

Voices: A Series Of Oral Histories

'AUTHORITY HAS A PROBLEM WITH ME'

by Jan Schmidt

Yariv, interviewed January 16,
1994. Yariv is an Israeli painter
living in New York.

Jan: How have your paintings or you changed in the last few years?

Yariv: One change is that the better I get, the more time I have as a painter, the more I drop intellectual ideas, I just let it be paint, I'm painting. I don't want to say anything, I don't have a statement. Actually I'm making quiet all those ideas. I want it not to have any ideas. Just to do it. It's a vague way to say it but I'm trying to be pure. In other words to get rid of my aesthetic ideas. And to get rid of the knowledge. To let it be instinctive, to let it to come out of me.

Dostoyevsky. You were telling me about the *Gambler*.

I really love Dostoyevsky. I love the depth of his descriptions of feelings and emotions. About the *Gambler*, I went once with my mother to Las Vegas. I was broke. This was three years ago when I just stopped doing drugs and alcohol. I was sick actually. She gave me \$300. We were supposed to be there three days and she suggested I spend \$100 a day. I lost the \$300 in the first hour.

The next morning I woke up and I had five cents in my pocket. I went to the next hotel, which was the Mirage, I think, a new hotel. I put the five cents in the slot machine and it rained. I got eight dollars, and at that point, something happened. This relates to my painting. I have no idea what it is exactly that happened, but Dostoyevsky could describe it.

With the eight dollars from the slot, I went to my hotel and played on the blackjack for 10 minutes. It's like a deep voice in me said, 'You're gonna play on the blackjack for 10 minutes. You're just going to make 30 or 40 dollars.' I won like this, (snap) 40 dollars.

Then, it's like someone took me to the roulette. I got the 40 dollar chips. Wherever I put the chip, I won. People around me started following after me. It was like I was in a zone. Like Michael Jordan in basketball—*In a Zone*. And I just couldn't lose. Every time I would win.



Computer graphic of drawing by Yariv.

My mother was ecstatic. She actually tried to cheat me one time. It was my coin that won. She said, 'that's mine.'

We had a small argument, I said, 'MOM, you know that's mine, huh?'

It was maybe an hour of this, an hour of madness or being in the zone, or whatever. I understood roulette. I would win wherever I put money. Definitely it's a weird feeling. The only thing is that you can't manipulate it. At least I can't manipulate it. It's not in my control. It's just something that happened.

Painting must be a little bit more under your control.

No. I think only statistically just by doing it a lot, it will happen much more. You'll have many days where it doesn't happen. 'Cause I think fear is a big element. I can see 'that's a fear,' that's not real what I did. I was trying to impress.

So what do you do with the painting when you say it's a fear?

That's the struggle, I keep fighting with it.

But you paint over then?

Oh yeah, I paint over.

Until it's at the point where you say, all of this painting has come from this other part of me?

No. That's the thing, it's never all of this painting. There's maybe 10 percent of it that's really pure or it's the truth. Then you keep the other 90 that isn't.

What about technique, did you study painting somewhere?

No, I went to the academy of art in San Francisco, I took one semester and the Art Institute in San Francisco I took one semester and in New York Studio School I took a semester. If I was in class I always had an argument with the teacher.

Like what?

With many of them, I just wouldn't do what they wanted me to do. It's very simple, they would put a model in front of me and I wouldn't paint the model.

What would you paint? What was in your head?

I might have painted, I don't know, the guy sitting next to me. It's very difficult to discipline something.

You have a problem with authority?

Are you being cynical or something? Of course I do, yeah, of course. Well, I say it differently: authority has a problem with me.

Who would be an important painter for you?

A painter? Francis Bacon. I tell you something. I hardly go to museums or galleries. And the truth is I don't even like paintings so much, I hardly enjoy looking at paintings. It doesn't interest me to see other paintings. Sports interest me more.

I was in the Modern Art a week ago, and I saw all those guys, Cezanne, Picasso, Modigliani. For me they're good painters, it's a nice thing, it's a nice effort they put on the canvas, with figures or abstract or whatever it is. There's two big paintings by Francis Bacon. And those are the ones, that were, Wow. IT was really wow for me because the way I see it he managed to capture an essence.

What do you think that is? Francis Bacon looks to me kind of terrifying.

Well, not to me. To me he doesn't look terrifying, he looks very aesthetic.

What do you mean by aesthetic?

I don't know, but definitely, I don't see it as terrifying. Like I said, there's some essence there.

That's got to do with that thing we were talking about, being real.

