediately answered with a letter, well, this child is an artist. Don’t try to feed him anything else but kunst, kunst, and kunst – it means art, art, and art. This is somehow how that order of my great uncle, who later perished in Auschwitz, has established an attitude in all the members of my family that I was to become a painter, which was very much against my own interests, because I would have liked to be a fireman. I would have liked to sell candy in the street, or whatever, but I was supposed to become a painter. I guess that somewhere – I don’t know today if it is because I wanted to please my family retroactively, after most of them were assassinated by the Nazis, that I really stuck to it, because choosing art as a career is not a very easy thing, nor does one have too many guarantees of succeeding in that. It is between that and between the single fact that it is such a joy for me every day, every day of my life, to get back to my studio and continue painting. It is something that I do now for about 65 years. I became a painter.

**TRACK 03 – This Thing Called War**

The war started to announce itself to me in strange ways. I must say that when Europe was shaken by the occupation of Poland by Hitler’s army, that is the time when the Russians moved from the east and occupied my birth town, occupied Vilnius. Suddenly our house was full of refugees and people were listening to the radio and were discussing about what was going on, so on - so forth. Then there was a Russian general who kicked out my mother’s parents from their apartment, and my mother’s parents went to live with my father’s parents. I actually found – I was then about six or seven years – I found it rather fun. I thought this was wonderful, this thing called war, because my parents are having all these interesting people in our home, with suitcases. They move and they leave. My grandparents are all now for me, the four of them in one place. Then later, of course, things started to move very quickly. The Germans arrived in 1940. Then my father was taken to a camp to dig some turf, and I remained with my mother at home. Food became scarce. We had no right to have electricity, because we were Jews. We lost contact with my grandparents. We could not walk in the street. My two grandfathers disappeared. They were taken, actually, by some police to the killing fields near Vilnius and shot. Then one day the Lithuanian police stormed through the door of our apartment and dragged out my mother and me from our home and brought us to the ghetto. Then suddenly I started very deeply disliking the idea of war. But, of course, I still had no idea about all the things that I will have to go through and live through. It was only the beginning.

There are certain moments in my life that later furnished images to my paintings. I think that that specific moment in which we were forced to leave our home became embedded in my art. This has to do with the strange situation in which – although we were somehow prepared, and my mother has prepared a very small suitcase, saying if we have to leave, I’ll take this or that, but once the two policemen were there and we had to move very fast, she was at a loss. She took a suitcase, but then she ran to my room and took the pillow from my bed and gave it to me and said hold it, take it with you, it may be of use. Then we went to the door and I rushed back holding the pillow, thinking what happened now to my teddy bear because he was on my pillow, so he might have fallen. I saw to it that he was okay in the bed. Then we went out and we were in the courtyard. There were some other Jewish families that lived nearby or lived in the same building. It was a large building with a very large square courtyard. It was raining and we were little by little becoming wet, soaked, with water. Then we went out into the streets. The street was one stream of people. When I say stream, it was also so tragic, because the rain was very heavy and there was a lot of water streaming along the gutters of the street. Since Jews were not allowed to walk on the sidewalk, we had to walk in the water, walking in the direction of that part of the city, which was then decided to be the ghetto that the Germans created in Vilnius. Those few streets that were kind of shut off from the rest of the town became packed with something like 40,000 - 50,000 people. A dozen people per small room. I mean, it was really a very frightening situation. I also remember that at a certain point we were in a building from which people before that were taken out and killed, so it would make a place for the ones who arrived. Suddenly there was some screaming and yelling in the staircase, and that’s because a man committed suicide and he was hanging there from the handrail in the staircase. Then my mother holding me, keeping an eye on my face. By that time, I had already lost the pillow, because I abandoned the wet pillow that was too heavy, but we still had this tiny suitcase with us. We started running, and I think that we had lost the suitcase there somehow and we walked through these very crowded streets of the ghetto. It was the first day of the ghetto and we entered some other shop, and from that shop to another corridor. Then my mother tried to open another door, and suddenly we were outside. We were outside of the ghetto, because the ghetto was not yet hermetically closed in. This brought us to some courtyard that was not part of the ghetto. And this is how – we were in the ghetto and then the next day, we were outside of the ghetto. Then what would we do, being outside of the ghetto? That was not so very simple. Luckily, my mother had an aunt. My grandfather’s sister, who as a young person, converted to Christianity, and she lived in Vilnius. It was the only address that we could think of. My mother, holding me by my hand, courageously went in that direction of that home. It was very lucky for the two of us, because my mother was blonde and had clear eyes. I was dark and I could have been identified as a Jewish child in a city where most of the people were blonde and had blue eyes. Somehow, we arrived to the home of my great aunt.

