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JAN POKORNY
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CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1940
AGE 26
PASSAGE ON "THE BERGENSFJORD"

PHILLIPS: This is the Ellis Island History Project. It's the 5th of January, 1988. I'm with Professor Jan Pokorny. And, originally you're from Czechoslovakia, and came to Ellis Island in 1944.

POKORNY: No, 1940. That's important because it was before the war started, so I came from Czechoslovakia, via Sweden and Norway. I managed to get out of middle Europe after Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia, which was the same--actually Hitler occupied Yugoslavia in 1939, in March, and I managed to get out of there by the middle of the summer and went to Sweden. I had a car, and I drove through Germany to the Baltic, and then crossed over to

Sweden, and the Germans gave me--they have already occupied Czechoslovakia, in fact, they demobilized me, I was in the Czech army for two years, but since there was no conflict, there was this big army; Hitler had to disband the army which he simply did in a very simple manner, and then my father said, "Well, this looks bad, and it's probably going to mean war, and if it means war, you'd better not be here," and so we agreed that I would escape under some subterfuge by pretending to go on a study tour to Stockholm. I was working on the subway system--they were planning a subway system for Prague, and my father was in charge of it, and he managed to pretend that I'm being sent on a study trip to Stockholm to look at the subway system in Stockholm. And the Germans fell for it, and they gave me the permission to leave.

PHILLIPS: Can I perhaps go back to Czechoslovakia, perhaps your early days, your education, and what you were trained in and how old you were when you left.

POKORNY: I left at age 26.

PHILLIPS: You were age 26, and what had you been trained in when--

POKORNY: I studied, I was already--I was a young architect, I had just passed my state examinations. And I was ready to start doing architecture.

PHILLIPS: Perhaps you could just give us a sense of what studying architecture was like in Czechoslovakia and how long was the course.

POKORNY: It was a five-year course, and I followed it pretty regularly until it was interrupted by events, and I had to go into the army and I couldn't finish my studies, but I finished them while I was in the army; I took my last examination while I was in uniform. And that sort of permitted me to leave as a complete architect already. In other words, I had completed my studies. But this system was very similar to Austrian systems or probably to the German system, rather than the French system.. We did not have the Beaux Arts system, which was one that was adopted here in the United States by most schools. And it was a good preparation.

PHILLIPS: Could you just briefly give us the difference between those systems?

POKORNY: Well, I think that the middle European system was

somewhat more technical, and the French system, the Beaux Arts system, was heavy on design and aesthetics. That was the essential difference. I think that what we got was a very thorough. rounded education, but as I'll tell you later when we start talking about the United States when I arrived here, I ended up being at Columbia University, and I was confronted by the other system, and I had to adapt to it, and it was quite good for me, because I learned a great deal from that.

PHILLIPS: We'll certainly talk about that when we get to that part of the interview; I'd like to hear more about that. Perhaps, before we do, can we go back to a little bit of your earlier life in Czechoslovakia. Set the scene for us; describe what it felt like as the war began to loom on the horizon.

POKORNY: Well, I was lucky because actually, my life spans--I was born in Brno, which is the second largest city in Moravia, and then when my father moved to Prague, I naturally moved with him, and all my education was in Prague.

PHILLIPS: What year was that, when you moved?

POKORNY: When I moved, I must have been six, that was 1920, when we moved to Prague.

PHILLIPS: What year were you born?

POKORNY: I was born in 1914. And I think we moved in 1922, something like that. And so most of my--all my education was in Prague. I went to school, and then later on I went to the Polytechnic University and studied architecture. And when one finished that course, one got a degree called Architect Engineer, kind of a double degree. It lasted five years, as I said. But what was interesting, what was sort of significant about my early life is that I was born at the beginning of the First World War, 1914, and I left at the end of the Czechoslovak Republic, which was '39, when Hitler took over. So my early life spans this period of the Czechoslovak Republic, and it was a glorious period, you know, it was really absolutely wonderful, and it was a new country, very energetic, very promising, with good relations to all neighbors, and very well balanced economy, agriculture versus industry. My father was an industrialist; he was the general manager of the Skoda Works, and so he was number two--

PHILLIPS: Of the what works?

POKORNY: Of the Skoda Works.

PHILLIPS: Was that an engineering company?

POKORNY: Well, it was a machine production, and also unfortunate weaponry. Well, they were supplying Czechoslovakia with weapons, and also the neighbors, but my father was not connected with that; he was connected with peace production, fortunately for him. Because after I left the country and didn't come back, he was taken into a concentration camp, and so was my mother, both of them, because of me. I was in enemy territory then, you see, so they were making secure, sure, whatever. But he wasn't in it too long, I think. After a few months friends of his got him out, and after that, they didn't have much trouble anymore.

PHILLIPS: He was put into the camp by whom?

POKORNY: By the Germans, by the Germans. The reason was, that their son didn't come back from a permit to leave on a study trip but didn't return and thereby was suspected automatically. They were taking it out on my parents.

PHILLIPS: Are you Jewish?

POKORNY: No, I'm not. But you see, my father was in an exposed position and I suppose they used that as an excuse. So that happened after I left, of course. But I left in '39. I drove across Germany, as I said. And over to Sweden.

PHILLIPS: Tell us a little about that adventure, driving across Germany.

POKORNY: Well, it was sort of tense. I took my father along, all the way from Prague to Dresden, which isn't very far; about two hour's drive, maybe less. And there we met my aunt that came from Vienna to say goodby. She wasn't allowed to get off the train in Prague. She had to go through Czechoslovakia to Dresden in order to say goodbye to me. That was just part of the confusion in Europe at that time. So when we got together we said goodbye and I got back into the car and I drove right through Germany without stopping. I was so nervous about something not working out. I simply drove and drove, and I arrived at the Baltic Sea at one o'clock in the morning, and I found a fleabag hotel, and I stayed

overnight, and in the morning I got on a ferry and crossed over to Sweden.

PHILLIPS: You left your car.