Yeah. And in this case for some reason it's dark. Now that's a mystery to me. I don't know why. In this case it's dark. I know most people relate it to some kind of darkness, and the same with Dostoyevsky. Dostoyevsky is not an uplifting writer, but he manages to capture a certain essence. Now I don't know why this essence is not so cheerful. That's a mystery to me.

Do you think if people looked at your paintings that they would see somewhat of that same thing, that they would see this darkness?

I think, yeah, most people see this darkness in my painting. But at the same time I recognize it's on a very superficial level. It's the people who take just a two seconds look at my paintings. Then some people, like my girl friend, Isha, she manages to

see the beauty in it. And maybe the beauty is connected to sadness or whatever, but she sees the beauty.

And your mother also?

Yeah. I mean they refer to it as, 'oh, it's so expressive, you manage to express emotion.'

Actually, my mother called me from Israel, and she said, 'Yariv, there is a guy who wants to talk to you.' Now that guy was a gallery owner from Israel, a salesperson. He got on the phone and said, 'Listen Yariv, I like what you're doing, it's original.' He was a real fast talker, a real salesperson. He said, 'I really like what you're doing but listen. What I want you to do is, I want you to give me much more Judaica, much more, give me the Jewish subject, give me Friday meeting at the Kidduch. Give me some menorah. We're going to sell them like hot cakes.' And so on.

So I asked him to put my mother on the phone and I said, 'Listen, mum, don't you ever let me talk to this guy again.'

So your girlfriend, Isha, makes jewelry. Tell me how you met her.

Michelle, a friend of mine, brought Isha one day to my apartment to meet 'a painter friend.' That's Michelle's phrase. I was sitting on the carpet, so the first thing I saw was Isha's feet, and I loved them. She loved the painting, which helped a lot, I guess. We went to a dinner, a bunch of people. I wasn't talking at all during the dinner. Everybody was talking to Isha; she'd been traveling for 20 years, she'd been all over the world, she speaks seven languages, and so on and so on. We finished dinner and went down to the street. I told her, 'Listen, I think I'm in love with you.' And of course she thought I was just horny. Anyhow I moved to her place two or three days later. The rest is history. We fell in love.

That very night we didn't spend the night together. She gave me her phone number and said to call her a few days later. So I called her the next morning at eight o'clock. And she said that she had to meet her mother. 'Why don't you call me Wednesday,' she said.

'Are you crazy,' I said, 'Wednesday, my god. Are you joking with me? I'm going to die until Wednesday.' But I said alright. And somehow, I guess that was god interfering, her mother canceled the appointment. She called me the same day and said why don't you come over for dinner today and that's when I moved in.

I came to dinner, I thought it was going to be her and me. I brought flowers. I walked into the apartment, there's 15 people there. She brought friends. I told her, 'I thought it's a date.'

She said, 'I never had a date in my life. It's a dinner.' Anyhow, I waited until everybody left, and that's it. We stayed together since.

She has a home in Bali?

The last two years, she spent a lot of time in Bali, making jewelry, because she found a girl that does the jewelry for her. Two Balinese girls that make the jewelry. She bought some land in this small village in Bali, Kröbokan. She built a house, a beautiful house on this land. There's no white people there. And that's it.

Did you have a problem getting into Bali?

Yeah, because Bali is part of Indonesia and Indonesia is a Muslim country and they don't let Israelis in. And I've only an Israeli passport. I couldn't get into Bali, so we stayed in Thailand, Singapore.

Just recently with the peace talks in Israel a lot of Muslim countries opened up borders to Israel. But with Bali and Indonesia, they are talking about it, but not yet.

So, since then, you and Isha got married?

Yes, Isha and me got married in order for me to get a green card.

In the United States?

In the United States, because with a green card I can get what they call a re-entry card, which is a white passport, which with this passport I can get into Bali, so basically that's why we got married.

So were you able to do that?

Not really, what happened, we went to the meeting with immigration, and I was married once before. Ten years ago I got married, five years ago I got divorced. At the immigration meeting the woman that interviewed us just picked up my divorce paper, and she goes,

'My friend, you are a bigamist. Here in the States we don't accept religious divorce.'

I was divorced by a Rabbi in New York. The Rabbi didn't bother to tell me that this is not acceptable here. So it turned out that I'm a bigamist because I'm still married to my first wife. So now, I have to divorce my first wife, I have to divorce Isha, I have to remarry Isha and I have to go through this whole meeting with immigration again.

Do you know where your ex wife is?

She is in London. I found her and she signed the paper, so at this minute right now, I am a single man.