**TRACK 04 – The Convent**

Here is an extraordinary thing of having survived, of having had so many incredible miracles happening to me, and letting me survive – be among the 200 or 250 Jews who found themselves in Vilnius the day they were liberated – 250 people of a community of about 80,000 Jews. Lithuania is quite well known for the highest rate of murdered Jews in the Nazi-occupied areas. Something like 95% or 96% of the people were annihilated.

Here comes the story of this miraculous event that allowed us then to find a hiding place. Is that my aunt, when she was about 12 or 13, most 14, was working for a baker in town, who was providing bread and cakes to one of the aristocratic palaces of Vilnius. The girl was very liked by the staff of the kitchen, and the lady who was the governess of that mansion liked the girl very much. She tried to convince her that she would be smart to escape from the place where she was employed and come to the palace, and let her take care of her. This is what happened. She agreed. The girl, who was then 12 or 13, agreed to that. Because the law permitted to baptize Jewish children and then take them away from their parents, once they were baptized, that’s what happened to this girl. She was then adopted by the governess and her husband. My aunt, Hana or then as she was called, Janina, was put to study in a college for girls of the better families of Vilnius. That was run by Benedictine sisters. She became very close to a couple of these sisters. Developed with them a very, very, very deep relationship. Years later, when she came to live in Vilnius already with children of her own, she contacted again her brother, my grandfather, and we became very close to her, in spite of the fact that by now she was a good Catholic. That helped us to be allowed to hide in the convent of the Benedictine sisters, who made a very special place for us in the area that was called the clausura, which was an area that was completely closed to the outer world. They even had to have a permit of the Bishop of Vilna, so that my aunt, her husband, and my father would be able to join us and hide together in that place. In spite of the fact that in that area, which was of women only, no man was ever permitted to access, unless it was really very important to make some repairs of windows, or roofs, or ceilings, or whatever. So we were very lucky that we had a hiding place there. That lasted for something like seven or eight months that we were hidden in one room in that convent. Of course, not being able to leave the room and being in touch only with three or four of the sisters who knew about us, because it was within the convent, the place that was secret. Then the Germans decided to take that convent away from the church and turn it into a place where they would collect books and artifacts of the entire area of Poland and Russia, which would serve them as material for what they planned, a Museum of the Once Existing Nations. It was an organization called the Rosenberg Headquarters that was dealing with this project of creating that museum, and they decided to take over the convent. We somehow miraculously happened to escape that place, just at the time in which all the sisters were put on trucks that took them to a labor camp. We managed somehow to – when I say we, it was myself, my mother, my aunt, my father, and my uncle – and we managed to get into the ghetto. By that time, the population of the ghetto was about 19,000. More than half of the people already were killed by then. The German authorities found it possible, somehow, to nourish these people who were then corralled in three or four streets, and use them as slave labor. That’s where our life continued for another couple of years.

In the ghetto, in that lull between one period of destruction and then what happened about a year and a half or two years later, the proper destruction of the ghetto, in this lull there was suddenly, in the ghetto, in spite of the incredibly dire conditions, a kind of awakening of arts. People organized the theater. There were jazz concerts. There was jazz, there was singing, music, classical music. Vilna was culturally a very important center in the Jewish life, in the European east, so there were many writers, poets, painters, who wrote and painted, and wrote music. That is where, in the ghetto, two poets who worked for the Rosenberg administration as slave laborers, and were putting together enormous piles of books that came from various Jewish libraries. Those two poets, one of them by the name of Abraham Sutzkever, is maybe the greatest Yiddish poet of the 20th century. He survived. But those two poets were relatively young and took great interest in this boy who was a little child prodigy – myself – and managed to find for me paper and pencils and encouraged me to draw and paint. In order to provide me with material to work, they found and smuggled into the ghetto from that place where they were collecting books, an ancient book that belonged to the Jewish community. A book that dealt mainly with the various Jewish organizations of philanthropy in the 18th century and the 19th century. That book had very beautifully inscribed pages, very beautifully handwritten calligraphy, with various names of people of committees and the deeds they did. But there were empty pages and they told me to just take this book and make drawings here. I was made to understand that if this book had some chances to survive, they are much greater than my chances to survive, and that this book will be a witness. But to me, as a child, I do not think that this whole notion of death was very clear. I mean, even today, to any grownup, even the ones who have witnessed the death of their closest people, one’s own death is never a very clear possibility. It’s something we know. One day we will not exist, but how is it? When I was in the ghetto, the idea of not being there did not really preoccupy me very much. So, I was making drawings in this book. What is really strange and very unusual is that that book, which I took with me later to a labor camp and I lost it in the labor camp, was found. It is today, part of the Jewish museum’s holdings in Vilnius, with my drawings that I did at age eight or nine. This book was called The Pinkas.