POKORNY: Took it with me. They permitted me to take the car. And they did not--when we asked in Prague for money, for foreign money, they wouldn't give us any. The financial affairs of Czechoslovakia were already being managed by the Reichsbank of Germany. The Reichsbank of Germany, the people where my father applied for money for me said, "Well, what's he need the money for? Why is he going to Sweden?" And he told them, or somebody told them, that I was going to do this studying of the subway system. And they said, "Well, if he wants to study a subway system, he should go to Berlin," and wouldn't permit any money. So I left without any money. I would have left anyway, but I just didn't have any money, any foreign money.

PHILLIPS: The reason you weren't given any money was because the Germans were in charge of the bank.

POKORNY: Correct. They were at that point already in charge of the bank. And they were in charge of everything, as a sort of second controlling force. The employees were still Czechs, but the management was German. So we didn't have money.

PHILLIPS: Can you perhaps just trace out a little bit more of what that felt like in Czechoslovakia, as your country was just torn apart--

POKORNY: Well, it felt desperate. In other words, we all were sort of living from hour to hour, we didn't know what was going to happen next, we all guessed that this meant-- Well, our structure collapsed, we were not an independent country, we were occupied, we were an occupied nation--again, as we were in the Middle Ages. And by our worst enemy, the Germans. So, people were not happy, obviously. It was a terrible time.

PHILLIPS: What sort of hardships were there, what--

POKORNY: There were no immediate hardships. For instance, we did not notice, yet, that Jews are being collected

and sent into camps. That didn't happen yet. It was right at the beginning. We didn't know about that happening in Germany, either.

PHILLIPS: Again, what year are we talking about?

POKORNY: We're talking about 1939. I mean, it was not obvious. Although wait a minute, I'm not entirely--that's not entirely correct, because I remember that some of our Jewish friends were already losing their jobs. And one of them came to our house in the middle of the night trying to get some help from us, which we gave him. But everybody was doing it already undercover, so to say, so now that I recollect it, yes we did know that Jews were being persecuted. And, but that was only one, my best friend, my best school friend, his family was Jewish, he predicted that was going to happen and left, the family left with all they had, oh maybe three or four months before I was on my way, and before the Germans came. So they were lucky. But most Jews didn't want to believe that it's going to happen. They thought that's next door but not here. They couldn't make that terribly difficult decision.

PHILLIPS: But they had heard about things happening in Germany.

POKORNY: Yes, I think we didn't know the gassing; that we didn't

know. That I learned only when I was in Sweden. But we knew that they were being let go, and that they were being discriminated against, very definitely. And they were scared, so I mean there was an anticipation of doom everywhere. And the Czechs weren't any different, they were worried too. And then of course, there were the Quislings, even in our country, that were siding with the Germans and their methods. So we had to--they were very small, small groups of people that--they really did exist, as they did in Norway, the Quislings. We had Quislings in Czechoslovakia too. A Czech Nazi Party. Very small, but it existed. So, that to added to an unease.

PHILLIPS: When you say "czech Nazi Party." was it an official political party?

POKORNY: No, well probably not, because there were no parties permitted at the time, but I don't quite know what the official status they had vis-a-vis the Germans. They were just expressing their sympathy with German methods. But it was a very small group. I only knew one man who belonged to it, among my acquaintances. In Slovakia, also, the same thing happened in Slovakia. But most people were simply worried about what's going to happen next and my father started to be rational about it and figured out if there's going to be a war it's going to start that fall and he was right within two weeks. Germany occupied Poland and that was the beginning. But when that happened, I was already in Sweden.

PHILLIPS: You said your father had predicted almost to the day the beginning of the war. Can you perhaps give us a little bit more description about what it felt like. You said you were fearful. But what elicited that fear; were there palpable manifestations, or was it just a sense of what was happening in Germany through the newspaper reports, radio perhaps?

POKORNY: Well, we were confronted with a military regime and that's completely unpredictable, you never know what; since nobody's ever lived under that, you don't know what to anticipate. We were Czechoslovaks, the Germans were enemies; they treated as enemies until Munich, right? They wanted to get out border territories annexed to Germany, and that was the first step before they marched into Czechoslovakia. When that happened, I was in the Czechoslovak Army, and I was, as I said, I was demobilized, the Army was demobilized, as I said before, but before that, when I was still in the Army, I was in the headquarters, the Artillery Headquarters of Bohemia, that was located in Prague, in the office. And when we got the first maps after Munich, showing us what the

border will be between what's left of Czechoslovakia and Germany, we all started to cry.

PHILLIPS: Where did you get those maps from?

POKORNY: Those maps came from Munich. They were the agreement between the allies--I mean they were not called allies then, but the other side of the table, between the germans, and the president, figurehead president of Czechoslovakia, Hacha, on one side, and French, Italian, and English on the other side.

PHILLIPS: Can you spell the name of the Czech president?

POKORNY: Hacha. He was, I think, the president of the Supreme Court and he was, what;s the word, when you command somebody to become president, he was almost made a president, co-opted president, it was not an election obviously. He was a nice man but benign, meaningless person. Good natured person. Tragic person, is probably the right word for him. But, so we got these maps and my job was to draw onto our maps the new borderline.

PHILLIPS: Your job was to do that?

POKORNY: What's that? And in the headquarters, in the artillery headquarters, we had maps on hand, and somebody had to record what these agreements were.

PHILLIPS: What the new map of Czechoslovakia would look like?

POKORNY: Correct. Exactly.

PHILLIPS: You at this time were in the Army?

POKORNY: I was still in the Army, in the artillery headquarters. And my job was to deal with maps, because I was a technically trained person; I could draw, so that's the job I had at the moment.

PHILLIPS: Tell me about those maps. The day somebody walked into your office.

POKORNY: I was simply called in by my commander and he said, "Would you please record these things?" And they opened them up, they had never seen these things, I had naturally not, and there we saw the reality of those

agreements in Munich.

PHILLIPS: What date was this?

POKORNY: It was in March of '39.

PHILLIPS: Tell me about what you said to each other as you saw your country changed.

POKORNY: Oh, well, we sort of--I don't remember what we said, but I know we all cried.

PHILLIPS: Really cried?