So you've consummated both the divorces?

Right. A week ago I was married to two women, now I'm a single man.

You said you really started painting seriously three years ago. How old are you now?

I'm 35. So 32 was when I was introduced to sobriety. And my decision to be a painter was very soon after, when I was three months clean and sober.

Before that you were painting on an irregular basis?

Very irregular. Only I didn't even consider myself a painter. It was just something that I did maybe once a year, an explosion for a month, maybe.

What kind of people have influenced you in your life?

There were three people that I think at least consciously influenced me, I don't know if influence is a good word, but I was very impressed by them. The three of them are people

"A WEEK AGO I WAS MARRIED TO TWO WOMEN, NOW I'M A SINGLE MAN."

that I knew personally, they were not good friends, but I had relationships with them and they were much older.

One of them was Amos Abrahamson. He was a farmer in Israel and I went to work for him as a shepherd. He had a bunch of land where he grew bananas, dates, apples, and olives. He made olive oil. This Amos was a religious man. He became religious 20 years ago. He was 62 years old, his wife was I think, 45 years old and from Switzerland. He had five small kids.

The day I met Amos was a big party for the youngest kid when he was two years old and stopped breast feeding. So they gave him this big party in Israel. And the same night, one of the goats gave birth in the barn and I was there with Amos when the goat gave birth to two kid goats. One of them died and Amos was trying to revive him, to put him back to life, but he didn't manage.

I lived with him for six months, I was working mainly with the goats taking them up and being a shepherd. He introduced me to the good side of religion. I always rebelled against it. I guess I can say I hated religion, because of the way it appeared to me in Israel. With Amos, we finished work around four or five o'clock. We were both on the tractor. We would stop at the house and he would put on the truck dates and Arrack, which is an alcoholic drink, bananas and goodies. We would go together to the synagogue because in the Jewish religion, you have to have 12 people in synagogue. If it's 11 people or less you can't have the prayer, it's got to be 12, so he grabbed me by the ear, practically, and said, 'Come on, let's go to synagogue.'

At the synagogue, it was like a Fellini movie, the characters that were sitting there. There was one guy without an eye and one guy without a leg and we were sitting around a table and they would read the prayer, for 20 minutes or whatever it takes, and while they're reading the prayer, this one guy keeps serving tea and dates and all those little things, the small alcohol thing, the small shots of Arrack. When they finished the prayer, they talked about the thing from the Bible. But they talked about it as if it's something that happened this morning in the village. I don't know who they were, it was just very beautiful.

How old were you at that time?

Twenty-three or 24. So I left Tel Aviv and I went to work with this guy for six months.

How did you happen to do something like that?

Actually I had some troubles with the law in Tel Aviv. It was suggested, and I figured it

was a good idea, to go to the village just to chill for a while. I had an uncle that lived in this village and he hooked me up with this Amos.

How big was the village?

It's about 3 to 400 people.

Did you like being there?

Oh, I loved it. It was one of the best.

But you didn't want to stay.

No. I didn't want to stay.

So what kind of trouble did you get to in Tel Aviv?

When I was in my teens, I guess, and early 20's, I was just a thief, I guess.

Did you do some time?

No. I was busted one time for breaking into a place. I was held for two months before trial. But then in trial I got off. I didn't do any time. So those two months was the longest. I was busted many times. Mostly for possession of hash.

How did you find the jail in Tel Aviv?

Actually, maybe now I'll look at it different, but for many years I found jail to be—it was a great experience. It was a great experience. Because basically in jail it's a bunch of young lunatics. I mean, I was laughing those two months, like I don't think I ever laughed so much since. Every day something else happened in the yard. It's a wild experience and then the day I got out of jail, I had no money. They gave me just one dollar for the bus. So the ride from jail home, I'll never forget it. This ride, this freedom thing, and the bus went by the beach from prison to home, I just remember this ride.

I never lived with my mother. I never grew up with her. I grew up, till I was five or six in Africa, and my parents divorced there.

Where in Africa?

Nigeria, mostly in Nigeria, then Uganda and Kenya. So my parents divorced and they kept moving me every year or two to a different Kibbutz or to my grandmother.

But not with them?

But not with them. Maybe one year with my mother, but then she met her second husband who was in a different city so she just commuted with me. Really I never lived with her. She picked me up from one Kibbutz to another to another.

So this was when you were five to ?

From five to 18, till 19 actually, that's when I went in the army.

First, what's it like in a Kibbutz? Then, in the army?

