

[0:00:00]

- Robert Buckley:* We're interviewing Joseph Kempler. Would you please give us your address and the spelling of your last name, please?
- Joseph Kempler:* Okay, my name is Joseph Kempler, K-E-M-P-L-E-R. We are recording this in my home in Glendale, California, where we have lived for the past 21 years.
- Robert Buckley:* Joseph, would you please give us your background, perhaps starting with the date of your birth, the place, and your mother and father and where they were born and so on, brothers and sisters.
- Joseph Kempler:* Okay, I was born in Krakow, Poland, on April 12, 1928, so I'm 67 years old going on 14, which I'll explain to you later. It's real. My father was Max Kempler. My mother's name was Malka Kempler, born **Glassner**. I had two siblings, a brother and a sister, who are actually my half-brother and sister. My father's first wife died, and so I am the only one who was the son of my father and mother. My sister was born in 1911. She's still alive now. She is 84 years of age. And my brother was born in 1917. Her name is Judy. My brother's name is Abraham even though he was called in Polish Dolek.
- Robert Buckley:* What type of work did your father do to support the family?
- Joseph Kempler:* When – during my lifetime, he owned a small restaurant, which also served liquor. So, in the backroom there was the restaurant. In the front people could come, and it was sort of a Polish-style bar unlike the American ones. Prior to this, I understand he was a partner in a hotel business, which was doing okay for awhile. Then it went bankrupt, so this was our means of life was primarily the restaurant.
- Robert Buckley:* Did your mother work at all or did she take care of the family?
- Joseph Kempler:* Well, Jewish women as a rule did not work. She took care of the family. However, she did help out in cooking some of the meals and some of the special things she made for the restaurant, particularly quality hors d'oeuvres or things of this type—very busy woman.
- Robert Buckley:* What type of a religious and educational background did you have?

Joseph Kempler: Well, my parents sent me to a private Hebrew school. It was a very good school in Krakow. It was unlike most other schools. It was operating all day long. The morning were the Hebrew subjects, and then in the afternoon were the secular, Polish-type subjects. And I got a very well – well, I was very well-educated in the religious, in the Hebrew language. I studied the Torah. I studied the Prophets. I studied the Gemara and the Talmud. Even though I didn't go to school very long really because of the war, I was very well-grounded in the religion. And, as a matter of fact, even though I have forgotten many things, these things are almost hardwired. I really have a very good recollection, and I still am quite familiar with the things I had learned then at an early age.

Robert Buckley: What began to develop in Krakow, the attitude among the people as Hitler took power in 1933. Do you recall any of that? Of course, you were a young man. But do you recall your parents talking about that, '33, between '33 and '38?

Joseph Kempler: Well, in '33, of course, I was five years old, so I wasn't aware of any of these things. However, about the age of seven I began to read. I was a voracious reader. I was reading books endlessly and all kinds of books, not necessarily children's books. So maybe by the age of seven and eight, I began to be aware that things are happening. As a matter of fact, a number of books were being published about some of the persecution of people in Germany, including some gruesome pictures.

[0:05:00] It wasn't the kind of books kids normally read but I did. So, I was beginning to become aware of this, but still it was too remote. This was in Germany. We were in Poland and these two – there was no question of any kind of a threat at least to my mind. And it wasn't until about 1938 or 1939 that after Hitler began to – his actions in Czechoslovakia and Austria and all that. This is when things began to look more ominous. And by 1939, the threat of war was becoming real.

Robert Buckley: What was the discussion in the home? Do you recall your mother and father talking about what was going on? How did they feel?

Joseph Kempler: That's an interesting question because in many Jewish homes, it was a tradition not to discuss serious matters with the children present, so I don't know what they really thought about this. In most cases, it was business as usual even though by 1939, I guess beginning of 1939, Hitler began to expel Jews from Germany. And he left them on the border of Poland, and they migrated their way to different towns. So, I remember sometime in the summer of 19 –

maybe it was by June or July of 1939, many German refugees came to Poland, to Krakow. They were located in a or at that time they were put in various schools and places which were closed down for vacation in the summertime. And they were the first refugees I had seen, so there was sort of a touch of reality here. These are people. For the first time, I saw people who actually were persecuted and we saw this. So, the fear began to grow. And I think in my own case, I was very much aware even though I didn't quite project. I couldn't project this in a way of saying in any specific way. It was a general kind of anxiety the even children and young people felt.

Robert Buckley: Mm-hmm

Joseph Kempler: So, this was in 1939, but I was going to school. I was minding my own business. Between friends in school, and sports, and reading, I had a busy life.

Robert Buckley: In Krakow, Poland, where you were going to school, it was a Hebrew school you said.

Joseph Kempler: Yes

Robert Buckley: But what was the feeling toward Jewish people among the Polish people in general in the area in which you lived? What part of Krakow did you live in?

Joseph Kempler: Well, we lived in the Jewish section of Krakow called Kazimierz, which was primarily occupied by Jews, but not entirely. Poles, as a rule, have been antisemitic, of course, with some exceptions. But the general tendency of the people was to look down on Jews, and they were strongly antisemitic. I was not exposed to antisemitism in a big way like who are trying to get universities or certain professions and so on. But even as a kid, I had stones thrown at me, or insults, or things of this type, but it was probably kids were getting beaten up. And things were not all that serious, but the general atmosphere was Jews are not welcome.

Robert Buckley: Well, what were some of the expressions that they would use against Jewish people in those days?

Joseph Kempler: Well, the kids would sing various kinds of—whatchamacallit—little songs that they made up, which were derogatory to the Jews, just ridiculing us.

- Robert Buckley:* Had you heard about any of the persecution of any of the other groups other than the expelling of Jews from Germany like the Gypsies or Jehovah's Witnesses at that time?
- Joseph Kempler:* No, the only people that I knew somewhat about that he was anti-Communist. But I don't know that they understood Communism or politics very well in those days. So, when the war started, I was only 11.
- Robert Buckley:* Do you remember the event when Germany attacked Poland?
- Joseph Kempler:* Oh boy, that I – this is embedded also in my mind with the sharp, razor-sharp detail. Even let's say maybe a month or so before, Hitler began to make overtures demanding from Poland that they yield the corridor up between East Prussia and Germany, which of course Poles refused. So, there was the threat or tension that he may take action against Poland.
- [0:10:00] My brother, as a matter of fact, my brother was drafted into the Polish army—not because of the war—I guess about 1937 or so, the beginning of 1938, long before the war started. But he was in the army during the time when the war began. So, we were certainly concerned with the threat of war even though, as a rule, the Polish people had the attitude 'Germany's not going to attack. We're going to beat Hitler.' It was a very passive, kind of rambunctious attitude—not very realistic but sounded good to me.
- So, maybe a few days, a week before the war started, there were some war nerves started in Poland. People began to prepare for bombing. And the way it was done in order for the bombs not to shatter windows, people would place tape like a cross, like an X, across the windowpanes. So, the whole city became plastered full of every single window had strips of tape pasted on. People – then the Polish government began to dig ditches for how you call it, in case of attack? Shelters, air-raid shelters which were in the open, in parks and so on. They were the zigzag-type ditches deep enough so people to hide, to hide away from shrapnel or things of this **kind**.
- Robert Buckley:* And you actually saw this?
- Joseph Kempler:* Not only saw it but in these days, I was participating. This was a voluntary thing where all the people were supposed to pitch in, and I often worked on these things. It was some sort of fun type—still was not real. So, the preparations for war were going on. And then on Friday, September 1st, I remember I was in bed. And I heard the planes overhead and then sounds of explosions. And as a

matter of fact, I felt a little excited. This sounds like the maneuvers—very realistic maneuvers. I had no idea the war broke out. We had no radio or anything like this. And then before long, we found out that the Germans actually had bombed Krakow, and the war was started.

Still did not mean very much to me. As a matter of fact, there was an uncle of mine who was, I guess, either rash or brave. He took me for a walk because he heard there were several buildings which were bombed nearby. We didn't live too far from the railroad station that was close to the way. He took me by the hand, and we went walking. There were air raids going in between, but he felt just let's go have a walk and see what things look like, and I went with him. So, in those days it was still an adventure. I went to a friend of mine, and we looked at – on a roof, a machine gun firing at a German plane. This was still sort of fun.

But by the second day, things got more serious. There were some not only more heavy bombing but the artillery fire coming from the outside. And the family began to go down to the cellar. They had a coal cellar where we lived—dark, dismal, wet—but this was the place where we would hide during the air raids. Some people began to run away. They left town going east towards Russia, but we stayed behind.

And then on September 6th, the war was over for us. The Germans marched in. And even then, even my father, I remember he had to go downtown in order to seek a beer license or something like that. And we went downtown together, and we were walking down through the streets. And the Germans were in their trucks, and they were setting up one-way streets through the narrow streets of Krakow directing traffic and so on. We were watching it sort of curiously. We went about our business and went home as if nothing happened. Whether it was a shock or whether it was something had to believe, it was – we tried to maintain somehow a form of normal life like things hadn't changed yet. But they began to change very quickly.