POKORNY: All these hard, hard bitten officers saw what happened. I mean, we were really, we were castrated, that's what it amounted to, because they were taking all the areas that they felt were important--industrial areas--it was a real gerrymandering kind of system. When there was city, for instance, a small city, and it had forests around it that were of value, they would run the borderline around the city, taking all the forests away, and leaving the city sitting there, like a

peninsula. Perverse, absolutely perverse. And it was consistently that way, throughout the whole process. It was awful. And all I can tell you, when we went home, we just didn't speak. The feeling inside was indescribable. But it's only--that's when we realized that this was only a passing thing, that this isn't going to stay that way; we couldn't exist on such a basis. What was left of Czechoslovakia was not supportable. It's like taking a city in a graduation like taking a big city and taking all the supporting land away from it essentially. That's what it amounted to, in a large scale.

PHILLIPS: So you realized then that in fact you were going to have to go to war, to fight for--

POKORNY: Well, we weren't able to go to war anymore. The point about Czechoslovakia and what the allies completely missed--and when I speak of the allies I mean later allies, France and England essentially, who were really the only ones in a position to possibly resist the Germans at that time, and of course, they were ill-prepared, but at least the French thought they had the Maginot Line, and that would defend them. Well, we had a

Maginot Line, a Czech Maginot Line, around Bohemia, and Moravia on the north, and it was built on the principle of the Maginot Line, with French officers advising us how to build it. So it was a more modern Maginot Line. So the Germans by taking all that territory and incorporating it into Germany, had the chance to experiment with that new maginot Line, how to penetrate and pierce it, and then when the war really started, it was kids' play for them, they knew exactly what to do, where the weaknesses were, how it was organized, because they worked, they prepared themselves on the model, a full-scale model.

PHILLIPS: A Czech model.

POKORNY: A Czech model. So the Maginot Line was completely meaningless by that time, because they had, well almost, combined with the lack of resistance that the French, as a nation, were able to muster, it was a disaster.

PHILLIPS: The Czech Maginot Line that you describe, can you tell us how the Germans were able to overcome that, do you have some sense of--

POKORNY: Because there was no resistance, in other words, by having come to an agreement in Munich to give up those border areas where the Maginot Line was located, there was no conflict, right? There was no fighting over it. We simply gave it away.

PHILLIPS: Why was there no resistance?

POKORNY: You mean, why was there no uncontrolled spontaneous resistance?

PHILLIPS: Well, that's one question. The other question was, at the time, you felt that your country had been given away--

POKORNY: Definitely we were. We were sold down the river.

PHILLIPS: So you must have been very angry--

POKORNY: Of course.

PHILLIPS: --with the administrative authorities.

POKORNY: Not so much the administrative authorities, but we were angry at the French and the British. It was famous Mr. Chamberlain who believed Hitler was after all a decent fellow. You just talk to him. And so, Hitler got the best of it, without any shot fired. In retrospect you can say, "Well, it saved a lot of Czech lives." But it has cost a lot of Allied lives. It made the Second War. So one could say, "Well, we saved our necks, but then we didn't save anyone else's necks." That was a bad quid-pro-quo.

PHILLIPS: So you redrew the maps and they were subsequently printed no doubt.

POKORNY: No, it wasn't--well, it probably was printed in large scale, yes, of course, for people's convenience, in the newspapers. But we were the first ones who knew what happened in Munich. You know, there's a meeting, and a conference, they agreed piece by piece about areas and lines on territories, and that gets folded away and sent to Czechoslovakia from Munich. And I was the one who happened to draw that. At least part of it. I think that I was drawing the part that we were in charge of. Because we were the Bohemian headquarters; there must have been the same going on in the Moravian headquarters and the Slovakian headquarters. But it was a terrible thing.

PHILLIPS: What rank did you have at this point?

POKORNY: I was only a corporal. I had a spine injury; I fell from a horse a year before I was drafted in the army, or taken into the army. I was drafted before. And because of that I couldn't go to officers school, and so I managed to get to be a corporal, but I was doing office work. But my commanding officer lost his life, was shot by the Germans. The next in command was a Jew, a major, he was shot by the Germans. A little bit later, not right away. The third one survived, and I was the fourth one, I survived.

PHILLIPS: So you left the army.

POKORNY: Well, we were demobilized by--you see, this happened after Munich, and after Munich, several months later, the Germans in--I don't know when that happened, I'm giving you the wrong dates, you must check when Munich exactly happened--but, in spring or in later winter, early spring, of '39, the Germans finally marched into what was left of Czechoslovakia. And I was still at that army headquarters. And I remember that at that particular day, I was at home, I didn't stay at the small

barracks near the headquarters, and I was permitted to go back home, and I had my little car with me. And in the middle of the night, about 2:30 or 3:00, my father woke me up and said, "You're asked to be back immediately at headquarters." So I went to the phone and sure enough, I was told that the Germans have crossed the border, and they would be arriving in Prague by five in the morning, and there's a lot of work to do; I should come immediately, which I did. And what we were doing was burning papers or taking papers and burning them in a furnace, and running back and forth, and when I was almost finished with this task, my commanding general called me in and gave me his revolver and his saber, his sword, the symbol of his rank, and told me to go and take it back to his wife in a suburb. So I got into my car and I drove out there, but it was--we had curfew, not only curfew, but we had a blackout, and there were no lights, no street lights, and I was not allowed to put on my headlights either. So I drove in the dark through streets to the suburbs, delivered those things to the wife of the general, drove back. It was already beginning to be a little light, it was easier to drive. And when I arrived at the Prague castlelet, the Rashjani,

I ran into a column of Germans. The Germans had already arrived and were starting to drive down into the center of the city, where my headquarters were. Now, I had a choice what to do. I didn't know what to do. Here I was in uniform, and this car, and there was this column of armor and tanks. I said, "Well, I have to get back," so I simply drove to the column, and there was a gap between two tanks, and I just joined them, and I drove with them, and they didn't do a thing, they let me do it! And the only thing I could explain was that nobody gave them any instructions of what to do in such a case, and they were also frozen stiff. They were all--it was a frosty night. They were all shaking on their motorcycles and they were so glad they didn't have to do anything, they just were stiff, and they were going down the hill, and I was going with them, arrived at the headquarters, drove into the courtyard, full of German generals walking around. I just left my car standing there, walked up to my office, and there they were, looking for papers, couldn't find any. Well, they didn't know they couldn't find anything, but they were immediately going for major papers, opening safes and so on.