What's it like in a Kibbutz? Well, when I was young, when I was seven years old, then a Kibbutz it's some kind of paradise for kids, we live together and we laugh together, it's a blast, there is no discipline. You hardly go to school. There's trips. It's very nature. It's great.

But as I was growing older and I guess that's connected to the problem that authority have with me, I didn't like the Kibbutzim and they didn't like me. So from a certain age they kept kicking me out. I was in a Kibbutz, and they'd kick me out, so I went to another one, they'd kick me out. Because A) I wasn't working too hard and B) I was smoking hash.

I'll tell you something. That's the superficial reason, I gave you. The real reason I believe it's racism and that's got to do with the politics in Israel. In Israel I'm considered, not black, but dark and in Kibbutzim, it is mostly European Jews, whites. First I was an outside kid, and they weren't too thrilled about me.

And so, what was it like when you were in the Army?

Again, authority have really hard time with me. It's much more than comical than just being kicked out of every station I was, being in different jails, army jails.

How did they compare to other jails?

They are much lighter, much easier, I guess. But it was never for too long. I didn't really finish the army. I did a year-and-a-half, which normally takes three years. After a year-and-a-half, they kind of gave up on me.

So that brings you up to age 20?

Twenty-one.

And then you were running around stealing things?

While I was in the army also I was high all the time, and I was stealing things. I would be in bad company. Although many others thought that I was the bad company. A day after I finished the army, I went to Amsterdam. I lived in Amsterdam for six months, doing the same thing, being a street kid, I guess. They kicked me out of Amsterdam six months later.

The funny thing, the only story I remember from Amsterdam, and I don't know why I am attached to the hard things that happened to me, or the embarrassing or the sad, but those are the things that influenced me the most.

When they kicked me out from Amsterdam, they put me in isolation for eight days. Total isolation. They put me in a room without telling me how long I was going to be there. So theoretically, after two days, I thought, hey, that's it, forever. There was a guy across the hall. When they opened this small thing to give us the bread, I saw the guy and he looked insane, and I used to scream at him. He was a black guy and I said, 'how long are you here?'

And he said, 'I don't know, I think couple of months.' So that was a real experience. The foreign police. Which just by the way, this is an illegal thing to do, to throw someone to isolation for seven days. Not speaking with a lawyer, nobody, not a soul, for eight days. It's illegal, but.

Then what did they do?

Then after eight days, they opened the cell. They handcuffed me. With handcuffs and a beard, they put me on El Al, Israeli Airlines, full of Israelis and their mummies and daddies. They took me with the handcuffs into my seat. Before that, they're walking with me, so I told the guy, 'Listen, give me a break here, we are here in the airport, I'm not going to run away now.'

They took me to the seat with the handcuffs, so the whole plane knew. And it was me and this older guy, from isolation, another Israeli that they were kicking out. So we're sitting together, and we both look like we're terrorists or something, and this guy lost it a little bit 'cause he was kicking heroin. The truth is he was tied for a few days. There is this bowl for water drinking inside, so you can drink, and he was tied to it, handcuffed to it for a few days. And how he was in a very shaky state. I tried to talk to him, but he didn't make much sense. He said a few sentences, and then he lost it. After half-an-hour, he looks out to the sky. He looks through the window, and he goes, 'Yariv, I think the pilot lost his way.'

I look at him and I say, 'Eli, how can you tell?' I look out because I can't tell, I look out. 'Eli, how can you tell? There's only sky there.'

And he was serious. He called the pilot, he called the stewardess. He made a mess—on the plane. He was convinced the pilot lost his way. 'Go right, here,' he said, and outside there's only sky.

So that brings you up to 22?

Twenty-two, twenty-three, I was back in Israel, and after a while I started working in prison theater. Doing stage design and so on.

This was after being a shepherd?

Before. Right after this the theater went bankrupt. Because all the actors were ex-prisoners, and they were really a bunch of wild guys. One day when we had a show, one of the actors, wise guy, a really intelligent guy, decided to steal all the tickets and to sell them to his friends, so we didn't make any money, so we couldn't pay salaries. The theater didn't make any money and that was our biggest show. The biggest seller. So all the actors locked us in a room, me and the other two guys, the presidents of the theater. They let me go. But then the other two were really threatened with knives, 'They want their money, and bub bub bah,' and so the theater went bankrupt. Then I went back to Tel Aviv, and a few months later, I went to the North to work with Amos.

When you describe people you usually mention something about being real and being passionate.

Well, that's the way I want to be with life.

It's hard.

It's very hard. I'm much more successful in my paintings. Like I said before, I manage, 10 percent in my paintings.