[0:15:05]

Robert Buckley: What was the discussion in the home now? Were your parents discussing it openly now or were they still talking, so to speak, behind closed doors to keep it away from the children?

Joseph Kempler: Well, there was fear. There was concern. I mean, we knew where Germans stood on the subject of the Jews, so there was talk. I don't

remember exactly what the talk was but they – I listened to it carefully enough. I'm not sure, don't remember. But I know by the second day of occupation, on the 7th of September, I was out in the street, and I saw two German soldiers stopped a Jew with a beard, and they had scissors and would cut his beard, on one side, just kind of to ridicule him and humiliate him. So, this sort of began to strike home. Something is happening. And from then on, things began to go from bad to worse very, very quickly.

To start with, the German occupation was the German army, which were not SS or any of the other soldiers. The general government, the new government, was not set up yet. It was still the early occupation, so most of it was minor mischief. But before long within a few days, they began to arrest people and take them – what's the word when you take – can't think of the word. Arrest people who are both the intelligentsia, people who are ...

Robert Buckley: The intellectuals?

Joseph Kempler: Intellectuals. But they arrested them in order to keep the rest of the people quiet. I forgot the word for it now. This happens to me now in my old age, but I don't remember the particular expression. So, arrests started. People were being picked up off the street. This was September, so I went back to my school, which was open, but only for a week or so. And they closed down all the Jewish schools, so I was out of there. School was over.

Robert Buckley: What did the teachers have to say in the classes at that time, knowing that the Germans were now occupying. Teachers having – must have had some understanding of what went on in Germany.

Joseph Kempler: I don't think anybody spoke out of turn. It was none of our business. We didn't talk about it, at least not that I remember that made any impression on me. There was – so then after the school was closed, some of the teachers began to do some private tutoring for a short while, which maybe lasted through December or maybe not even that late, that long. And that was the end of my schooling, so I really finish only five grades.

Robert Buckley: Tell me something. At this time, did your parents start talking about going east like other Jewish people, other Jewish families were doing?

Joseph Kempler: No, no

Robert Buckley: There was no intent of leaving or ...

Joseph Kempler: No. Many people left, but mostly I think they were younger people who just could pick up and go. But people who are so – who may be more aware and so scared, they felt that going to east to Russia may be easier. But then again, after the war actually in Poland ended by the end of September. It was the *blitzkrieg*, didn't last very long. And many people actually began to come back, telling horrifying stories of being caught in the fighting and being caught in air raids, and so they began to come back. Others, again, made it over to east. In the meantime, the Russians attacked Poland from the east and cut it in half. So, some people didn't have to go too far to meet with the Russians, and they crossed over. Some of them survived that way. But our family was not adventurous. We wouldn't know where to go and how to go about this.

Robert Buckley: How old was your father at this time?

Joseph Kempler: 1939 he was, let's see, was 83, 17. He was 58, so he was an older man, but he was in pretty good health. It's not a kind of a thing that we could just pick up and go. People didn't have any cars or way of transportation. You went someplace, you picked up your suitcases and walked.

[0:20:00]

Robert Buckley: Now, in Krakow you said you had an uncle. Did you have other family?

Joseph Kempler: We had quite a few, large Kempler family and my father's brothers—that means uncles and cousins and aunts—but all of them are gone as far as I know.

Robert Buckley: Did they begin to leave, or did they have more or less the same mental attitude as many of the other Jewish people?

Joseph Kempler: As far as I know, nobody in my family left.

Robert Buckley: What was the first sign that the family began to disappear or began to get arrested or ...

Joseph Kempler: Well, not so – well, let me give you this story in order. First of all, I cannot give you all the detail. This would take hours and hours, so I have to give you sort of the major highlights of certain events. What has happened in Krakow, I believe, by January of 1940, all the Jews have to wear armbands with the Star of David. I didn't – this is beginning with age 12. I wasn't 12 yet so I didn't – I wasn't

subject to that. I remember the first major action against the Jews was [on] December 4th of 1939 when they surrounded the whole Jewish section, the Kazimierz, and went from house to house taking away jewelry first and things, possessions of various types. And people were not allowed to go out in the street. Anybody who would go out in the street would be shot.

We were living – there was a group of houses, so there was like a common courtyard, and there were balconies going inside the courtyard. And the woman walked inside on the balcony, I guess, going from her home to an outside toilet, which we had to go on the balcony to get there, and she was shot. Somebody in my family—I forget who it was—went to the window to look outside, and a soldier shot through the window, hit the window and the bullet hit the ceiling, so it was serious. So, this began a series of actions which really never stopped.

Now, in my case I was 11, but in some respects, I was very well-informed, I guess, through the books. But the books also made me dwell in many case[s] in fantasy, not in reality. I liked adventure stories, and my favorite author was Karl May, which I understand was Hitler's favorite author, full of wonderful stories and so on, and I had a hard way of distinguishing sometimes. So, I would do things in the beginning of the war, which Jews were not allowed to do, but it was fun for me. I mean, most of the stores had signs, “Jews and dogs are not allowed,” but I would go in there. There were stores set up, which were only for Germans or what they called “*volksdeutscher*”. *Volksdeutscher* were Poles who had some Germany background or maybe German ancestors. And they received – they were referred to as German—not German citizens—but German nationals, a special distinction.

Robert Buckley: Because you didn't have to wear the badge?

Joseph Kempler: And I didn't look Jewish and I would go and nobody would dare to question me. If I was – if I claimed to be a *volksdeutsche* and I went to a Polish store, they wouldn't question me, so anyway I was **sort of** superior, so I was playing my games. I remember the one time in 1939 the major market square in Krakow was the center of town—beautiful old spot. And it was going to be renamed the Adolf Hitler *Platz*. There was a big ceremony. The General Governor Frank was supposed to be there, and there were parades and ceremonies. So with my mother's permission, who always let me do these things, I got dressed, I went and I stay and I went down there to listen to the proceedings and watch them. At a certain point, they began to play the German national anthem.

[0:25:00]

And all around me there were people who stood there with their hands out, you know, “Heil Hitler,” and singing the song. So, I was the only one who didn't, who wasn't, so I stuck my hand out *[laughs]*. And, as a matter of fact, later one when the governor arrived in his convertible, kids ran forward. I ran right along with them, but then I realized what happens if he asks me a question because he talked to the kids, so I sort of pulled back. But this illustrates the idea that this was still a big adventure, and I felt somehow less subject to it or less vulnerable. I didn't have my Star of David. I could go around wherever I wanted to. There was a certain amount of freedom. I didn't have to go to school and ... vacation.

But even I began to realize that things were beginning to go worse and worse. My father's business, well, it was taken away early in 1940. This was happening to more Jews. They took their businesses away. Many people who lived in town that had nice apartments and so on, they were taken away. They had to move to Kazimierz or wherever they wanted to go. And then in the spring, I believe, they began to build a ghetto in Krakow, which was actually across the river in Old Town. And the people who were going to stay in the ghetto are those – or allowed to live in the ghetto were those who had some professions or skills, which were of use to the Germans. Now, nobody in my family had any skills.

Let me back up a little bit. First of all, let me go back because I am discussing the events, but let me go back to my family. As I said, my brother was in the army. We didn't hear from him for about two months after the war ended, so we didn't know what happened—no information. Then one day he shows up, I mean, bedraggled, and scared, and skinny. He was in the fighting all the way almost to the end of the war. And, finally, when the army and everything broke up, he got some civilian clothing from some peasant and made his way home.

My sister was married in 1937. She married a German Jew, who was a musician. He was quite a good musician, jazz-type musician, one who played classics and other things. And he was in an orchestra, which may be familiar, the Herman *[sic]* Rosner of whose violin hangs in the Holocaust Museum. He was the one who was featured in *Schindler's List* and played for the commandant of the camp. He had his own orchestra, which traveled throughout the world. And my brother-in-law played with his orchestra. He played the violin, saxophone, and the clarinet.

So, when the war broke out, my sister was on – he was supposed to – let me go back. He was supposed to start playing, start playing in Warsaw on September 1, 1939. And they were supposed to arrive there the first day of the war. And we haven't heard from them for another maybe close to three months. And one day they show up— he on crutches—and it turned out that they were in Warsaw. They got caught in the heavy damage of Warsaw. Warsaw was almost destroyed by the Germans entirely. They – their building was hit. They jumped from the window. He broke his legs in the process, so it was an adventure story. But somehow, they survived, and our family was all together. My brother came back. My sister came back, and we were together.

Well, my brother who was truly an artist, he has ability to draw and to print calligraphy, all kinds of a graphic-type artist, intuitive.

[0:30:00]

My father didn't allow him to develop that. I mean, this didn't seem to be any future in this kind of activities, so he sort of made him to take up the profession of tailoring, tailor, so it was done in those days. People, young people, would be – become apprentices to masters, and they go gradually and learn the trade. Because he was an artist, he became truly a master tailor. I mean, the way he could construct the clothing was just truly incredible. Anyway, this was having an effect later on so I am mentioning it at this point.