PHILLIPS: But you'd gotten rid of all the papers--

POKORNY: I don't know what we got rid of, we were just throwing away everything. And so there were just, a lot of books left and they probably thought that was important. Anyway, I got out of there as quickly as I could, and we were confined to barracks. The staff was probably sent away too; I don't remember what they did with them. Some were in prison. And about three weeks or two weeks later we were demobilized. In other words, we left our uniforms there and we walked away.

PHILLIPS: Because the Germans overtook then.

POKORNY: Yeah, that was the Germans. Under German command, we were demobilized. So the fact is that there was never and conflict, any confrontation. There was confrontation, but no fighting. And that was the story. But it went in steps.

PHILLIPS: Yes. So, at this point you'd been demobilized, and very soon you were going to leave for Sweden. Maybe, we started to talk a little bit about that in our first roll of tape. Could you describe a little bit about how you came to that decision, and then how you

left?

POKORNY: Well, to the decision not to be there, I mean not to stay around. Well, I think that came from the logic of, if there was going to be a war, and the Germans were in a pretty complicated war, they would be very much, they would be short of manpower, and one could certainly assume that they wouldn't leave some available manpower sitting around, doing nothing for them. They might not have drafted us into their army anymore, because that would have been too dangerous or risky for them, but they certainly could have used us for all sorts of forced labor, and we predicted that I would certainly be, like all the other young people who were in the army,pretty good material for them to get hold of. So we didn't want--I didn't want to be subject to them. My father didn't want me to--I was the only son, he was trying to protect me. So we devised this subterfuge of sending me on a study trip for subway system in Sweden, when that subway system, as that man from the German bank was absolutely correct, he didn't know how small the subway in Stockholm was, it was exactly one kilometer long. And when I finally saw it, when I finally got out and looked

at it, I was laughing to myself, how true that was. If I really wanted to study a subway system, I should have gone to Berlin. But that was obviously only a subterfuge, and it succeeded, and I had a wonderful time once I could forget the war, which by then had already started, or was ready to start.

PHILLIPS: Could you describe driving nonstop across Germany? What did you see in Germany?

POKORNY: Well, that's a good question, because, well, Germany's beautiful, as you've probably heard or you've seen it. It is a beautiful landscape, very similar to the Czech landscape in a way. But then when we came closer, when I came closer to Berlin, I noticed an awful lot of military columns being on the autobahn. I was driving on the autobahn wherever possibly because it was the fastest way, but the autobahn led me right to Berlin. Berlin had a circular autobahn bypassing or going around Berlin, and so I went on that bypassing thing and there were even more columns of armored vehicles, and then I came to a sign that said Orienburg, which meant nothing to me at the time, and I saw barbed wire on both sides of the road, so I knew I was going through some restricted area. Well, it turned out to be one of the biggest concentration camps in Germany at the time. And I was driving right through it, on the autobahn, which happened to bisect it. So I was

aware of it.

PHILLIPS: What was the name of it? Could you spell it?

POKORNY: Orienburg.

PHILLIPS: But you didn't actually--

POKORNY: Well, I sensed something because all of the military around me on the roads, and the barbed wire, heavy barbed wire, not just perfunctory; that was really the thing. And some barracks left and right--and I realized this must be some military installation. Well, it wasn't military, it was a labor camp. It was not one of the Jewish camps, I think. But it was a notorious place, as I learned later. That thing stuck in my mind, and I put two and two together, that I drove right through it. But that's all. I stopped for gasoline in some town, and I kept on going. And the autobahn is like any autobahn, they're excellent, they were in excellent condition. They were in good condition for two reasons. (A), They're very thorough people, but they were also preparing for the war, and they had built fantastic

roads. And that got me all the way to Stepdin which is on the Baltic Sea.

PHILLIPS: Then you took your--

POKORNY: Then I took the ferry across to Malo. But I was still terrible scared. In the morning I thought, well, just--

PHILLIPS: The ferry across to where?

POKORNY: Malo, which is a town in Sweden. And that is where a friend of my father's was going to pick me up. Not a friend, but an acquaintance. And when I arrived at this checkpoint, which was occupied, controlled by one single blackshirt, and that;s really the point--that was it. The moment of truth. Is this guy going to let me out, or not? With a car, or not? I didn't know what was going to happen. In fact, that was why I didn't take, I didn't try to smuggle out anything. I didn't have any jewelry with me, to be able to sell on the other side, nor money, foreign money, which I wasn't given officially so I didn't take it unofficially. It turned out I could have taken as much as I could have carried. They never even looked at me. They waved me through. So you never know! I got on the ferry, I was almost the single passenger, got across to the other side.

PHILLIPS: How long did it take?

POKORNY: I don't remember. But a few hours, probably I would guess four or five hours, maybe. And it goes across the western end of the Baltic Sea into Malo, which is a town at the southern end of Sweden, and it's a very pleasant little town.

PHILLIPS: Tell us a little bit about your feelings. They must have been very mixed at that time.

POKORNY: Well, it was a great anxiety and a tightness in my body, until I passed that blackshirt. The moment I was on board that ferry, I was much relieved. You know, if you could draw a graph it would go from almost zero up to infinity. I was out, I was free, I was out of there. It succeeded. That was my feeling. And the, on the other side, it was extremely friendly, and they gave me money, you know, they were waiting for me.

PHILLIPS: Who was waiting for you?