**TRACK 05 - The Children’s Action**

Life in the ghetto for me was not really very frightening because I was rather sheltered by my parents, who had to go out early every morning for work and they returned late. But we had our tiny space, where there were two bunks, one above another. I had my pencils. I did not go to one of the schools in the ghetto. I had a teacher, a lady who in the evenings took it on herself to teach me. I had access to a library in the ghetto, so I was reading books. I was reading about a book a day. I was an incredible reader. All this went on for about a period, as I was saying, of about a year and a half or two years. Then the German army started to have significant losses in Russia. It became clear that the Germans will retreat and that they will destroy the ghetto, with the inhabitants of the ghetto.

What happened in the history of the ghetto of Vilna, which wasn’t known for any years, now it is quite known, because there are books about it and it is historically shown like maybe more fascinating story than the Schindler story. There was this Major Plagge, German, who was a major of an age of between 45 and 50, who lost one of his legs in the First World War, but worked for the army. He was an engineer. He organized a camp in which men were transforming cars, from cars that were running on fuel to cars that were running on burning wood. They had kind of kettles with burning wood on the cars themselves, because of a scarcity of gas in a time of the war. This unit became very important to the German army. They must have had about 400 to 500 slave laborers from the ghetto, well chosen. They had to be very efficient mechanics, technicians, and my father found this job - he was sent to this job - and he did his work very well, so he was in this group. Now, Major Plagge– I remember him, but you know, as you can remember a German officer in his uniform and his boots, and so on, from far away – but I heard that he was the “Good German.” Now he managed to have the permission, just a few days before the liquidation of the ghetto and before all these 18,000 or 19,000 Jews of the ghetto were sent to various death camps, he managed to have the workers of his unit, with their wives and their children, moved to a camp a little outside of town. It must have been about 1,500 people. So these 1,500 survivors of a population of about 19,000 people who remained in Vilnius after the ghetto was completely destroyed and the people put to death. Many were shot in the forests of Vilna, which is in a place call Ponary. But we were there. My father continued his job. I think it was maybe the only camp in which families still were in the same labor camp. Of course, the conditions of life were very, very hard. People had to work many, many, many hours, but still, we were alive. From us children – I was about 10 or 11 -- there wasn’t much to be required. That lasted for about 6 months, like from September to March. Then it became clear that Plagge wasn’t able to have any more of the control that he had on this camp. It is known today from writings that he left, from contents that he had, that his idea was to find a reason to save as many Jews as possible. Today he is recognized by the Museum Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, as one of the righteous Christians. In Germany, there are military institutions that carry his name and so on. He is a hero. But at that time, I didn’t know that he was a hero, nor did he know that he would one day become a hero, after his death. At a certain point, the German authorities much above Major Plagge decided that the children weren’t necessary. On the contrary, they were just taking up too much food, and the children had to be eliminated. One day, trucks arrived to the camp. We must have been about 200 or 300 children in that camp. Some German army men started to yell, all the children out, all the children out. I guess that at that point my mother realized – it was early in the morning and my father was already away – that this was the end. By that time she was going to lose me and, of course, she knew much more than at that age I was permitted to know. She started to go towards the staircase. In the staircase there were many, many women and children that were coming down. At a certain point, we were stopped by a friend of ours, who lived on the ground floor, and she dragged us into one of the rooms and pushed us almost by force into that room, put me under the bed and said, hide. I was under the bed there, and there was another boy, and there was another girl under the bed. I heard some people were making noise at the door. Later I discovered that it was my father who then came there and the husband of this woman. They were dragging all kinds of debris and putting it against the door, in order to mask the door. My father had with him a couple of coins in gold, or they were, I think, imitation of gold, or whatever. He was standing near there, and when the German soldiers with the rifles came to check, you know, wherever there were doors, if the doors were open, and so on, my father pushed that coin into the hand of the German soldier, who quickly grabbed this and passed by this door. I was under the bed, and I was hearing screamings and children crying, women screaming at the soldiers, murderers, and then some shots, and it was obvious that somebody must have been killed there. And then the trucks left. What has happened in reality is that I think about 30 of the children of these – I don’t know the number precisely, 250 I would say, between 250 and 300 – about 30 of these children survived, hiding in various places and finding an escape from the army that came to pick them up. Well, the others were of course brought to the place where they were shot. I remained in the camp with my parents. What I must say, in terms of the security of keeping the people in the camp, no one dared to escape, although it was not that very difficult. There were ways to escape from the camp. Because we all were given numbers and we were counted twice a day, the morning and the evening. If one number was missing, five people before that number and five people after that number were shot. So the people were watching each other and felt also very responsible. No one dared to move out, because the price was frightening. Actually, there was a family, a father, mother, and a child, who tried to escape early on, and they were hanged publicly in the camp, so that would be a kind of signal. This is what expects you. And then a certain number, I think, 30 people were taken and shot. They said anyone escapes. But what happened in that action in which the children were taken away, some mothers who tried to tear away their children from the soldiers were shot by the soldiers. Then their husbands and other men buried these women in the ground. Suddenly, it wasn’t clear how any women were shot. Then my mother, considering herself as one of the women that were shot, managed to escape from the camp, trying to find a way to prepare the ground to have me smuggled out of the camp. And she managed. After about three days of being hidden in the camp, my father was able, by carrying me in a sack, similar to the other sacks in which people were carrying wood for the trucks that were actually then working on little cubes of wood, so there were thousands of sacks of wood. I was supposed to be wood in one of those sacks. My father carried me on his shoulder through the camp and brought me to the place, which was on the brink of the free world, and managed to make me slide out from a window and run towards a person that my mother managed to send to the area of the camp to pick me up, and brought me again to the aunt of my mother, to Aunt Janina. This was just one of those miracles that made it possible for me to be sitting here and telling this story.

