

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Archives

Oral History Interviews of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center

**Interview with David Kempinski
March 9, 1987
RG-50.002*0011**

PREFACE

On March 9, 1987, David Kempinski was interviewed on videotape by Bonnie Kind and Bernard Weinstein on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and time-coded notes for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

Rights to the interview are held by the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses a copy of the interview as a result of a contributing organization agreement with the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. Details concerning the Museum's rights to use and reproduce the interview are contained in the contributing organization agreement.

Summary of the
Interview with David Kempinski
March 9, 1987

David Kempinski was born on July 27, 1921 in Praszka, Poland. He lived in Wielún, Poland, where his father had a flour mill, with his parents and three brothers, from 1927 until 1939. David's father's factory was appropriated by Nazis after Wielún was bombed on September 1, 1939. On August 9, 1941, the Jews of Wielún were rounded-up.

David was sent to Posnan (Poznan), Poland and then to a "Reichsautobahn" slave labor camp. After three weeks, he was sent to Regensburg (Regensburg), a concentration camp in Germany and then to Kreising. David was then sent to Reppen (Rzepin), Poland where he worked in a lumber mill. From there, he was sent to Britz, and from Britz, David was put onto a train, with other workers, to Eberswalde, Germany. However, after a four day train ride, they arrived at Birkenau, a concentration camp in Poland. From Birkenau, David was sent to I.G. Farben where he worked from September until January 1945. Throughout the war, David had been moved around continuously. Some of his locations included Sachsenhausen, Oranienburg (Oranienberg), and Flossenbürg, all concentration camps in Germany. David's parents and younger brother had been brought to Chelmno, a concentration camp in Poland in August 1942, where they were later gassed. David was liberated from Dachau, a concentration camp in Germany, on April 29, 1945.

After liberation, David was in Felderfing (Feldafing) and Landsberg (Landsberg am Lech), displaced persons camps in Germany, from 1945 until 1949. David then lived in Israel from 1949 until 1957. David now lives in the United States with his wife, Eva Kempinski. He has a daughter and two sons.

Time-coded notes of the
Interview with David Kempinski
March 9, 1987

01:00:00

Born in Praszka, Poland on July 27, 1921. After he turned five years old, his parents moved to Wielún, Poland, a country town about 13 miles from Praszka, where his father had a flour mill. They lived in Wielún from 1927 until 1939. David's family consisted of himself, three brothers, and his parents. Wielún was leveled on September 1, 1939. They were hiding in a Rabbi's house. After Wielún was leveled, David traveled east. He got past Radom, Poland, but saw Germans and reversed his direction, moving toward home.

01:05:00

He walked for several days. Germans found him on Rosh Hashanah, and, with others, he continued moving west. On Rosh Hashanah, he was 250 miles from Wielún. By Yom Kippur he was only 45 miles away. They were in a synagogue when Nazis arrived. Nazis made them bring scrolls and books to town square and put them in a pile. They made an old man stand in center of pile. Then they set fire to everything. David was blackened by the fire.

01:10:00

David saw a bus bound for Wielún. He traveled on the bus to his father's factory. David was so blackened by the fire that his father didn't recognize him. Two "Treuhändlers" (Aryan "owners" of Jewish businesses appropriated by Nazis) controlled business. "Volks Deutsch" (German/Polish)

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workers now employed there. David's father was reasonably well-treated. The family lived in the office for 10-11 months. A new "Treuhandler" forced them out and they had to find other lodgings.

01:15:00

David was taken to clean up demolished houses. He used to steal library books to read. On August 9, 1941, the Jews of Wielún were rounded up. The day before, he was caught with books by a German who interrogated him. The German informed him of the round-up scheduled for the next day and urged him to stay home. Later, he was sent to Posnan (Poznan), Poland. He would never again return to Wielún. He was brought to a slave labor camp, a "Reichsautobahn" labor camp.

01:20:00

After three weeks, David was sent to Regensberg (Regensburg), a concentration camp in Germany, and then to Kreising. David had to work in camps, cleaning out swamps and digging topsoil. The inmates were jealous when anyone died. He was now separated from his family. He was issued a bowl to be used for everything. He was always hungry and lice-ridden. Once, he recalls, he was taken to Poznan in April 1942 for a shower.

01:25:00

Rumors of German need for factory workers. David was sent to Reppen (Rzepin), Poland where he worked in a lumber mill. From there, he went to Britz where there were war prisoners and many nationals. The factory was four kilometers from the camp. David had to produce shells. He spoke fair German, and his supervisor took an interest in him.

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01:30:00

The supervisor saw David as someone who was "like everyone else." The supervisor was ordered to go east, to the front. He tried to help David. He gave him bread. He hoped for David's return home. The supervisor put himself at risk to help David. He was compassionate to David's suffering. He brought David newspapers so that David would know what was going on. He also traded supplies with him. When things broke down, it was called "sabotage."