Anyway, any of those skills that we had were not of any value to the Germans, so we were the people who did not qualify to go to the ghetto. They were the ones who had to leave town. The ghetto was opened, I believe, in March of 1941, so we had to leave. We had to abandon our apartment, most of our possessions. And we moved to a little village not far from Krakow. As a matter of fact, it was only about 20 miles, but it was 600 years back in time. I mean, the whole was totally primitive: no electricity, no running water. People were, as an example, the peasants in the town, they would tell stories about Krakow, you know, winter evenings when they would get together and talk. They would describe that in Krakow instead of using the oil lamps, they pushed something in the wall and the light would go on. And the water would come from the wall, so they didn't have to go down to the well.

So, and other people would sit and listen and say they don't believe that. This was 20 miles from town, so these people never left their villages. And they did things the same was as I think they did in the 14th century, for instance. This village, very small, and we rented a room from a peasant who had a little straw-covered cottage. There [were] two rooms in it, so we rented one of them.

So, my mother and my father, my grandmother, one of my uncles and my brother all lived in that room.

Robert Buckley: How did you happen to come to that family? Was there antisemitism there in these little towns as well?

Joseph Kempler: [*Crosstalk*] No, there was, but the reason was because I believe my grandmother, who at some time in the past lived in that village or nearby, knew some people. So, this was how the connection was made. I mean, it wasn't selected for any other reason. So, it was a tiny room, but it was a place of safety. Being removed from Krakow, being removed from the streamline of the Germans and SS and all these activities was sort of nice. So, we moved there in March of 1941.

My sister and my brother-in-law went to another town. His parents also came – my brother-in-law's parents were Germans. They were – they had to leave Germany, and they settled in this town Tarnow, which is about 50 miles away from Krakow. We were halfway between Krakow and them. And so they lived there together with his parents, and the rest of us [were] where this little village called Nieznanowice, which means "nobody knows of it" in the literal translation, which is just about true. My life there was sort of – how shall I put it? I was contented. I was working in the village. I was helping them out with various farm work. It was – I liked the animals. I liked the cows. I liked the horses, and I had books.

[0:35:00] I would scrounge books wherever I could. Anything finding in the *Old Farmer's Almanac* or the life of saints or the Bible, whatever it is, I would just devour it. And, generally, things were quiet even though we began to hear stories [about] the actions in other towns.

One of my uncles lived in Krakow, and we used to get correspondence from him. And one day we didn't hear from him anymore, and we heard there was some action in Krakow. So I still had my adventurous spirit, and my mother and father still permitted me. I would go to Krakow, which was difficult in itself. There was no regular transportation from the village. It required many miles of walking to catch a train, which I wasn't supposed to travel by train anyway. And then I would actually sneak into the ghetto through holes in barbed wire, which was guarded at that time not by Germans but by the Jewish police, and I walked myself into a ghetto. And I found out my uncle was taken away [in] one of the first actions back in 1941.

I mean, talking about my adventures, I would go there. I would – I don't remember who I stayed with, some people that I knew. And I was there, and then I would sneak out in the afternoon back through the hole in the wire, which I knew about.

Robert Buckley: What did the people say to you when you snuck into the camp?

Joseph Kempler: This was not a camp. This was the ghetto.

Robert Buckley: I meant to say the ghetto. What did they say to you?

Joseph Kempler: Many people would do that. I mean, this was not so unusual.

Robert Buckley: Okay.

Joseph Kempler: You see, this was still not as dangerous even though it could've been. So I remember I was there one afternoon. I sneaked out, went to town, went to see a movie, and then sneaked back into the ghetto and another adventure. So, I was not only skilled in doing these things, but I was totally unafraid. So, I would travel at that time, not only to Krakow, but I also went at one point to see my sister in Tarnow, another adventure. Actually, I was caught by police at that time, Polish police. That's another story. The two Polish policemen – I was walking down to someplace where I was supposed to sleep. There were two Polish policemen that grabbed me, and they wanted my papers, you know, *ausweis*. Every Jew has to carry *ausweis*, which is an identification card.

So, I said to him, "What kind of *ausweis*?" You know, I spoke that typical Polish-type thing, you know, saying what kind of – like I couldn't pronounce the word, never heard of a thing like this. And they began to search through me. I had a notebook that was given to me by my brother-in-law. There was all kinds of addresses and things like this and all kinds of Jewish names in there. And the policeman looked through that and says, "All these, are these Jews?"

I said, "Oh, this is my brother-in-law who used to be in [the] orchestra and he used to"—all stories—"my father, he's a translator." I knew all kinds of stories. "And I live here and there."

So, one of the policemen says, "You take him in a doorway and check him out whether he is circumcised," you see. This was going to be the end of me at that point. And all of the sudden, there was a woman walked by. I don't know who she was, but all the sudden, the policemen became interested in the woman, and they told me,

"Take off! Go!" So there [were] many close calls like this, but I made it.

Anyway, I can't dwell too much [on] these little stories. In 1942, in April a call came – not a call but through the Polish authorities in the village, a notification that all men between the ages of 17 to 45, whatever, had to report to a certain town. So, my brother and my uncle had to go and didn't come back.

[0:40:00]

And later on, we got a letter that they were taken to a labor camp near Krakow, which was associated with the military airport – airfield. It was the labor camp Rakowice, which was operated at that time by civilian companies who were part of the construction. They would build things around the airport, and they would have the Jewish labor. So, they went over there, so this is how we got separated at that time from my brother and uncle. So, we were just the three of us left, four of us—my father, my mother, my grandmother and myself.

In 1942, in June the war against Russia started. And in the beginning, we thought the Russians might very well beat the Germans. Maybe this would be the end of the war. As a matter of fact, I remember at night if you laid down on the ground and put your ears to the earth, you could hear the distant explosions even though the front at that time was roughly about 200 miles away. And for several days, it would seem to be coming closer. Even the people in the village began to get friendlier; were not very friendly before. But now they thought that maybe the Germans would lose the war. It didn't work out that way.

About that time, there were more and more actions being taken against Jews. We hear of many small towns where the people were taken away. And either they were shot right on the spot or they were taken away by cattle cars and disappeared. So, this became acknowledged that this kind of action is being taken.

Robert Buckley: Now, did you actually see or just hear this from other people?

Joseph Kempler: No, this we only heard about this even though I knew what happened in Krakow. I know my uncle disappeared, and I know about some other two towns where we had some family. They were all gone. They were totally – all the Jews were removed. So by August of 1942, we were told that we – that within a week or so we were supposed to report to the town about eight miles away, maybe less—Bochnia—to report for "resettlement," as they called it. Now, we knew what this potential is here as to what may have

happened, as what may happen as a result. But, again, we had no choice. So when the time came, there were other people in the village who were all prepared to pack their things. And their hope was maybe this will be resettlement for labor in the east someplace. That's what the promises were.

In the meantime, my sister, who was in Tarnow, there still was the correspondence, the letters were still allowed, and she was writing to us in sort of a code because everything was censored. So she was saying and talking about Uncle Abraham, who was very sick and that he's died and whatever, things that code was to the effect we should not go to Bochnia because this will be the end of it. My mother worked to find a way whether I can go – we can go under false papers and things of this type, find some solution other than report to Bochnia. So we knew we had the warning, but there's nothing we could do. I mean, didn't have any money. We have no resources, nobody to go. My mother, as a matter of fact, began to talk to some people, some of the friendlier Poles [*coughs*] raising the question that somebody would hide me for the duration of the war, but nobody would have any part of it. So we just sort of resigned ourselves that we're going to go. In reality, I don't think I believed that we [were] going to be resettled because I heard too many stories about people being shot. Incidentally, I was very, very close to my mother. I mean she was my – much more than my father.

[0:45:00] So we were always very close. And I remember just during the week before we had to report, I was walking down with my mother someplace down in the village. And in those days I sort of felt I knew everything. I don't remember what it was I was telling my mother, who patiently listened to all my great knowledge. So I remember I took her hand as we were walking down that path, and she was very upset and sad, and I tried to comfort her. And I said that "I'm going to hold your hand when we get shot," and actually described to her what it feels like to be shot, you know, the big expert, trying to encourage her there really is – it's not going to be so bad, and we're going to be together. This was my attitude at that time. I was 13, a bit lower. As a matter of fact, I had bar mitzvah in that village. So, back in 1941 so this is a year ago prior to that.

Robert Buckley: Were you able to have some type of a celebration for your bar mitzvah?