**TRACK 06 – The Escape**

We arrived to my mother’s aunt, but it was obvious we could not stay there. We tried to find another place, but it was impossible. There came yet another very dramatic moment in the story of our survival with my mother. We had no place to go. Remaining with the aunt was endangering her life – not only her life and the life of her two sons. She [my mother] decided that it was enough. She would go to a bridge nearby that house and take me in her arms and jump into the river and put an end to our misery. I remember. I mean, I did not know her intention, but I remember we went – we went right to the center of this bridge and we stood, and I looked down at the water. The water was then a lot of melting ice. The stream was very strong. Some dead cattle was swimming underwater, some pieces of houses that were inundated. It was a very dramatic, unusual sight. I was fascinated with that. I did not ask myself why was my mother standing there. It was only later years that she told me what was going on in her head. Then suddenly, what came to her mind is that she heard that some of the sisters that were sent to the labor camp were allowed to return to the convent. She thought, well, why won’t I try to get to the convent and see if there is one of those sisters, maybe they can give us shelter. So after standing for I don’t know how long on that bridge, the sirens started to sound, which meant that it was the moment was arriving in which it wasn’t allowed any more to circulate in the streets. It must have been something like 6:00 in the evening, and people started to run, people that were crossing the bridge, and so on. It was clear that we had about 5 to 10 minutes and we had to disappear. So my mother suddenly grabbed me by my hand and we ran, and we arrived to the closed gate of that convent. She started to bang on the door of the convent. She banged, and she banged, and she banged. Suddenly the door opened and an old woman was standing there. When she saw us she pulled us in and she hugged us. Suddenly I recognized her. This was one of the sisters. I had never seen her, you know, not in her formal dress of a sister. I could not recognize her, and then she aged by something like 20 years in those two years, at best, meanwhile. This was Sister Maria Mikulska. She was also recognized as a righteous Christian. I was in Vilnius to receive the Medal of Honor for her, for her good deeds, from the President of Lithuania, a medal that I have with me today, because I’m the only one to whom this medal was given to, to be deposited with. This was still yet another miracle. What has actually happened before, and this we did not know, that this sister was hiding about 10 other Jews in that convent, among the books that were being concentrated, lodged there, stored in that place. Books that were later sent to Berlin. The most amazing story here, I mean, almost forbidden to happen in novels in fiction is that this we didn’t know, nor was it anything that I knew when I wrote my memoir, is that when the books left that place where we were hiding and arrived to Berlin, my mother’s uncle, Arno Nadel, the one who decided I was to be an artist, he was the one who was receiving these books. He was a slave laborer in Berlin for the Rosenberg Headquarters. In his diaries that were then saved by a very good friend of his, a famous artist and sculptor in Germany, a lady called Kathe Kolvitz, he described this strange feeling that he had by receiving these precious books from Vilna and holding them in his hands. He had no idea that these were the books on which we were sleeping. I mean, you cannot invent such coincidences. And it was only a few years ago when somebody prepared a lecture in a university on my great uncle and quoted from his diaries that I learned this absolutely unbelievable fact.