01:35:00

A man called "Boxer" administered beatings. One day, the Gestapo put them on a train to Eberswalde, Germany. Actual destination: Birkenau, a concentration camp in Poland. On the train, there was a man who was crying and screaming. After about four days, they arrived in Birkenau. They saw Jews working. They heard screams of "Raus!" They saw girls in uniforms who were playing musical instruments.

01:40:00

In Birkenau, David met some of his relatives, but hardly recognized them. He saw a multitude of people. He was taken to the barracks. The bricks on the floor were loose. They picked them up and saw letters, rings, money, and other possessions. They were told by the SS men that if anything was found on them, they'd be shot if they didn't return it in one second. David was taken to another barrack near crematorium. He was told by the Greek Jews there that the smoke was "his parents."

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01:45:00

David saw vans of gas and SS men in white coats. He slept in a wooden bunk with wooden shoes as pillows. He was sent to I.G. Farben where he worked from September until January 1945. Between 10,000 and 12,000 prisoners worked in construction. They had showers every two weeks. There were selections every few weeks. Everyone tried to look healthy.

01:50:00

David was aware of the 2nd Front, invasion from the west. Factory bombed in July 1944. They had contact with British war prisoners from North Africa. They translated German papers into English, with David's help. He traded clothing with them in exchange for food. There were also Czechs, Poles, and Yugoslavs with whom they traded.

01:55:00

Whoever escaped was brought back. In November 1944, an underground was discovered and several men were hanged. This was an unforgettable experience. It was heartbreaking because they knew, as they were forced to watch the hangings, that liberation was near. Eleven thousand prisoners had to watch. David describes liberation from Dachau, a concentration camp in Germany, on April 29, 1945. He fell down before a liberator who told him about the death of Mussolini and imminent destruction of Hitler.

02:00:00

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David was given chewing gum and cigarettes. He saw GI's running with weapons. Many Germans were killed. Hundreds of prisoners came out. David saw pictures and flags of all nations. He had spent about a week in Dachau. He'd been moved around continuously—Sachsenhausen, Oranienberg (Oranienburg), and Flossenberg (Flossenbürg), all concentration camps in Germany. David was originally supposed to go to Matthausen (Mauthausen), a concentration camp in Austria, but the camp was filled to capacity.

02:05:00

David went back to Czechoslovakia and Germany. They were so hungry and thirsty that they ate snow. He came to an industrial area called Vitkovicze (Vitkovice), Czechoslovakia. People threw bread at them, but the SS opened fire on the people who threw bread at them. The weak and sick were shot and left in the snow. Leipzig, Germany and Dresden, Germany were demolished. David was brought to Flossenberg, "a terrible camp."

02:10:00

He was forced to take cold showers in February. He heard B-17's and B-29's. "This warmed us," he recalls. He heard one SS man marvel that "still Jews exist." By now, bombing was beginning. The prisoners were glad. There were so many bodies that the Nazis couldn't bury them. They covered the bodies with trees.

02:15:00

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David heard cries of help. He walked five days in the direction of Munich, Germany. Those prisoners who couldn't walk were shot. A German woman threw them bread in a newspaper. David saw the story, on April 20, 1945, of Hitler's 56th birthday.

02:20:00

David came to Dachau. He saw a prisoner named "Marchewski" from Wielun. On Friday, April 27, they were going to move Jews to Tirol, a region in Austria. David escaped from the line. He hid in a garbage can. He ran out and took more bread than the allotted amount, but there was such confusion that no one noticed. On Saturday, April 28, they saw white flags and there was no more shooting.

02:25:00

David doesn't know why he survived. He calls it "luck" and he also felt connected to God. He came from a religious home. One older brother survived and is now in Israel. His parents and younger brother had been brought to Chelmno, a concentration camp in Poland, in August 1942. They were put in trucks and gassed.

02:30:00

In 1946, David made an attempt to get home. It was still dangerous to be a Jew in Poland. A woman that he knew gave him some of his family's possessions. He is still in contact with her and her husband. David feels obligated to help them. Went back with his sons to visit the flour mills, which were modernized. One of the workers, now 83 years old at the time of this interview, had helped David during the war.

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02:35:00

When he was liberated, David weighed 74 lbs. He was in Felderfing (Feldafing) and Landsberg (Lansberg am Lech), displaced persons camps in Germany, from 1945 until 1949. He was in Ulm, Germany for a short time. David needed to establish residence in order to receive reparations. He worked in a kitchen; he was always hungry. A cousin of his mother was in Switzerland. He went there. David was arrested by the French, but was later freed when they realized he's been in Dachau. He lived in Israel from 1949-1957 because of war.

02:40:00

David had friends in the United States. He has a daughter, 29 years old at the time of the interview, and two sons, one was 25 years old at the time of the interview and the other was 28 years old at the time of the interview. His older son has contact with Elie Weisel. His younger son is in Jerusalem, Israel. His daughter is married. David has nightmares. He gets upset when people disbelieve that the Holocaust happened. David doesn't want Jews to forget or forgive. He will not "buy German." David is saddened that many in the younger generation do not see the Holocaust as their problem.