POKORNY: It was the employee of a company that was affiliated with

the Skoda Works, and it was thereby professionally related to somebody that somehow sends some orders to him to execute. Bit it was partially good will and partially professional obligation. But what was interesting is they had a very small apartment in Malo, it was a small family of two people, so I had to sleep on the couch in the middle of the livingroom. Apartments in Sweden are very nicely equipped but small. And they were very nice to me, and they were curious why I was leaving, and I was telling them what happened in Czechoslovakia. Now, you must remember, Sweden was always, oh at least for 150 years, a neutral country. And they were terribly nervous. Everybody in Europe was nervous. But they particularly were trying to hold or stick to their neutrality. And the news I was bringing was so disagreeable, they didn't want to believe it. They thought that I was all wrong, that I was exaggerating. And that was hard for me to understand. It took me a while to understand. What the situation was. Swedes were worried that they won't be able to stick to their neutrality. And I was jogging the conscience; I was shaking them up. They wanted to--they would have liked to think thoughts that would have supported their

neutrality. In fact, they kept it up, as you know. When Norway was run over, they gave the Germans permission to cross Sweden, and the Norwegians never forgave them for that. And they also didn't do anything when Russia started fighting with Finland. Same thing. There was no need for grousing, et cetera. They sympathized with the Finns, but they didn't do a thing. Of course, the Red Cross--after the war, and even maybe during the war, the Swedish Red Cross did a lot of helping the young children in Norway and did a lot of things to alleviate somewhat that bad feeling that people had about Sweden. But they succeeded to stay neutral.

PHILLIPS: So how long were you in Sweden?

POKORNY: Seven months. Seven months, and it would have been a wonderful time, it was late summer, it was beautiful, the weather was excellent, my friends then, I forgot to say, from Malo, I moved up to Stockholm, where I had very dear friends. And they were informed ahead of time that I might be coming. And they sent letters saying that I would be most welcome, and in fact I stayed with them several months. First I stayed with them in the country, in Dalna which is the center or the core of Sweden, and then I moved back to Stockholm and I had to worry about my crossing to

the United States. I had to do it in Stockholm, of course, so I had to be there. So I took a small room in a pension and made a lot of friends and it would have been, as I said, a wonderful time for me. I was at the right age to go by myself, but there was always behind this weight of, "What's going to happen next?" And while I was in Stockholm, of course, the war did break out, just as my father predicted on October first. I remember I pulled the leaf of the calendar and put it among my souvenirs I've lost since then, but I was in my friend's restaurant when the news came out.

PHILLIPS: Did you hear it--someone came into the restaurant? Or on the radio?

POKORNY: No, there were special editions. The newspapers were terribly important in Stockholm. And one didn't have to buy the newspaper. In fact it might not have been available yet, not yet printed, but the news would be exhibited in storefronts; they would make large posters with the headlines, just the way we have them now movable in Times Square, they had them in the window of the various two or three newspapers. And so we would stand in front of those storefronts and watch for the next edition, or so to say. We could almost keep up to date by--it was like a radio, in a way--and that's where we learned that Germany moved into Poland and France started to declare war, and one thing after another. Something happened every day. And that time I was really trying to negotiate my passage to the United States,

which was very difficult, because the United States at that time didn't accept immigrants readily. You had to have some sort of visa. And I hadn't really thought about it, I just wanted to get there, but through some diplomatic connections I was sent to the Consul General of the United States, a Mr. Snow, who was very nice, and he told me very openly that the only chance I have to get to the United States was with a student visa.

PHILLIPS: Let me ask you, before you tell us about that, just what had you been doing in Sweden for that seven month period.

POKORNY: Well, it was actually the middle of what I had been doing through the end of the summer, beginning of fall. I was with my friends in Dalna, and since I had a car, and they didn't, they thought of all sorts of places to visit and we would drive around and they would show me Sweden. Not too big a region--Sweden is very long. But the central section. And so we visited a lot of places. And I stayed in a country house and I had a good time, swimming and going walking in the woods and taking photographs and meeting friends. It was just a nice vacation. It would have been, if it wouldn't have been--as I keep repeating, this back of my mind, "What's going to happen next?"

PHILLIPS: Were you able to keep in touch with your parents?

POKORNY: No. By that time it was impossible. But--now, I shouldn't say no. There were--you know, there is one really important historic event that took place. Germany and Stalin made a pact. And that shook everybody up; that was a terrible blow. Because we thought that at least one enemy still--Germany still has one enemy. No! They made a pact. This happened even before, I think, before the war started. So now, the consequence of that was that people who were now being sent from Czechoslovakia industry by the Germans to Russia to negotiate for commercial deals had to come across Stockholm, via Stockholm, so they went from Germany to Stockholm, and from Stockholm they flew to Russia, to Moscow. And some of those people stopped to say hello to me. And they even brought me some money, from Czechoslovakia, in a hidden manner. And so that sort of kept me going. They were supplying me with money, and they were bringing me news from my parents, and vice versa, I would give them news--they would bring news from me to my parents in Prague.

PHILLIPS: You could actually write a letter to them?

POKORNY: Well, I wrote a note, or just orally. Some of them were good friends.

PHILLIPS: We're just about to talk about your application for a visa, I think.

POKORNY: Well, after I was told that the only way I could come was on a student visa, I wrote to my friends in the United States to kindly try to have me accepted at some university.

PHILLIPS: Now, your friends in the United States. You'd better explain who they were.

POKORNY: They were very important because before I-- right after we were demobilized, I remember a party at my father's colleague's house where his son-in-law was present with his wife. And he was getting ready to go to the United States. This was long before I went. And he prepared for going to the United States for along time;

he was taking his whole family, all his goods, and he was going to emigrate to the United States and he was saying sort of "Good-bye" to us at this party. And he turned to my father and he said, "Maybe you ought to think about sending your son. I'll help him." It stuck in my head and stuck in my father's head, and that's what really we were planning to do. We said that if the war starts, and you're stuck in Sweden, you're next step is to try to get to the United States. But we didn't make any other preparations but to inform my friends from Stockholm that I managed to get to Stockholm. So now I took the next step and I wrote them, and I said, "The war started, I want to come, as you suggested. But it seems that the only way I can do it is on a student visa. Now will somebody accept me in a university if I already have an architectural degree?" Well. that was no problem. My colleague went to Columbia University, and wrote Columbia University; they wrote him a note saying I was accepted. He sent me the document pack. I brought the documents to the Consul General, and then we started negotiating to get me a visa. Well that took me about nine or ten visits to the Consul General.