So here we were, hidden in this convent, from March until July. In July, the Russian army occupied Vilnius. About a week before the arrival of the Russians, the Germans machine-gunned all the people that were in the camp. Among them, they killed my father. It was just a few days before the liberation. It was a few days before he became age 37. We found ourselves among the 250 people, more or less, of the Jews of Vilna, who have remained alive. Later, some people who escaped into the woods and who became partisans, started to return. I think that about 2,500 Jews of the community of about 80,000 have survived the Holocaust. I was one of the most lucky ones. So, of course, with this sense of having been given my life by so many incredible events, incredible events – there is an event, for instance, I did not mention. When the fighting for the streets of Vilnius was going on, some streets were already the Russian army, some streets were still occupied by the Germans. We were still by the German-held place. The convent started to be on fire. Some firemen came running to see if they could put out the fire of the convent. Then they saw us, they discovered us, and they realized, of course, that we were Jews, and the head of the firemen must have been a very, very energetic anti-Semite, because seeing us, he decided that he would go immediately rush to call the Germans. He told the other men, hold them, hold them, I’m running to bring the Germans. We looked at each other and it was clear that we will hear machine guns in a few minutes. He came out from a gate and he was killed by bullets that were just passing through the street. He fell in his blood on the ground. So this was the last miracle. It’s almost, for me, although I’ve told these stories, I’ve written about them, and every time when I tell it again, I have almost difficulty in believing in them. But this is how it happened, and this is what gave me maybe this kind of very strong need to give sense to these strange miracles, by doing the work that somehow relates to what has happened, not only to me, but to so many, many, many people. This is something that I must say. It is not only a Jewish story, it’s just a Jewish story in my case, because I was condemned to die by the Nazis. But it is a story of humanity, in which suddenly some people are convinced that they have the right of life and death over other people, and they start to think that they are better. So it’s a mighty subject. In my case, I could not be just an artist who thinks in terms of colors, shapes, and so on. Of course, I also think in these terms, because this is what makes art art. But there is in me a very treat necessity to speak about things that touch the core of my experience. And maybe with that, somehow thankful for the privilege of being still alive.

**TRACK 07 – The Russian Army**

The loss of my father, for my mother, was a terrible thing. I felt that now the loss of her parents, the loss of other members of the family, the loss of the friends and so on – it was she, myself, and I am now the one who is going to repair the situation. There is also something almost neurotic, something very Oedipal in such a situation, when the son decides that he has to repair the broken life of his mother. I mean, there is a limit to how much we can repair things. But this sense of being able or taking on myself a responsibility of repair, goes into two other directions. One is the ancient Jewish sense of the world of the broken vessels. The broken vessels that were broken by man’s misdeeds, by bad actions, and it is our duty to repair those vessels. So this is a kind of philosophical metaphor of repair, which is called the Tikkun. What is called the Tikkun is this concept of doing good. I very often depict a broken world. A world made of bits and pieces. They are put together to try to somehow repair something. For me then, I was explaining to people what do I mean by all these still lifes that I paint, where the objects have been broken, somebody tried to put them together. The things fit, but they do not fit. So this was my life after the war, in the community of the survivors. Who were we? Very many families were recomposed. My mother married a man who lost his wife and his two daughters. I became his son. My mother lived always with the ghost of my father in her head. He lived always with the ghost of his lost daughters, so we were this kind of recomposed family, and all the people around us.

Only the ones who really spoke to each other would have the terms of reference of the experience of surviving the hell of the Holocaust, because they communicated. They communicated with each other. They could speak with each other. Then the same people who lived through that, once they were exposed to the outer world, even to their own children who were born after the war, they could not talk. They could not tell, because they did not share terms of reference that were possible. So for me, yes, this thing of trying to repair – once we were liberated by the Russians, and once we met again, the same two boys, Sutzkever and Kaczerginski, who were saved by the Russians, and they became very interested again in what I was doing. Suddenly, the Russian authorities knew that there was this child prodigy. I was supposed to be taken away from my mother and sent to Moscow to a very special school. My mother was about to lose me, and we had to escape from Vilnius. This was immediately after the end of the war, in 1945. By then, already a year has passed, while we were under the Soviet rule, the Stalinist rule. We were liberated in July and by mid-May, the beginning of May, the war was over. The Germans capitulated. And then, in the summer of that year, it had been about a year after our liberation, the Russians started to expose the former Polish citizens from Vilnius to Poland. This was an occasion for us to escape from the Russians, because my mother was terribly afraid to lose me. By having me taken to Moscow and then being put into a very special school, where they had a few painters, and a few musicians, and a few dancers, and so on, children that had big promises, and they were somehow going to create the geniuses of the Stalinist paradise. So then we escaped to Poland, and then my mother decided to go to Palestine. From there, we went to Germany. We went to Berlin, first to look for her uncle, for my great uncle. So we arrived in Berlin in 1945. This was the Berlin after the war. It was all still as it was in the day of the surrender of the Germans. It was terribly bombed. There my mother learned that her uncle was sent to Auschwitz. From there, we arrived to the American area of occupation in Germany, which was Bavaria, which was south of Germany. We arrived to a place called Landsberg. There was a big camp of mainly Jewish refugees. We were the DPs, the displaced persons. We were the people who were waiting for some visas, for some permits to move elsewhere, where they could start life again. It was very difficult to get to the United States. There was a quota. It was practically impossible to get to Palestine, because the British did not allow any Jews to get to Palestine. Then Palestine was under British mandatory rule. So we waited. We waited. From 1945 until 1948, we waited in that DP camp. By that time, my mother was married, with the survivor of Dachau. In 1948, when the State of Israel was declared, and suddenly the gates of Israel opened to Jews arriving from Europe, we left there.