Joseph Kempler: Not a celebration really. We didn't have very much, but we sort of got together, and I became a man, responsible man. So, then a strange thing happened, which is a very significant thing really. A

Polish policeman, which was in the next – police headquarters was in the next village. He was assigned to us apparently, he says, to make sure that we don't take off, that we report to Bochnia on that day. So, he would show up every day and hang around, take some things, whether it was food or whatever. He would help himself to whatever there was. And two or three days before we're supposed to report, he invited himself to the house. My father got a little small bottle of schnapps, whiskey of some type, and gave him some. And he said this sort of friendly and indicating that he may be able to help us in some way, and he wrote a note. I remember it very clearly. This is very clearly embedded again in my mind, this particular event. He wrote a little note on a piece of paper that "M. Kempler"—M. stands for Mr. or Mrs.—"come to where my house tomorrow afternoon and let – and maybe we can work something out."

And I was sitting at the table at the same time listening to this, and I remember this wasn't clear because "M." is not – could be either one. And he could have made it clear whether it was Mr. or Mrs. but he left it at this. I was some disturbed by this that he didn't make it clear. I was a purest for accuracy. At any rate, next day my mother got dressed, and she was wearing a dress, a good dress, something we don't do in the village. I remember it was a blue dress with white polka dots, and I think she was wearing lipstick. She got dressed and without saying anything, she left. And so, I understood she was going to the policeman. And this was a strange day for me. I mean, I knew what was going on and I didn't know. I wasn't quite sure whether I wanted to accept it or not. And I left this hut, and I laid in the meadow.

This was sort of a day which changed my life. It was a beautiful, warm August day. And I didn't know what's going to happen, but I expected to go to Bochnia the next day and to die. So I laid there with the idea that this was—

[0:50:00]

This was in my memory. This was sort of a day when I said good-bye to life, and I didn't want to die. It was [a] sunny day, and I laid there on the ground, and there were the flowers and the grass all around me and the insects buzzing. And I heard the kids playing in the distance and watched the birds fly overhead. It was so sad and so tragic that I had to die.

But there was more to it. My father was in the hut, and I wouldn't dare to go in there, didn't want to face him. And I laid there what seems to me like three or four hours. And during that time, something broke in me. Whatever the break was was never fixed

down to this day. And then my mother came back and I had got – when I got up from the meadow, I was a different person. I – something snapped in my relationship to my mother and my father. I went in there back to the hut. I didn't say anything. So I understood, I guess, subconsciously—I don't know how conscious I was of it—that she in some way paid the price, you know, some sexual favors in order for him to help us in one way – in some way. I didn't question it. I didn't know what happened. I didn't know that he was – she was successful or what he could do, whatever—didn't know.

Robert Buckley: How old were you now?

Joseph Kempler: Fourteen. And next day, which was the last day before we had to report to Bochnia, the policeman wasn't there. So, he kept his word that he wasn't going to be there to watch us. But still, what we going to do? We were packing our things, and next morning we're going to go to Bochnia. And the idea, just the fact that he wasn't there didn't really make much difference. What [are] we going to do? Where [are] we going to go?

Next door there was a neighbor, a young guy who was very friendly. And it was late afternoon, and we were talking to them about having to go to Bochnia and what's going to happen, what we expect. He said: "Why don't you run into the woods? I'll take you across the river at night."

Robert Buckley: He's a Pole?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah and this was at night. The moon wasn't going to last for very few hours. And sometime after midnight he came, and my mother, and my grandmother, and my father, and I took our suitcases, whatever we could carry, and crossed the river at night into the woods. And he left us, and we were on our own. We spent the night in one area in the woods. Then it turned out that we are too close to the place. Next day was – I forget. Was it a holiday? People were going to church or something, and some of the kids were running through the forest, so sort of dangerous. And it came – I became the one who had to take charge. See, I with my books and knowing how to walk through the woods without making noise, how to know which way the wind was blowing so the dogs wouldn't smell us but to find a place where there's water.

I sort of had to take charge of the family and lead them, which was I felt my responsibility. No matter I was not capable of doing this. My father didn't feel well. He was sick. He was beginning to get

some problems with his stomach. I don't know whether it was cancer or ulcer. My grandmother was old. We almost were caught once. I found a place, and all the sudden a forest ranger came upon us—was far away from anyplace. And he said that apparently on the corner of a suitcase there was a metal edge. And this metal edge reflected the sun very brightly, so he went in there and found us.

[0:55:00]

He was friendly. He said: "Stay here. I'm going to bring you some bread tonight."

But after he left, I said: "No, no, we can't take chances. What happens if he's going to deport us?" So we took off again. And we were there for quite a few days like this. I even made it back to the village one day at night, and I found out there were some other Jewish people who did the same thing. They hid someplace in the bushes, and so they were caught and shot by the Polish police. So, we couldn't come out. There was no place to go. Of course, they were looking for us. The food was scarce, I mean, a question of berries or whatever, carried some pieces of bread, you know, and some cheese.

But what has happened? One day, I got it into my mind—just came out of nowhere—the total determination I'm going to leave. Part of my - the day in the meadow, my mother went to the policeman and I say something happened in my relationship to my mother all of a sudden—the love, the affection, whatever it is—something happened that I didn't feel this way anymore. And I wanted to save myself, and I told them I'm going to leave. I'm going to Krakow. Now in all of this discussion, my mother, rather, my father and my grandmother either never participated or never said anything. It was always me and my mother like these two didn't exist.

And my mother said to me: "I wish you would stay. You give us courage."

And I said, "No, there are too many of us," which was a lame excuse because one person less wouldn't have made a difference, and I could have made a difference in helping. But I decided I wanted to leave them and what happens to them I didn't want to think of it, and my mother agreed. And I remember she gave me very little money, Polish money. I never had long pants before, so I took one of my father's long pair of pants with patches on it. She shaved my upper lip so there was no - nothing to make me look Jewish in any way. And I took a little bag because there was a small section of bread and cheese, and I left.

Robert Buckley: And that was when?

Joseph Kempler: This was in August of 1942. We never said good-bye and I took off. The strange thing is, which I didn't understand at that time, when I left I was almost – I felt free, almost euphoric. Not only I wasn't upset about leaving them or feeling sorry for them or being afraid for myself. I felt like I am just almost like floating on air. And I marched right down to the middle of the village in the full view of the people, and I went to the main road.

The way to go to Krakow in those days or any one of the places was to be picked up by German trucks, the German army trucks which were open in the back. They would occasionally stop if people waved them down and gave people a ride. So, I stood there at the crossroads, you know, from the village on the main road to Krakow. And this crossroad went from the village to the other village where the police headquarters was. And there was a bunch of other Polish people who were also waiting for the truck. Now, I know I've been seen, so I kept my eyes open. And for awhile, there was no truck. There were not trucks coming, so this was late August. The potato fields were sort of tall. There was one potato field nearby. Say for any reason the truck doesn't come, I'm going to – potato field was a good place because of the deep grooves between the ridges. And there are grooves so I could hide there for the night. And just maybe I was there for maybe an hour or so.

[1:00:00] And the young son of the peasants was coming down the road with a cow and he saw me, and he turned around and went back. Within 15, 20 minutes the old man comes down wearing his Sunday clothing, which he goes to church with. And he was heading down to the direction of the police headquarters, so I realized where he's going. Anybody who would denounce a Jew would get two kilos of sugar as a reward. Besides, we left our possessions behind, and getting rid of us would be something that he was, you know, they would have enjoyed. Anyway, just then as he was crossing the road and I was about to run, the German truck pulls by and we climb aboard. And I remember he turned around and I went to him like this. [*Thumbs nose and smiles*] and we took off to this truck.

So, I was sitting there. Maybe there were 10 or 12 other people. We went a number of miles and were going through a small town called Wieliczka. And as we were driving through this, there were rows, columns and columns of Jewish people. And they were being led to some area and probably to the railroad station. So, whatever was happening in Bochnia that we were supposed to go to was also

happening here. Everybody was rounded up, and I remember the reaction of the people, the Polish people, you know, laughing and saying, "Good riddance," and stuff like this. This was the other _____ [crosstalk]

Robert Buckley: [Crosstalk] Is that right? I've heard accounts where they would take advantage of people with their suitcases that were too heavy to drop. The Polish people would come and grab them quickly. Is that true?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah, oh sure. That's right. Well, of course, in this particular case, they were surrounded by the Germans, so they couldn't really do that. But there were other occasions they would drop and steal and kill and do all kinds of things at this time.

Well, we went to Krakow. The German truck dropped us off right outside of the entrance to the city. And this entrance to the city—it was just one street you can go into. And there were a bunch of Polish policemen standing there checking everybody's papers as well as people were coming in from the village carrying food, public market, so they would stop them, take it away from them. So, there was no way for me to enter town. Anyway, so this was also an end for the railroad—not railroad—a tramway or a streetcar, which came to the end and then made a big loop and went back again. [Draws circle in the air] So, I hid in a doorway, and then as the tramway came around and made the loop to where it blocked the way of the policemen, I would jump in and this would bypass the policemen.

And I walked into town, and the first place I went is to the place where I used – where we used to live. And the super in the town was – in the building was friendly. So, I walked in there and asked him could I stay there. He says: "No way, no. You can't stay. It's too dangerous." So, I walked out and then sneaked back into the building and went up to the top floor where there is an entrance to the attic like where people kept their possessions, hung their laundry. So, I spent the night lying on top there, like the hallway on top of where the attic floor was. I left my bread and cheese that had with the super and took off.