PHILLIPS: In Stockholm.

POKORNY: In Stockholm. He was very cooperative and he gave me the right instructions. But now I had to go through the mechanism of applying, and I was handed down to the office force, and they gave me the fifth degree. It was very slow, and some were not very cooperative. And one of them, for instance, told me, "You are going to go to the United States and go to a university?" and I said, "Yes." But you see, I didn't speak a word of English, and they said, "But how could you? You don't speak English. How can you?" I said, "I'll learn." Well, they looked very dubious, and they didn't like it. So I was sitting it out, and as I said, I had to be there about nine times. And I felt like, you know, the opera by Menotti, The Consul? Have you ever--you haven't seen that? But it's exactly about that subject, sitting in a Consul's office in Consulate, again and again by the hour, waiting for some document, and people passing behind you, and it was just like that. I saw the opera much later, but I kept thinking about my own experience. Well finally I got the document. But I must say, before that, the Swedish government wanted to get rid of me,

because my permit to stay in Sweden was only limited to six months, and when it came close to six months, they called for me from the foreign office and said, "Mr. Pokorny, you're going to leave," and I said, "I can't" and they said "What do you mean, you can't?" and I said, "Well, I can't go back to Czechoslovakia." And so they were going to force--I scared stiff they were going to deport me.

PHILLIPS: Back to Czechoslovakia?

POKORNY: Yes. But then I had already good connections and a countess, Braz de Pose who was the president of the Nasen Organization took me and went with me to the reverend at the foreign office.

PHILLIPS: Could you just tell us who that person was again and what that organization was?

POKORNY: She was the president of the Nasen Organization. Nasen was a very rich man who gave a foundation for stateless people.

PHILLIPS: Could you spell it?

POKORNY: Nasen. And she was the president. And she was a countess related to the royal family.

PHILLIPS: I'm going to ask you to give us their names again.

POKORNY: Amalia Pose. And, she had another name, Brazdowab. She was married to a Czech painter. So she was very sympathetic to Czechs and she took me on and she certainly helped me. Without her I might have lost the battle. Anyway, she got me out of that trap.

PHILLIPS: How? What did she do for you?

POKORNY: Well, she simple went there and gave them hell. She said, "You going to send him back there? You know he might lose his life because of your stupidity?" That way. She talked to them just like that. And the man who was sitting behind the desk was very much taken aback. He knew her, and he was scared of her, so that he helped me a great deal. You can just see, the little things that you depend on. And so you get very edgy. That's the way that period was. But once I got through

that, and once--

PHILLIPS: There's a great deal of fickleness to all of this, essentially.

POKORNY: Yes, yes. Exactly, it can go one way or the other, and you--just pushing doesn't help. You have to be lucky, too. And that teaches a lot of lessons. You have to be grateful when you succeed. Well, then I had only one question. How to buy the ticket. And so then I sold my car. And for the money that I got, I was able to book the passage. I didn't want to leave from Stockholm, because at that time the war was on, and the Skagerrak and Kattegat Narrows between Denmark and Norway are terribly narrow, and we suspected that it would be patrolled by the Germans.

PHILLIPS: Can you perhaps again describe that and spell that for us.

POKORNY: Well, I can't--spelling would be difficult.

PHILLIPS: We'll look on a map. Just tell us again what it was.

POKORNY: Kattegat and Skagerrak. It's two bodies of water that meet at a very narrow spot, and we all learn it in

high school. And, of course, now it all of a sudden became prominent. There it is, and it's going to affect me. So I didn't want to risk that, so I took the train from Stockholm to Bergen, over the mountains, and from Bergen I was planning to leave by Bergensfjord ship, S.S. Bergensfjord, to United States. And that succeeded. That was in January, 1940.

PHILLIPS: Again, let me ask you a little more about that journey, to describe that journey.

POKORNY: Beautiful. It goes through the--it goes up the mountains, over the spine of Scandinavia, and down the other side, into Bergen. And it's almost--all year round up there it's under snow, so you go through snow tunnels. And the train goes pretty fast, so you in and out of tunnels continuously for about an hour, maybe longer. You keep going in and out of these snow fields, and rocks; it's an absolutely beautiful trip. And I felt good, because I was leaving; it was wonderful. I took pictures. And then I arrived in Bergen; terrible winter day. There was the boat. And so I stayed in the hotel terminal over one night, and the next day we boarded.

And off we went. And it was a very rough passage, because it was in the winter time, and in February it gets to be rough on the Atlantic. But we passed some whales along the way, and then after we arrived in New York, the captain told us we were lucky. We had passed a mine by a very short distance, and "I couldn't do anything about it any more because if I had changed course it wouldn't have made any difference." I don't know how close it was, but he saw it from the bridge. So we had a lot of things happening.

PHILLIPS: Tell us, how long did the passage take?

POKORNY: I think it took nine days.

PHILLIPS: It took about nine days. Now tell us about actually arriving, and seeing--

POKORNY: Oh, it was fantastic. We arrived on a Saturday, in the morning, early in the morning, and of course, we saw the skyline, and I saw the Statue of Liberty, and we were going to land, and we must have landed around ten o'clock in the morning, maybe nine o'clock. I mean, be tied up, at the pier. We must have been in the thirties somewhere. And the piers

were all still, you know, all the pier buildings were there; they were not just wrecks. There was a whole slew of pier buildings. And then the bad news started. Because this was Saturday, and the contingent of the U.S. Immigration officials was not complete. There were very few men, and when they came to my passport, they kept looking at it, they gave it someone else, he looked at it, and then they told me to wait. And I had to wait until everybody was finished. They came back to me and they said, "We can't let you land. Your passport is not adequate." I didn't have the slightest idea-- They said, "There's nothing we can do about it. You have to stay on board till Monday, and on Monday we'll take you to Ellis Island." And so, here I was, scared stiff, naturally. That was a blow I didn't expect at all, because I got the passport--well, the passport was a German protectorate (Berman Bairn) passport, but it was an original Czech passport with something glued over. So they knew it was a Czech passport that was monkeyed with by the Germans. But it had the visa in it, my student visa was stamped inside, and it was extended, it was valid. But they didn't tell me the details; they just said, "You have to go to Ellis Island. And the commander of, or the chief of, our bureau, isn't here on Saturday. He'll be in place on Monday morning." So--

PHILLIPS: What date was this?