When we arrived to Israel it was obvious that our story was not a story that anyone in Israel wanted to hear. They didn’t want to hear the stories. We arrived at a very crucial moment in Israel. Israel was fighting for its survival. Israel was fighting armies that surrounded it. It was a population of about 600,000 people who were going to absorb about 2,000,000 people. It was absolutely incredible. The austerity was going to last for about 3 or 4 years, you know, rationing cars and such things. If Israel survived, the moment of the Arab attack, and was able to establish itself as an independent state, it was because people knew that they must be heroes, or they will be dead. We, the people who survived the Holocaust, who arrived there, we were the Jews who allowed themselves to be led to slaughter like sheep. We were not respected. We were kind of accepted. No one wanted to hear these frightening stories. So the survivors were among themselves. We were not very proud. I tried to dress exactly like the Sabras, like the boys or girls that were born in Israel. I would not talk about these experiences. I tried to learn Hebrew very fast and speak it as much as possible, the accent of the ones of the country, and it was only a few years later when Israeli agents caught Eichmann, and there were the trials of Eichmann, that German officer who was the creator of the industry of death to the Jews that the Nazis have established. Then, suddenly, the story of the Holocaust and all its implications, and all its mechanism, and the power of this machine to enslave and destroy millions of people, that became clear. Then, suddenly, the attitude changed. By that time, many years have passed and somehow, some people who arrived as survivors remained living within their little enclaves of people with whom things were shared.

**TRACK 08 – Arrival in Israel**

So, my arrival in Israel, my normal schooling in Israel, suddenly I have to study 24 hours. I have to learn so many things I never knew existed, and I’m terribly frustrated, because I cannot dedicate time to painting. I somehow managed from time to time to paint. I finished my studies, and I went a year to art school. In the art school it was clear that I knew much too much about art. The school advised me to remain as little as possible and to move on. I mean, it was as if I were in college and they said you look – you have to graduate school now. But this I could only do abroad. For me the idea was to go back to Paris. I said go back to Paris, because in Paris my father was conceived when my grandfather was escaping from the Tsar police, was hiding in Paris. So for me to go to Paris and study in Paris was always somehow to go back home. To go back to the place where my grandfather admired so much. But before that, I had to do almost three years of army service, in the Israeli army, which I did. And then I went to Paris. Of course, Paris was then the center of world art. I tried to find my way as a very modern and abstract artist and, somehow, because of personal events in my life, my first marriage, I ended up in Rome. I had an exhibition of art in Rome, and the exhibition was a big success, and I remained in Rome. I painted very much of the crest of the wave of what was called modern art. Then my abstract art became very gloomy, very dark, frightening, even to me. I realized that there was a need in me to say something. Maybe I was trying to speak about something that is scary, but in a way that is not really understandable. I think that I somehow got to a point in which it was clear that I was in a kind of a crisis, and I had to find another way. I thought, well, how can I speak to people? How can I attract people to what I want to tell them? This is not to speak directly, not to speak graphically. To speak metaphorically. To speak through symbols. To speak through icons. I thought, what attracts people? Why do people stop in museums and look at paintings that were painted centuries before the Renaissance, and so on? Let me imagine some paintings that were painted in the Renaissance, but at night. Some things happened at midnight, and these paintings aged by three or four centuries, and the speak of the world, still in the language of the Renaissance, but of the world that has known the cataclysmic events of the Second World War. I came suddenly like this to the painting that I am doing now.