The first thing that I did, I remember, there was – they didn't have public libraries in Poland. They were private libraries. So, I used to belong to the library which was Jewish, now was turned over the Poles. So, I went in there and I joined the library, and they'll give you a card with your name on it, and this will give you authorization to borrow books from them. So, not only I wanted

books, but what I had done, I gave them the name Kempar. It's sounds close enough to Kempler, but it was a Polish-type name, so I had an ID. Also, incidentally, I wore one of these charms, you know, it was Mary or something like this on a chain. I was prepared.

[1:05:00] And I went, borrowed the book, and I remember I went to the park, and I sat all day there reading a book. I remember the book. I remember I just sat there all day long.

Robert Buckley: What was the book?

Joseph Kempler: What was the book? It was the – the title was *History of a Man*. But the book wasn't very much, wasn't important. The fact that I had the book and then towards the afternoon, I went to a movie. Even the movies were dangerous because very often they conducted raids and so on. But I went to the movie, and I remember the name of that movie *Star From [sic] Rio*. And the movie left out – let out. It was in the afternoon or late – in evening. It was still light, and I had no place to go. This is the first. After I read my book and I went to the movie, never thought about what I have to do next. The next item was to say, okay, now I have to worry where am I going to sleep.

And I walked to the street, and I found like a courtyard, and there was a carpenter shop or something there, and they had all kinds of crates and boxes. So, I sneaked in and I spent the night in there in a crate, all the time not eating anything. I never went back to the super. The second day after, I did the same thing over again, so it was non-reality. I didn't think about my parents. I didn't have – I didn't think about anything what I have to do next until the time came to do it. In the interim, I would read and go through these things.

Any rate, what's been happening is that many of the Jews in Krakow ghetto would work outside of the ghetto. And in 1942 they were still allowed to go out by themselves. They were going out in groups, and they would go without any supervision. They would go to their workplaces and then gather together and march back to the ghetto. So, I spied out a group and I – well, I won't go into details. I got in contact with some people, and I finally worked myself a way into the ghetto. This was much more difficult in those days with both Germans and Jewish police. And they checked all the cards and identities, but I managed to get in. So, I was in the ghetto, but I was illegal there. And they were conducting raids over there because a number of other people had

escaped from surrounding areas to hide in the ghetto, so they kept looking for us. So, I couldn't stay with anybody. Again, I had to hide in the courtyards, and the police came at night and I would ...

But in those days I would just take care of things to save myself and forget all about it and go about my business. There was somehow there was no fear or terror. There was just something which was almost like expected. There were many kids like this, kids more so than the grown-ups could adjust to this and sort of go about their business. And the danger is over, you went right back to where we started. But the fact was I couldn't stay there.

So there was a – I also found out that there was a truckload of Jewish people going from the ghetto to the camp where my brother and uncle were. So my brother and uncle were permanently there in the camp. They stayed there, and this work group from the ghetto would go there during the day and then come back at night. Anyway, I worked myself out to the group. I joined them on the truck going to the Rakowice. When I went there, I took off, and I went in the direction where my brother's camp was. And I found – I came upon a barracks, and there were a bunch of Jews working there, and it turned out that this is the group, the same camp, and I just joined them. I just started washing the floors, whatever it was.

Robert Buckley: So you voluntarily ...

Joseph Kempler: Yeah, I just was there waiting for the German civilian to come up. The German civilians came out. They came to inspect, and I came to him and says, "I want to be with my brother. I want to go in the camp here."

He says, "How old are you?"

I says, "Almost 15."

He says, "Okay."

Robert Buckley: So you voluntarily ...

Joseph Kempler: So, I voluntarily came into the camp with my brother. My brother was – by that time, they discovered his talents as a tailor.

[1:10:00] So, he had a magnificent little job. He was making uniforms and stuff like this for the Germans and their wives, so he had a soft spot. I was working in the construction—very hard and difficult—

but he still was a civilian-run camp, so it wasn't the SS concentration camp.

Robert Buckley: What type of work did you do on the construction?

Joseph Kempler: Well, they were building buildings, you know, construction anywhere from the cement work and the bricks laying and all that, and I had to do this. I was still very weak. I remember I wasn't old enough. They told me I was going to unload cement, big railroad cars full of cement sacks, which are 120 pounds. Two people would put it on my back. I had to march and put them in the storage house. I couldn't do it. I would collapse under it. Fortunately, I was – they were not as – as I said, not a concentration camp yet, so I got away with it. I went out doing brickwork or other type of things, so they would let me, you know, get away with the cement work.

In the meantime, I didn't know what happened to my parents. I assumed that they were dead. But we were corresponding with my sister. And my sister, my sister was writing to my brother in the camp saying that she was in touch with my parents, but they wondered where I was. As it turned out, they were in the woods for a period of time. And they finally decided they're just going to take their bags and go to Bochnia no matter what. They go into Bochnia, was just going through the backroads. There's nobody paid any attention to them. There was still a ghetto left in Bochnia, and they walked there without any problems and settled in Bochnia. So we finally found out that I was safe in Rakowice. They were in Bochnia. My sister was still in Tarnow. So, the family was still intact at this point.

Robert Buckley: Your feelings now toward your belief in God. Can you recall at that time what was going through your mind yet?

Joseph Kempler: Well, that's interesting too because I was – when I was brought up, I was quite religious. I took the religion and Bible and God very seriously. I mean, not just seriously, but I was a perfectionist. I had to do it just right, I mean, all the prayers. There were required prayers, and there were optional prayers. I would always go through all of the optional all the way down to the line. I would really live up the letter of the law so I would – I was very serious about this. Bar mitzvah I took serious[ly]. I was doing my prescribed prayers, you know, with the tefillin and the phylacteries and all this kind of stuff when I was still in the village. So, at that time, I was sort of neutral because I was preoccupied with myself.

I didn't give my attention to God or to prayers. Nevertheless, I was neutral. I wasn't one way or the other at this stage of the game.

Well, let's say there were many, many things that have happened. I mean, I'm going from one month to the next, one year to the next one. I cannot possibly cover all the details even though the details themselves are important. Some of the stories that I tell are stories. There's something of a story in itself because it has some content which may be interesting. But really what made me me during those days is not contained in this kind of stories. It's the everyday events and all kinds of experiences. I can't really – I guess the best way what I can do now is actually tell the stories as time permits.

We were in that camp in Rakowice. And then in July 1943 after I was there roughly about 11 months, the German SS men came and relocated our camp to Plaszów. They took everybody except 20 people, and the 20 people who were left behind included my brother, so I was separated from him, and we went to Plaszów.

[1:15:00]

Plaszów was the camp right after Krakow. This is the one which was made famous by the *Schindler's List*. This was the camp that was featured in *Schindler's List*. So, I remember we came to the camp. The first thing that we did was the whole camp was assembled at the *appellplatz*. This is the place where the rollcall took place, and they were going to have a public hanging. And this was primarily for our benefit to show us how the things were being done. This was the famous Commandant Goeth.

So, they hanged two people, and one of them was a young boy my age, who was caught singing a Russian song. Now, many of the guards in the camp were Ukrainians, and they often marched and sang songs, and he was singing one of their songs. So now this became a pretext, you know, for violating, you know, the war with Russia, but this was just an excuse. It was one of the Jewish policemen who hung him. He broke loose. And I remember he threw himself down before Goeth begging for mercy, but he wouldn't. He, you know, hung him again. And then he was hanging there, and just before he died, he shot him, so this was his mercy. So, this was my introduction to Plaszów.

Robert Buckley: How did you feel toward the Jewish policemen who would do this to their own people?

Joseph Kempler: Fear essentially. Even though, as I understood, that many of these people were forced into this. They didn't volunteer. By the same token, nobody had any great love for them. At the same time, the

Jewish policemen could have been very helpful. They had some power and authority, and those who were their friends or those who knew somebody, you know, the Jewish policemen had, whether it's by their positions or getting away with some situations, they could've been very helpful.

So, in the camp there was always a hierarchy even among the prisoners. There were the prisoners who were on top in a position of authority like the policemen—people who had better positions, people who knew other people, people with contacts—and then gradually to the lowest of the low. Since I didn't know anybody, I got shoved into the lowest of the low. So even in the camp, there were different levels of existence. And I, unfortunately, wound up in the what they called in Plaszów *barrackenbau*, which means literally "building of barracks." This was the work that was the most dangerous, the most difficult and most exposed to the Germans who go around shooting people and so on as is shown in *Schindler's List*, which was really mild compared with things actually happening there in camp.

So, this was my introduction to the camp. And it was very, very, very difficult. There are many incidents that happened there in Plaszów, and I don't think I'll dwell on these now. They're significant in themselves.

Robert Buckley: So at this time in your life, 14 years of age, you're very old for your age for what you've experienced.

Joseph Kempler: Already 15 by then.