POKORNY: It was in February; I don't know the date exactly. I

know the date when I actually landed, on terra firma, which was February 7, 1940. But I don't remember exactly--I can probably reconstruct it.

PHILLIPS: But this was early February in 1940.

POKORNY: Right. It was a very cold day, there was ice on the water. There was snow on the streets. And I couldn't leave the boat. And that was a strange experience, because the whole--all of a sudden, the lively ship becomes a dead ship. Nobody around. All the mattresses turned around the cabins, the crew all of a sudden becomes unfriendly; you're not a passenger anymore. You're just nobody. And everybody left on leave, for shore leave. And I was there, left with a cook and maybe two guards. And maybe two other people also, I don't remember anymore. And there we spent the weekend on an empty boat. Very dismal. In this miserable weather. Some friends came to see me. I made friends with some people, and they knew my predicament. And there was a young lady, and she came on Sunday just to pay a visit, just to cheer me up.

PHILLIPS: Someone on the boat?

POKORNY: Someone with whom I made friends on the boat. She was Jewish girl that was joining her family. She spoke Swedish very well. Anyway, I remember her name, it was Miriam. Anyway, so my friends were waiting for me on the dock and they of course knew what happened, and that I was going to Ellis Island and they said, "Don't worry, we are going to go there and take care of things." Well, then Monday morning, I put my stuff together, and I was picked up by a tugboat, and I was transferred by guards under the tug, and I was taken to Ellis Island. And I arrived at Ellis Island from this little thing. You know, it's short trip, but nevertheless, it was not your official arrival. There was nobody around; the building from the outside looked benign. There was this huge pile of brick and stone. And I didn't know what was going to happen next. And finally, well, with all my baggage--I had what, two suitcases and two small pieces, a lot of stuff to lug--and inside--immediately almost, one gets into this huge hall, which looked like a railroad station, with large windows on one side, a balcony around, beautiful walls. But I didn't look at the beauty of it, I was oppressed. It was full of people; there must have been 200-250 people milling around, and stuffed full of baggage. Everybody had piles of baggage. Now, then I didn't know what to do. I had to wait. They were telling me to wait, they will call me if necessary. So, I sort of started to see what was going on there, in this big hall, and there was a pattern, where wooden

benches, women, and children were sitting on the benches. And the men, and some women, were circulating in the center of that hall in a sort of a leisurely fashion, like a corso in middle Europe in the square on Sunday, when people walk around to keep each other company and socialize. Well, this was just like that, very slow walk around the circle, people going in two's and three's, talking to each other, and pretty soon I joined with somebody who was alone and wanted to talk, and then I realized what this mechanism was. Well, first of all it was moving. Some people had been there for weeks on end, and some people were there just a day or two, and some a week or two. They all had different experiences, but it was a tremendous source of information. And also, a source of rumors. I mean, it was a rumor factory. And you couldn't get a straight, reliable answer. You sort of had to judge from the advice you would get on how to behave, and what to do. And this all comes from the fact that we were being dealt with by the U.S. Immigration Office, which was not the State Department, it's an independent agency. They had their rules, and nobody really quite understood what those rules were. They were not, as I said, they were not in unison with the policies of the State Department or many others. In other words, they didn't catch up, or their rules, or their instructions were not synchronized. And so we soon learned that what these people go by was what was written, by the book, they were going exactly by the law and what was written in the books. And, so each one of us had a much more complicated situation. I was coming on student visa. And I was given to understand by those who were advising me

that if I am going to be--I knew that I have to go before a hearing to establish my case, to see what has to be done, what they can do, what they will do. And so I looked forward to this hearing. Sort of uneasily. And they told me, "You have to tell them, when they will ask you, if you can go back, you have to say yes, because you have a student visa that's limited for one year, and if after that's over, you're going back. And if you say otherwise, you won't get in." And, of course, it wasn't true; I wasn't going to go back. And normally, if I wouldn't have been warned and they say, "Can you go back?" I would have probably said, "No." So that was the one thing that became very clear to me, that I better say that, because everybody was telling me that's what I have to do. Now, so--I wasn't called the first day. My case was to be next day. So that meant I will have to stay overnight.

PHILLIPS: Let me ask you, before you go on, how did you find someone to speak a language? The Czech language?

POKORNY: Oh, that was international; nobody spoke Czech to me; I don't remember if I talked German to somebody--there were a lot of Jewish people there; they spoke many languages. I can speak French; I might have been speaking French. Anyway, I don't remember that. It's hard for me to imagine that there was a time when I didn't speak English, you see. But there were no Czechs there. I remember that much. I wasn't speaking my native language.

PHILLIPS: You could have been speaking French, German, Swedish?

POKORNY: A little bit Swedish, but I don't think I spoke to anybody in Swedish. Swedish had the least reason to be there. There would have been very few immigrants from Sweden.

PHILLIPS: I'm trying to get a sense of how many languages you spoke.