At that time, I was, I believe, close to 30, over 30 years of age. I landed suddenly in this what people later called post modern, a very funny concept. It’s never interested me. Or what people call surrealism, because things were not exactly the way they seem us, a simple appearance. They were somehow transformed. Surrealism didn’t interest me, because surrealism was dealing with the subconscious, with dreams, with all kinds of things that were not what I was trying to say. I was trying to speak about really what is unspeakable, which is so frightening that people are afraid to touch. So, I thought, well, let me see. The world has gone through a major catastrophe, but still people find the resilience in them to continue. They want to repair whatever was left of that. So I started to paint still lifes, in which all the objects have suffered terrible destruction and yet are being recomposed. The recomposition of objects also allowed me to speak what I think about what we are telling in our memoirs and our reminiscences. It is always a kind of a recreation of things. Then I thought, how is it that human wisdom has allowed such things to happen, and then I thought the human wisdom that made man lose his paradise, the lost paradise, the fruit of wisdom. What was the fruit of wisdom? We don’t know what the fruit of wisdom was. In the Renaissance it was mostly apples. But sometimes it is even a pear. I thought, well, the pear has a nice, womanlike shape. Let me take that pear of the wisdom and let that wisdom be transformed in many shapes. So I dedicated many paintings to the metamorphosis of the pear, where the pear became something that speaks of the questions that the human wisdom brings up to be shared, not always responses.

Then I thought of myself surviving. My best friend, who was the son of my mother’s best friend, whose name was like my own name, Samek. He was my age. It was almost as if we were twins, although we were very different. But he was my best friend. He was a boy who did not survive. While we were being hidden in the convent, he was with a Christian nanny, but some neighbors gave him out. The German police came. They shot the boy in the courtyard of that house and left his body. No one was allowed to touch the body. The body of the boy, the killed boy, had to be left there for the people to see what happens if they find a Jew and what would happen to them if they dare to hide a Jew. So I thought, here is this boy called Samek, like myself, Samek, short for Samuel or Sam, became Samek. I must tell the story of Samek. And then I found suddenly that he and myself, we looked exactly like the boy in the famous photograph of the Jews that are taken out in the time of the liquidation of the ghetto of Warsaw. The boy that appeared on hundreds of books or journals, the little boy with his arms lifted. I thought, well, this boy and myself, and this – we don’t know if this boy survived. A few men claimed that they were that boy and that father, but we don’t know. I somehow dedicated to this boy, because this is a very easily readable symbol. I dedicated paintings to that boy.

Now, for instance, I am working on a lot of paintings that have to do with the cup. The cup, which is a kind of container, a vessel. You say, our cup was full. What does it mean when they say our cup was full? Was our cup full of happiness, or was our cup full of suffering? How did we perceive the cup? How do we preserve the cup? Again, the cup can be either representative of the broken vessel. The cup is the domesticity. I have described in one of my paintings the sending out of the Jews to the ghetto, like hundreds of cups that were thrown into the streets, and the streets are littered with broken cups. Domesticity somehow thrown out into the street. So, I am taking these very common objects of daily life and I am trying to project them into a kind of almost mythological style of something is happening to them that must mean something about the world in which we live. Unfortunately, the Jewish Holocaust did not teach the lesson it could have taught. There is a lot of work still to be done about this. Genocides continue to happen in Africa, and in other places. Religion plays sometimes a frightening role in these things. The concept of my God is better than your God. My God takes away from you the right to be – well, for your God to exist to you. All these things, the anti-Semitism of the Nazis was nurtured by centuries before that of anti-Semitism of a church. It was very late to recognize how damaging this was. After all, the Vatican declared it only a few decades ago, the things against the Jews were wrong. So there are centuries of religion that have created and not only Christian religion today. Today we can see what is done in the name of the extremists of the Muslim religion, or even by the extremists of the Jewish religion. All the religions, once they become instruments of power, become much more dangerous than guns.

**TRACK 09 – Speaking the Unspeakable**

Some of the figures, various figures, female as well as male, have eyes that do not see, that do not exist. This kind of blindness is sometimes voluntary, sometimes the result of ignorance. The world was already starting to disintegrate in some areas in Europe. I remember, I was a child of six or seven, and there were already refugees from Warsaw in our house. People were sitting at a table and so on, and they’re saying yes, but this cannot happen here. They were blind, obviously, to the future. This is how they tried to protect themselves. To protect the world. To keep the kind of denial alive. I think that this blindness has something to do with denial that I want to speak of. In some way, none of us knows what is going to happen in five minutes from here. I mean, every time I have an appointment with a friend in a restaurant, I take my car, I leave my home. What do I know? A drunk driver may come from the other side. I mean, there is something of this incertitude or maybe this sense of incertitude is so deeply rooted in me because of all these events in my life, where my life was on the brink of being extinguished, that I have the sense of something miraculous happening to me. When in the morning I open my eyes and I’m in this beautiful house. I have another day and I can work. I think, my goodness, this year I am 80, and so many of my friends have left, and I still have this pleasure of waking up. My wife is still near me, and my studio is waiting. This is absolutely fantastic, but I have absolutely no feeling that anyone guarantees that this will be also the day after tomorrow. I have to wait until the day after tomorrow and then see again in the morning.