Robert Buckley: Fifteen now? Where you asking a question why was it happening?

Joseph Kempler: No, it wasn't ...

Robert Buckley: It just was?

Joseph Kempler: Just was. The key to everything was survival, dealing with the present right now, what I had to do right now. There was no tomorrow any more than when I was in Krakow that time after I left the forest. I did not face the question what am I going to do tonight? What am I going to eat? Right now, I wanted to escape with a book.

There's an example I can tell you. I loved trains as a kid. Oh, trains were my passion—riding in the train. The day – I'm going back to just being in Krakow before I sneaked into the ghetto. I wanted to

take one more train ride before going to the ghetto. And I remember I wanted to – I slept someplace again, some hallway or whatever.

[1:20:00]

And near there was a rail – a tram, a streetcar going directly to the railroad station. So, in the morning I took the first car, and I went to the railroad station. I was going to take a train anywhere, which was going to take me as far back as I could go even though it was crowded and no windows. It wasn't fun ride but just to be on a train. And I went to the railroad station, and the whole railroad station was surrounded full of policemen and so on and guards inspecting everybody, so I changed my mind. It was a big disappointment in my life. So, I was in a way a child, and I wanted to do childish things. And I wanted to live in fantasy and only deal with reality whenever I had to like finding a place to sleep and running away from some threat or danger.

So, in the camp was the same kind of a situation. You deal with the food, with the comfort, with the sleep, with not working too hard, not being beaten, not being shot. And everything else you don't spend time questioning. Counting how many turnips you have in the soup became much more important than any other things.

Some of the events talking about Jewish policemen. One of the things that they used to do there, every once in awhile they needed sacrifices literally to be shot for some event. People used to escape. I tell several stories on that. If there was an escape or any other breach, you know, people would come from Krakow and carrying some forbidden food, things like this, they would normally take these people to the area called Chujowa Gorka and then they would be executed, shot in the back of the neck.

Robert Buckley:

By whom? Who would do the shooting?

Joseph Kempler:

The Germans, various of the German SS, yeah. People would have to get undressed, kneel. He was sitting over there, one guy. Strojewski was his name. He would sit at the edge. This was like a ditch. He would sit on the edge of the ditch swinging his feet. People would get undressed. And they one by one come to him, kneel in front of him with the back of their head next to him. He would shoot them in the back of the neck. Two guys would pick him up, stack him like cord, and next guy would go. This is normal execution.

Once in awhile, the execution was such that the 50 people who were usually there with groups of 50 who were going to be

Commented [KF1]: Chujowa Gorka; Verified from The Altered I: Memoir of Joseph Kempler, Holocaust Survivor (Chapter 19, page 144, paragraph 8)

Also spelled; 'Hojowa Gorka'
[Collections Search - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Search Results \(ushmm.org\)](#)

executed were not positively identified. They were taken away someplace, and then they were supposed to report. And what the Jewish police would do is substitute 50 other people in order not to shoot the other guys. So, they would go to some of those barracks where the people were, you know, the riffraff, the lowest of the low, and pick 50 victims.

So, I was in one of the barracks, and they came one night, several Jewish policemen, and they wanted to have 50 people right away. So, we had to get dressed, and they were very nervous. They had to do this quickly, and they had to report someplace. So, I was putting my shoes on, and as soon as they went to the other, you know, they went from bunk to bunk trying to get more people, I would take the shoes off. And now you have to lace them and stuff like this, so they would beat me for being slow. But I managed every time I put them on I would take them off again to stall. So, by that time, they had 50 others, and they took them away, and I was one of those people who was spared. I knew what I was doing. I wasn't going to sacrifice myself. You know, I was going to save my live. Let 50 others go. But it points out first of all, number one, the need to survive was counted first. The action of the Jewish police under the circumstances and being this – being the victims even of our own brothers in the camp.

But one event—this was sort of important. I was working in a group of 50 people, who had the reputation of being very good workers. We could do things in the camp that nobody else could do. We could construct a barrack in half the time. The camp commandant, as a matter of fact, I remember one time he made a bet that we could build an air raid shelter, very complex air raid shelter fully covered and equipped, in one day.

[1:25:00]

And they said no way can you do it. It takes four or five. We did it in one day, so this was a crack group. To explain the situation, everybody was living in large barracks of several hundred people. Every morning people would go from the barracks to the *appellplatz* to be counted and then broken down into workgroups of 50. So, the barracks were the black leader of the *kapo* was in charge of the barrack. And then when the people broke up again, then the group leader, the *kapo* of the workgroup would be in charge of that group, so the responsibility shifted.

That morning we assembled from the barrack into my workgroup, and we were counted off. There were 49 rather than 50, so one guy was missing. The rule was if somebody – there were quite a few escapes at this particular time period, and everyone in this group

was shot, the entire 49 remaining people. So, immediately we were surrounded by the Jewish police. The procedure was that at 6 o'clock in the afternoon the camp commander Jewish – the Jewish police commander Chilowicz would go up to Commander Goeth and report that somebody escaped. And they would march up to whoever broke out and shot. So, this was in the morning, so we went off to work. But we were surrounded by Polish police so we couldn't escape in a protective, I mean, protective custody, I guess.

So at lunch, we're marched down back to the main camp and had lunch. It was interesting because the two people who were in charge of all the burials over at the Chujowa Gorka they came up to look us over to see what kind of work they're going to have that evening. I mean, we were condemned. It was just looked over. He said, "Okay, you are guys we're going to bury tonight," this kind of a thing. I mean, this was sort of matter of fact. The 50 of – the 49 of us, as a matter of fact, were sort of engaging in sort of a gallows humor trying to laugh. He says, "I'm going to get shot after you." "No, you go first," this kind of thing.

But then after that, there was a whistle blew. An announcement was made that we're not going back to work, but everybody is going to go back to their barracks and at 2 o'clock there's going to be a big *appell* gathering at the rollcall, the entire camp. They were going to make examples of us. So, we marched back to the barracks. To the group, our 49, came from many various different barracks. They broke up, and they were each one went to their own barracks. Then I decided what do I do? What they decide? Oh, yeah, the announcement was made they're going to make an example of us by hanging us publicly rather than shooting us over there in this place.

So just before I was on – there were four bunks. I was on the top one, and there was somebody I knew on the bottom one, so I sort of went down waiting for the whistle to blow. So, I was down on the lower bunk. And then the whistle blew, and everybody had to run out. And that's when I stalled again. And after everybody left, I pulled out the top board. There were boards for the bunk, short boards, and the straw mattresses. And I worked – I broke up the top board and sneaked underneath the bunk. There was a space maybe eight inches. And I decided I'm going to stay here until they catch me.

As it turned out, this was hanging and all kinds of other things. They just took the black, took all the people, marched them down

to the *appellplatz* without counting so didn't know I was missing. And I was there underneath for at least five hours without moving and just lying there. I'm totally pressed down. And my thoughts were, 'I don't want to be hanged.' I saw it once or twice, and I didn't want a hanging because it's scary, so I'd rather be shot. Now if they catch me—because they had to catch me—there's no way I'd get away with it.

[1:30:00] So they going to – they won't hang me. They'll probably either beat me to death or they beat me, then shoot me. I prefer that. And besides, at least I'm alive for a little longer. So, I stayed there, but this was another one of the situations where I said this is the end. I mean, there's no way getting away from that.

And then later the people from barracks came back, and I didn't come out. I was listening for a long time to what was happening. And, apparently, they didn't come looking for me. They didn't say: "Where is he? What's going on?" So, I worked myself back up again –

Robert Buckley: Now, these were different people?

Joseph Kempler: The same people from my barracks came back at the end of the – whatever happened there, so I found out what happened. They took my group, isolated them for hanging. But then Chilowics, the Polish—not Polish—the Jewish head of the police, he persuaded Goeth, "Why do you want to shoot people" who he know – he knew to be this crack group? He himself was proud of them. "Why don't you have one of these selections," as was featured in *Schindler's List*, "that people march by and select people who are not suitable for work and get rid of them instead of getting rid of these people?" So they have agreed and—I forgot—about 180 people, maybe over 200 people—I don't remember, this range—were selected and taken up [to] Chjowa Gorka and shot and our group was spared. So, there's another story.

Robert Buckley: So did your group ever say anything to you afterwards? Did you get back to work?

Joseph Kempler: They didn't. No, the group never knew ...

Robert Buckley: That you weren't there.

Joseph Kempler: ... because they were – oh, they knew, yeah. But there was apparently some others who didn't – who hide and so on. Then then I didn't – only people who knew other people, none of the

kapos or the leaders, certainly wouldn't let them know, so I got away. Nobody knew any better. This was very fortunate. The chaos and panic at that time helped me.

Robert Buckley: Was there ever any talk among the prisoners? "Let's revolt. Let's got together. I mean, we're going to die anyway. Let's ..."