POKORNY: Oh, well, I spoke those other two languages, three languages, Czech, German, French, that I could speak well; and a little Swedish. And Czech was definitely not what I was speaking at Ellis Island. Anyway, so then we fell into the pattern of living on Ellis Island, which was probably what you want to know, what I remember about it. I remember that we were eating in mess halls that were, well, not so terribly large, not as big as, well, it was a limited sized room. with long tables and long benches. And it was just like in the army; I mean, they were ladling out the food over our shoulders from big pots and they were carrying these big pots around the table. And the food was hearty, and adequate. It wasn't terrific, but it was plenty. And at night, we were staying in what you might call a kind of combination dormitories or more like a hospital ward, for 18-20 people in one

room, with barred windows, which could have been a psychiatric ward somewhere. And the walls tiled with white tile and the floors white tile and the beds were iron beds, but good ones, and mattresses were fine. But it was locked, and once we were in the room, you were locked up. So, it was kind of a combination hospital-prison. Or psychiatric ward, or something of that sort. And when we want to go to the john or to wash up, we went in groups with a guard, always with a guard, who went with us to the john and--constant guards. Guards were all over the place. They had blue uniforms, they were friendly but noncommittal. They were bored with their job, but they were doing it punctiliously. And so that gave us a feeling of lack of freedom, obviously. We were being guarded. And we were taken for exercise to the outdoors, and there was the strange situation where, I remember very vividly, going onto this space, which wasn't a yard, because it was against the building, it was outside between the water and the building and it was enclosed on two sides by the building and on two sides by a chain link fence with barbed wire around it on the top. It's like a prison yard, but with a view. And the view was the Statue of Liberty, so I was looking at the Statue of Liberty through the chain link fence crossed with barbed wire; it was a kind of a strange experience. That, I will never forget. And then I finally got to the hearing, I think probably the second day, and they told me what the matter was. I had a passport that had the proper student visa in it, but it was only valid for half a year. Now, the Consul General in Stockholm has never found it, or maybe he found it but didn't want to bother, because it

would have caused difficulties. So he overlooked it. It could be either that he overlooked it or he didn't know about it. And unless the immigration officials found out about it, established right away, already on the boat, that there was a discrepancy between the length of the visa and the length of the validity of the passport. So, on that basis, they couldn't let me in. And so then the question got to be, how is it going to be solved, and my friend was called in to the meeting, and he said, "I'm going to have the passport extended, if you permit that." And they said, "Sure. How are you going to do it?" Well, there is a government-in-exile office in New York and I think--he called them up, they said, "Yes, we'll extend it." So he took the passport to that office; Czechoslovak government-in-exile had a kind of Consulate here.

PHILLIPS: Where?

POKORNY: Here, in New York.

PHILLIPS: Do you know the address?

POKORNY: It was somewhere near Columbus Circle. But I didn't go there myself. And they extended my passport; he took it back, and the case was solved. But they did ask me, "If you wanted to, can you go back?" And I said, "Yes." I lied. But it was necessary to lie, it was a white lie. And

they probably knew exactly what I was doing. But they simply had to go by the book. So when that was over, when the passport came back, they saw it and they okayed it, then I could leave. So, on the way out--no, on the way back to the mainland, I was going on a ferry boat; there was a small ferry boat that was going to Battery Park, between Ellis Island and Battery Park, so I went on that ferry. Those are the pictures, here, in the book. And that's my story. But then, from then, my friend took me straight to Columbia, and I arrived at Columbia that same morning, on the 7th of February, and I registered and I stayed there for--and the dean of the school put me into the second year of the School of Architecture. Here I was already an architect, a graduated architect, put me into the second year, and he explained to me why he was doing it, and he was absolutely right. He said, "You are going to learn English. And you are going to best learn it if you deal with the subject you know, and that's the way you'll learn, from your other fellow students, and from the professors." They were wonderful to me, the faculty was unbelievable. They have, since I couldn't speak at the beginning, at all, they all spoke French to me. Because they were all graduates of the Beaux Arts school in Paris. And they loved to speak French; it reminded them of their youth, so I came along wonderfully. The other things that I wanted to say, but it was a nice coincidence, that the Ellis Island main building was built, designed by William Boring, who was--used to be the dean of the School of Architecture at Columbia. So the dean built the building I spent my first day in America, my first few days in America.

Well, I'm still at Columbia. I started as a student, and I became an assistant and so on and so on, and got to be a full professor, now I'm a professor Emeritus, but I still teach. So it's now 48 years that I've been at Columbia. From 1940 to 1988. almost exactly 48 years, because February 7th is going to be in a few days, in a month.

PHILLIPS: Perhaps as we get near the end of our interview, you can tell us a little bit about your observations, about coming into the United States, and architectural studies here compared to the architectural studies in Europe of the period.

POKORNY: Well, it was quite different, as I told you. The local, the system here in the United States was based on the Beaux Arts, although Columbia wasn't per se following the exact curriculum. I t was sort of trying to combine the two systems. There was more technical instruction at Columbia than in most other schools in the United States. That's what made it one of the best schools in the United States at the time. And I learned a great deal from the professors who went through the Beaux Arts system, which I didn't know from Czechoslovakia; it was much more pragmatic. But this

Beaux Arts system was a system of teaching design in a very special, very useful way. Useful in a general way, in general terms, not that it meant a special style, although it did at the time, when it was taught in Paris. The same method applied to modern architectures as valid as any other system might be. So that I've learned from these Beaux Arts teachers. I remember particularly Professor Fletcher who was a typical Beaux Arts teacher. And all the others too. Well, I've also been able to contribute something. I was a relatively good draftsman, I had a fine hand, and I had no equipment with me; I brought only the bare necessities, certainly no architectural tools. I didn't have a compass, I didn't have any triangles, I just had a few mechanical pencils. And I didn't want to invest too much money; I didn't have much money. So everything at the School of Architecture here was, when they came to the final stage of a project, was done in ink. Everything was drawn in ink. And this is what I didn't want to do; I wanted to do it in pencil. So I did all my rendering, my final presentation drawings in pencil. But they were so good, that it started a precedent which they probably weren't very happy about, because when the students saw that this

can be done, they all started doing it. Then ink disappeared in about a year. And that was my contribution to the school; you could call it a negative contribution, from their point of view. But I had a good time there; as a matter of fact, I must admit or say that Columbia really put me on my feet here. I got a Master's Degree there, and that was the basis of my whole career. But now I'm very much involved with Czechoslovakia again. I am the chairman of the American Fund for Czech Refugees, and we admitted about 444, or no, we have relocated about 444 people last year, in this country. And in total we must have dealt with about 150,000 Czechoslovaks over the years, in the last 40 years. And I'm also involved with the Bohemian Benevolent and Victory Association, which is building on 73rd Street and I'm redesigning it, and so I'm back in the American-Czech life.

PHILLIPS: That brings us to the end, I think, of our interview.