



BEN SHAHN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

I remember very vividly before we left Russia to come to this country, and I remember the United States very vividly upon my arrival here. And then there seems to follow a period of rather vague memory. . .

Now I will talk about the uprising in 1905. I wasn't aware that it was 1905 or what was an uprising. I don't think I was aware of the year 1905, but I was aware of the Hebrew year, the Biblical (year)¹ . . .

Anyhow, they decided to send the governor of the province² through there, and they built sidewalks. They built wooden sort of catwalks, because the streets were so muddy. And preceding the governor's entourage came a contingent of Cossacks³, and just whipping with their cat-o'-nine-tails⁴ at the people standing along (the way) watching, just to inspire respect. And one of those tips of lead caught my ear, and I thought it would burn off. And I yelled, "Down with the Czar!"⁵ It was in the air. . . . When it gets down to the level of children, little children, we automatically yelled, "Down with they Czar!" when we saw a uniform.

We left (Russia) in the end of 1906. I was over eight, just about eight then. My father, who had done very well in South Africa⁶, was going to bring my mother

(and) the three children he left to America. . . . We went first in a wagon to the railroad and by railroad to the dock, and so on, and so forth. . . .

The departure was heartrending. I loved my grandfather, and a coach came to take us to the railroad station. I think it was 15 miles or something, and my grandfather walked along, and I held on to his hand. And then the coachman said he would have to start driving and said something to my grandfather and he was going to speed it up. And my grandfather handed me a little nutcracker that he had carved for me . . . and I screamed as I was drawn away from him. . . .

I will tell you the God's honest truth: I wasn't happy in this country at all, until the First World War came along. . . . The war had finished my roots, you know, had just cut my roots finally. . . .

We got on the elevator train from Ellis Island to go to Brooklyn, and I saw at that moment a statue being unveiled. It was a statue of George Washington on the Williamsburg Bridge Plaza. I saw everybody chewing. They were chewing gum, and I immediately had to chew gum, because I wanted to be American, you know. . . .

As soon as we got here I was put into school, knowing not a word of the (English) language. . . . There was an uncle of mine came down from Philadelphia, who had been here a number of years. And (he) took me to show me a department

store and bought me a xylophone. . . . The next day I took it to school, and the teacher was furious. . . .

She said, "Where did you get this?"

And I said, "My uncle bought it for me." And . . . I said, "I haven't seen him for 25 years."

I meant to say "weeks," but I didn't know the word "week," and she made me repeat it. I repeated it, and she took me by the hand and took me into another class. . . and I was put into an idiot class. . . .

All I knew was I drew all the time, you know, and I found that I could draw. . . . Well, then one remarkable thing happened. In the fifth grade I had a teacher by the name of Miss Quick. Miss Quick saw and knew about my drawing, and you know what she did? She bought me with her own money watercolors and crayons and put me off in the corner of the room and told me to draw.

And my Jewish morality, now troubled by this time, and I said, "How do I ever get into the sixth grade?"

And she said, "I will teach you everything you have to know in a week, before you go into the 6th grade."

Then I was loaned to the other teachers to draw Santa Clauses, to draw turkeys for Thanksgiving, you know, all that kind of stuff.

NOTES

(1) The Jewish people followed a calendar based on the Bible (Old Testament) as opposed to the *Gregorian* calendar devised by Pope *Gregory XIII* that most people use today.

(2) Ben Shahn's family lived in a part of Russia that is today the country of Lithuania.

(3) The *Cossacks* were an elite group of horsemen in the Russian Imperial Army.

(4) A *cat-o'-nine-tails* is a whip consisting of 9 knots attached to a handle.

(5) The *Czar* was the Emperor of Russia.

(6) Ben Shahn's father first traveled by himself to South Africa prior to bringing his family to America.

Source: An oral history interview with Ben Shahn conducted by Edwin Roskam on January 10-14, 1965. The Rutgers University Library Special Collections