Joseph Kempler: Well, you have to understand now. This was still not the worst of camps. Things were getting worse and worst. But even in a camp of this type, you developed the typical reaction when you go to a camp. The mind begins to lock people emotionally. So, the first thing that happens is you become sort of desensitized and emotionally removed. You no longer feel things emotionally. It's automatic process. Nobody plans it. But you become sort of like an observer, and things happen, which previously will be totally shocking. You look at this like it wasn't – like you weren't there.

Robert Buckley: I see.

Joseph Kempler: So you become an observer to things, but this is only the first step of the process of becoming like a robot, becoming dehumanized. I actually believed that the Germans were right, that they the – I saw the Germans, they way they worked, the way they looked. They were superior. I look at us and said we really are subhuman.

Robert Buckley: Okay and with that, we're going to stop for a moment. How do I turn this off? On top?

Joseph Kempler: The red button.

Robert Buckley: The red?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah.

So, I will tell you more about this later, about the mental effects of the camp. I mean, most of us went through similar manifestations where we became less than human. Actually, we reverted to some form of a very basic, primitive, childish state. And all of us went through it pretty much the same way. Later on, in some of the camps finally got worse. People became the *Muselman*, and eventually they're walking dead and they died, but Plaszów wasn't quite like this yet.

At any rate, so this experience with near-hanging and hiding underneath the bunk, I mean, even this left a mark. You know, ever since that time when I'm caught in a tight space, I get sort of a

panic feeling. It's almost like a phobic feeling. It's something very tight space that I cannot move or cannot moving or getting out of there would be dangerous.

[1:35:00] So, it's not very serious, but each one of these incidents in some way leaves a mark—a mental or emotional mark. It just, you know, the experience is over but –

Robert Buckley: Does it cause you to think back of what happened?

Joseph Kempler: No, not necessarily but I identify it with this early situation. But it's an instinctive phobic reaction, you know, being in a tight spot and this being pressed over there for hours and expecting death. It leaves a mark that you can never shake.

So, I forgot one thing to mention here before, while we were still in Rakowice back before we came to Plaszów. It's an important event. This was back in 1942 but December. Winter was approaching. And all the people who were in the camp at that time who are taken away in the spring or the summer and didn't have any winter clothing, and most of the work was being done outside. So, the German civilians had agreed—I mean, they arranged it or not agreed—arranged that all of us would be given a pass. And we'd go back to where we came from to see whether we can bring some winter clothing. They wouldn't provide any for us. So my brother, my uncle and I, we marched to the village of Nieznanowice. However, before there, I went to Bochnia where my parents were and my grandmother. And they lived in a little ghetto, and I saw them again. They survived.

And then we went to Nieznanowice. There were some adventures too because the people – we came back to our place where we had our possessions. And the peasants where we lived, they went to the police, denounced us, and the police came and arrested us. So, we were taken to jail. We said that we have permission, but they didn't believe us. They called the Gestapo. The Gestapo got in touch with the camp, and they confirmed that we are there legally. So not only were we released, but we're given a police escort to make sure we get the stuff because the peasants refused to give us our possessions.

Robert Buckley: Because they had stolen it?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah, they say it's theirs now.

Robert Buckley: When you had that brief encounter with your parents again, what was that brief reunion like? Do you recall?

Joseph Kempler: Yes. In my part I remember to being sort of almost informal and cold like very remote. So, we went to Nieznanowice, picked up quite a bit of clothing but also picked up things that we brought back to Bochnia to our parents, so we went there again. So, I saw them twice and I could have – this labor camp was still – if I escaped, there would have been no consequences to me. So, I could have stayed with them, and they encouraged me, and I said no. The reason – my reason was I was safer than they were. They were in Bochnia in a camp – in a ghetto, rather, which while it was quiet at this point, they didn't have too much time before it would happen again, so I left them. Again, it was no good-byes—sort of I became a very cold person running away. The pattern I established when I ran away from the forest became a pattern that I found works for me.

And the situation got very difficult, and I could run away from it or hide from it. and the results were such that I actually survived. Then it became a way of operations. I operated in this way that I would run away from emotional situations and other situations which I could not cope with. So, running away from my parents possibly tied in with the fact that my feelings for my mother changed. As I found out later, I felt that even though I was so close to her which she saved my life by going to the policeman, but at the same time, she sort of – she betrayed me. I was so close to her. She had never had to do this. So in a way, it was a type of mixed feelings that I could never resolve. So in a way, I punished her for what she did.

[1:40:00] But because she saved my life, the whole thing does not sit right down to this day. So, by removing myself emotionally from this, I sort of never had to face it. But a few months later, next spring, while we were still in—'43—we were still in Rakowice, the Germans used to send a big truck for lumber from the forest, which was near Bochnia. And this truck was run by – operated by Jewish drivers from the camp. And these Germans were rather friendly in their own way, not very but sympathetic enough. And they allow people to go with them to work in the forest or load these things up while at the same time, what has happened—to cut the story short—I went with them. They dropped me off in Bochnia. I went to see my parents. And then they would pick me up on the way back where they're loaded up with the lumber. And the Germans knew about it, but it was okay.

So, I went to see my parents. This was about maybe April or so of 1943. And they were living in this little room in Ghetto B. They had two type[s] of ghetto: A where people were working and had proper papers and Ghetto B, which were the older people, the sick people, those which are useless, and they were the first victims. And they lived there and we brought them some of the things from the village, maybe a little tablecloth or something like this. I was in there. It's almost like being home again. Compared with the camp, it was a wonderful place.

My mother says, "_____, you know, it's not easy, but we're making out. Gather a little bit of wood, we do this. We sell this. We do that. Can you stay?" And I said no. And I remember the truck came by, and I hadn't said good-bye to my mother and my father. I just walked off. That's the last time I saw them. And then a few months later, they emptied the ghetto of the Jews. And I just found out in the Holocaust Museum that this ghetto was – 60 people were shot in the ghetto. The rest were taken to Auschwitz and gassed. So, this is where I would have been. So in a way, my decision was right. Whether this was the way to leave my parents it's hard to say. In those days, I don't think anybody said good-bye—anybody—nobody grieved.

So, my feelings it was before, I mean, my religious feelings at that point, they died, and I wiped it from my mind because it sort of *es sogar*. Like they died even before they died. I cannot fully explain it. But there was a feeling that they're gone. That's the way it is, and I'm next. So, that grief for the dead, it didn't make much sense. Besides, you cannot cope with situations if you can't do anything about [it]. And suppressing feelings and emotions was part of the pattern. Everybody went through the same thing.

Anyway, back to Plaszów. While we there, my – finally the camp at Rakowice had closed, and my brother came back, but I never saw him. He was in a different barrack. He was back assigned to the tailoring, and I became remote from him as well. I saw him once in awhile but not too often. It just sort of didn't count. I was still in my own life, protecting myself one way or the other. So, there were many incidents and many dangers and many problems in Plaszów.

In the *barrackenbau*, they sent us out for three months to Zakopane. These 150 people were sent there to build a hydroelectric plant.

Robert Buckley:

Now we're speaking April 194?

Commented [RJ2]: This year doesn't seem right, but Joe repeats it so not sure if they're saying 1940?

Commented [BE3R2]: April '44

Commented [KF4R2]: April 13, 1944 ; Verified from The Altered I: Memoir of Joseph Kempler, Holocaust Survivor (Chapter 22, page 163, paragraph 2)

Joseph Kempler: April '94 and that was terrible because this was – when we were there, there was still snow and ice on the ground this high in the mountains. It was a beautiful resort area. And we were going to a mountain stream full of big rocks. We had to remove the rocks, you know, standing in the frozen water and trying to break them out. This was [an] unbelievable job.

Robert Buckley: Didn't you get frostbite or ...

[1:45:00]

Joseph Kempler: It was just terrible. Anyway, fortunately, the Germans who were there supervising us, they all realized that this plant will never be built, will never happen. And nobody was really making any effort to do this, so they decided to have a vacation. It was the right spot for it, and they sort of left us alone. We worked all the time, but we didn't break our backs, so it was a vacation.

Robert Buckley: [Laughs] And the Germans permitted this.

Joseph Kempler: Well, they themselves were – they take it easy and they almost became friendly with us. They told us to march, to be military-like and to – when we marched back to Plaszów, they want to be proud of us and this kind of thing. It was sort of away from Goeth and all these things. They themselves relaxed, so this was almost all died. The next two months were almost nice.

Then it came back to reality. They took us back. Back in July of 1944, we went back to Plaszów. And at that time, the Russians were moving in, and we knew about it. They were moving the camps and moving everything west. So, we expected we were going to be moved as well. I won't go into many details, but there were a lot of havoc, a lot of problems, a lot of casualties in Plaszów. But then one day in August of 1944, they gathered us. And at that time, somehow I got back together with my brother. I guess when I came back from Zakopane, I got back together with him, and we were shipped to Mauthausen

Robert Buckley: What type of transportation?

Joseph Kempler: Well, this was the cattle cars. Typically, the cattle cars accommodated 70 to 90 people, which was always too crowded. Nobody could sit down or lay down, you know, that 70 to 90. However, because of the rolling stock was in short supply, the Germans are moving out, so they put 140 people in a car. I mean,

this is just like, I mean, New York subways are nothing by comparison.