There is so much of my art that is becoming material for teaching. This is absolutely extraordinary. There are hundreds of books that use my art for their covers, because the people feel that they can – in languages that I have absolutely no idea – that I cannot even read. But they’re paintings of mine. So, obviously, somewhere unwillingly, with my eyes shut, I hit the nail on its head. I consider myself very, very lucky that I have this response. On the other hand, I do not like to be the interpreter of my work. You see, I feel that an artist should not say, when I painted this or when I wrote that, what I meant is this or that. I think that the creative miracle, which is this miracle of a connection, happens when the beholder brings also something from himself to the thing that he is confronted with, and something then happens. It doesn’t have to be necessarily precisely 100% what I meant. That person has the right to interpret it his way. And if I am saying, when I did this, my intention was that, what do I know? I am also somewhere working with my subconscious. If I had my subconscious be very open to me, it wouldn’t have been called subconscious. There are certainly all kinds of engines moving me around when I paint. Some of them intentional, some of them I don’t know. Art is a big, big, big mystery. I mean, you can’t always say that much with that many words on top of it. I have no language that I really possess fully. All the languages that I use are kind of acquired languages or partly abandoned languages, because I don’t live in them. I picked them up when I was young. So only that much I can say. But then, once a painting is painted and it leaves my studio and it goes into the world, it has a life of its own.

**TRACK 10 – Return to Germany**

I became very fascinated by paintings of Durer. And I discovered that Durer was a child prodigy. There are some self portraits of Durer, done at the age of 14 or 15, and one of them is with a pillow near his head. And the pillow is as big as he is. And then there is another drawing of pillows only. Suddenly, this pillow that I had when left my home in Vilna came between Durer and myself. So this was a very, very, very strange thing. One of his most fascinating creations was this engraving called The Melancholia, where you can see an angel, a brooding angel, sitting among all kinds of objects. All of these objects had then, in that time of history, specific symbolic meanings. But what was mainly important for me in that image of the brooding angel in a world in which there is a rainbow, and the rainbow was a promise of God that there will be no other flood. And yet, there was a flood. The Second World War was a terrible flood. How did Durer already foresee that in there? I knew that when Durer made that, he was a man of the Renaissance. He believed that the world is moving from an era of darkness into an era of light. He believed that the Renaissance will be this age of enlightenment. I was a refugee of a world that moved from believing in enlightenment into a world of darkness. So somehow I felt an enormous affinity with that brooding angel who has no answer. I started to paint to some paintings. Because I created a triptych with the angel of Durer, and because I also painted the four evangelists, based on the painting of Durer, The Ground Under Their Feet, the German Institute of Studies of Durer, and the Durer Gesellschaft in Germany, and then finally the National Gallery in Nuremburg, decided to have an exhibition of my art. They invited me to show there. This was for me also maybe one of the first times I returned to Germany. I had to move from the hotel to the place where they opened my exhibition, and I felt almost like living through a dream, a nightmare, something very strange. It seemed to me kind of a troubling feeling. Are the Germans of today trying to show the world they have become good people and they are using me for that? But then what happened to me two days after that, is that I returned to that museum to have another look of my show. There I saw teachers with German children, all of them born after the war, and children that had to be taught what this country went through. Now I’m speaking of something that happened in the late 1970’s. And I realized that my paintings were a fantastic tool for these teachers, to let the children look at my paintings and say what they see and ask questions, and then the teachers were able to move from these questions and tell them about the upheaval that happened in their own country. At that time, I realized that something was already beginning here in the States with Facing History, this organization that is teaching teachers to teach the Holocaust. And I realize, although it was not planned, it was not a device that I had found, it was not something that I have kind of calculated, but my paintings became a tool of teaching. While young people may be shocked or even scared by photographic images of human bodies being pushed by a bulldozer into a mass grave, and they won’t like to know anything about it or hear anything about it, through my paintings, there is a way to approach tragedy that can also speak of the man who made these paintings and what happened to him. Somehow, it was really in Germany and seeing the German youth reacting to my paintings, then later on -- after my book was published more than 10 years ago, and then a few years ago, when it was translated into German, and it was presented at the book fair in Frankfurt, so I had a book tour of about a couple of weeks, in various German towns, with readings and speaking, and so on – yes, I felt it was an important document. My book, as well as my art, to speak of this enormous unsolved problem of how is it that people who have potentials of so much good, sometimes they use only the potentials of the bad, which are in them. I believe that finally in every human being there is that much good and that much bad, and then it depends on circumstances and on education, and on so many things which are beyond the individual’s control. Why some people choose this way, some people that way, and some people do not even have the choice. They are just pushed and made to do things that to us seem absolutely impossible.

**STORYPRESERVATION INITITIAVE**

**SAMUEL BAK TRANSCRIPTION TO RECORDING**

PAGE \\* MERGEFORMAT 1