Robert Buckley: Where did you go to the bathroom?
Joseph Kempler: Yeah, just where you stood.

Robert Buckley: The stench must ...

Joseph Kempler: Terrible. Now, this was very, very hot August and the cars were sealed. And we were standing there already a day and a half before they moved us. So, I mean, people begin to die right then.

Robert Buckley: The heat in there must've been ...

Joseph Kempler: Unbearable. It caused death in many cases. I was very strong. I don't know where I got my strength, but I was strong. And then in the afternoon of the first day, all of the sudden there was hoses pouring water on the trains to cool us off, and everybody's spirits lifted. They said, "They're not going to send us to die if they care enough to cool us, so they don't want us to die." It was a wonderful thing.

Robert Buckley: Did the water come in the cracks or anything?

Joseph Kempler: The water came in the cracks too but mostly on the roof and the sides and the ... and then it was only many years later when I first read the book *Schindler's List* when I realized it was Schindler who arranged with Goeth to cool the – to pour the water on the cars so interesting.

Anyway, when we finally went, they took us to Auschwitz, but Auschwitz was full up. This was the time when they were bringing Hungarian Jews in, and they were gassing them by the thousands every day, and they didn't need any more. So, they shuffled us from Auschwitz to Mauthausen. Mauthausen was – that was a real hell. What a terrible place!

Robert Buckley: What was the reception when you first got to Mauthausen?

Joseph Kempler: Well ...

Robert Buckley: When you first got there and the doors opened up?

Joseph Kempler: When the doors opened up and those who died were dead. The rest of them were marched right away up to the camp. All these days in the heat no water. We were dying of thirst, but we couldn't get the

access to water in any case. And we had to wait outside of the camp until they were gradually bringing people in in small groups into the camp. So, we were there for two days before we finally got in. They took us to the showers. We didn't know whether we'd be gassed or not. And then the showers the water came out.

[1:50:05]

Robert Buckley: Did you have any idea that it could've been gas?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah. By that time, we knew exactly what was going on. So, no, it wasn't gas. It was water.

Robert Buckley: So, did you have clothing on when you went into the showers?

Joseph Kempler: No, no, naked.

Robert Buckley: To clean your bodies.

Joseph Kempler: Right and then, you know, put the uniforms back on again, not necessarily ours. They gave us numbers, you know—87,719. We used to carry them. Only Auschwitz have that numbers tattooed. We had numbers sewn on our uniforms, on the breast and on the trousers. Assigned us to barracks, would be five or six as many people as normally would fit.

Robert Buckley: What type of barracks—wood, metal, wood?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah, they were all wooden barracks as you see in the pictures all over—wooden. They took all the bunks out and put us on the floor to sleep. They tried different ways trying to squeeze us in. One of them was to lie back head-to-toe like sardines, squeeze them very hard. So once you move out, you couldn't move out of there because you could never get back in—solid. Other times they would try to sit people like this, one behind the other. [*Shifts in chair*] Either way, it was unbearable.

We were in these barracks for several days. And then one day it was time for the rollcall in front of the barracks, and I was there with my brother. And they called several numbers out, including my own, and I stepped forward. There [were] a few young boys. They took us away from this barrack to another one outside of this particular group. This particular barracks was of the quarantine barracks, and they took us to the main camp. This was the last time I saw my brother. Again, I just stepped out, never said good-bye, never looked back myself, and that was the end of it.

They took us to another barrack, and it turned out that the *kaapos* in the barracks, all the German, you know, criminals and so on, were looking for boys, homosexuals. So, fortunately, they didn't pick me. They picked two others.

And I was assigned to the work group. The workgroup in Mauthausen was the famous stone quarry, 186 steps, unbelievable steps. They sent us down there with barefoot. This was hard granite so – and there were the slivers and stones, sharp. It was unbelievable. We had to walk down to the stone quarry, and the steps were totally uneven. I mean, they were cut in the rock. I've been there since that time, and the government has put regular steps in there, which made me angry because I wanted the steps to be there just the way they were before that, but they did that for tourists.

You'd go down to the bottom, and there were Germans there with dogs. And we had to walk over the planks, over ravines. We had two workers who would put a heavy stone on your back. And you'd have to march while being nipped by dogs and the Germans beating you, climb up the 186 steps and then walk for about two miles, carry them to a spot and drop them and then continue. If anybody dropped the stone, they would be killed—either beaten to death or they had, if they were dropped already on top, they had a particular ledge, which the prisoners called the "Paratroopers Wall," and pushed people over to fall into the quarry. If somebody dropped the stone and they had to pick it up again, either it was too heavy and they couldn't pick it up or they carried – it was too heavy to put back on the back, so they carried it in their hands. They couldn't make it. There was no way.

There was one particular stone, which was too tall to step on. But there was a little ledge, a stone sticking out from the wall where there was – so if you carried this on your back, if you step on the ledge in order to sort of get the grip to go to the next stone, it was very difficult. You could lose your balance because you had to be suspended for awhile on one leg, hanging over there.

[1:55:00]

Those who managed to do that made it. Those who didn't manage and they dropped the stone, this would be the end of them, so the attrition rate was tremendous. We were there for over two weeks.

Robert Buckley:

Did you run into any other groups in Mauthausen—Gypsies, political?

Joseph Kempler: No, I didn't know anybody else in Mauthausen.

Robert Buckley: *Bibelforscher?*

Joseph Kempler: No, no, I didn't know anybody. I paid no attention to anybody. There was – this was the group that came from Plaszów. And that was unbelievably horrible, this experience, I mean, the whole atmosphere in Mauthausen. This was a true concentration camp, Class 3. This was Vernichtungslager. This was the extermination camp.

Fortunately, after about two weeks, I get regraduated survivors. They put us on a train and sent us to another camp. It was called Melk. This was about September of 1944, and this was a labor camp building underground factories built into the underground or under – into the mountains munitions factories and stuff like that. So this was a very, very hard camp. It wasn't an extermination camp. It was a labor camp, so people would die from work and mistreatment, but nobody was shot and stuff like this.

So, in this camp I remember, I mean, as all camps it was surrounded by barbed wire, electric wire with the watchtowers. But inside the camp there was one barrack. And this barrack was surrounded by its own barbed wire, restricted. You couldn't go in. The people couldn't go out. So I asked the people who were there already, I asked them what kind of people are there? I mean, what's the, you know, the – I have never seen before that you have a separate barrack isolated by barbed wire away from the others because normally there was a certain amount of freedom of movement within the camp.

And they told me, "Well, these are the Bible Students, Jehovah's Witnesses."

I said I didn't know who they were. I never heard about them, so I say: "What did they do to get this kind of a treatment? They must be especially dangerous."

He says: "No, these people are kept this way because otherwise they would go around the camp and talk about their religion to everybody. And the Germans don't want that."

So, I was surprised by that. I didn't know anything about them or their religion. And then they tell me that these people—actually, most of them are Germans. And they could go free by signing a

statement renouncing their religion. They actually would let them out."

And I said: "No way. I don't believe that. There's nobody in this world who wouldn't sign something to get out." And I said: "What's the big business? I mean, you sign. You don't have to change your religion. You just sign a piece of paper."

He said, "No, they wouldn't do that."

And I could not believe that. This is to me unbelievable that anybody would hold onto something that strongly so what? I said, "How come they are in the camp in the first place?"

He says, "Because they wouldn't heil Hitler or join the German army."

So, this was the first time I was exposed to this kind of people who were in the camp for a cause. And every one of us would literally kill their brother or father or whoever it is for a piece of bread. Literally, there were many cases just like that. The idea of being there because they – for a cause and them, they were allowed to go by free by signing a statement. I mean, this blew my mind. I was truly impressed. I never talked to these people. I only saw them from a distance. I never talked to them because, well, I had no dealings.

Many of them had good positions in the camp. They were there for many years. Most of us were newcomers. They were there from the '30s. And they had positions like, for instance, working for the Germans who were living outside the camp: their gardeners or nannies or even barbers, shaving the Germans with straight razors. *[Chuckles in disbelief]* They worked in the kitchen, and they always helped one another. There were only two groups of people who helped one another. There were the Spanish Communists, who were there from the Spanish Civil War. They were kept separately in the camp, loyal to one another, and the Witnesses.

[2:00:00]

They always would help one another. There were always good reports about them. Everybody admired them. I never understood their religion, never knew what they were, you know, what they believed in, but it wasn't important. The fact is they stood up against Hitler, and they suffered for it. So, this was possibly the only positive thing that I learned from the camp.

All of us, the rest of us were still the struggle for survival, surviving. Let me give you another story along these lines. We all had wooden shoes, which was sort of the canvas tops and the wooden bottoms nailed together. In a short time, they would separate. The top would separate from the bottoms. In the wintertime working in the snow, we had to ... stop.

[End of Audio]