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Joseph Kempler:

So as I was saying at the end of the first cassette, we were working in the wintertime. We had to walk quite a few miles to the train where we went to the work in the tunnels. So the only way to keep the shoes together is to – I used to wrap them in cement sacks, wrap the tops and bottoms with wires to hold it together. It didn't last very long. I mean, cement got soaked and the wires broke. It was a terrible thing, but there was no shoes to be gotten.

Now, they had a hospital there in the camp called the revier. And some people with some minor problems would be allowed to go there, but they usually—after they came out—they were worse off than before because they fed them less. And usually people who came out of the hospital—if they came out—they didn't last very long. So one night we were going from nightshift, bitter cold, _____ this gentleman, Hungarian. He looked like a very distinguished type of a guy, who just came from the hospital, and he had brand new pair of shoes on.

Normally, when somebody came from the hospital, nobody wanted to be near him because when we marched to work outside of the camp, we had to hook our arms together in groups of five. And this is to prevent escape, especially at night, so all of us were held together. If anybody would move, the other would be responsible. So now if somebody was sick, we had to drag him because he couldn't keep up. So nobody wanted to be associated with somebody who is sick, and they have to drag him, and they get into trouble as a result, get beaten or whatever.

I stayed close to him because I had an eye on his shoes, and I knew he wouldn't last. And I became friendly with him, supposedly. I mean, I didn't care about him, not at all. And we were standing there waiting to march off. Before [we] even left, he collapsed. He wasn't down yet and I was at his shoes, pulling them off, and literally yelling and crying, "My shoes! My shoes!" And the copper came over.

First of all, he beat me over the head—and always get beaten first—and I said: "I want his shoes because he's going back to the revier, and I need these shoes. I have no shoes." So, he started – so he beat him instead because he complained. I pulled his shoes off and put – and I left mine behind, and I had the brand new shoes. I mean, this was something which, I mean, there was no question that this was the right thing to do. He didn't need the shoes. I did.

But this was the way of surviving that was perfectly normal and natural to me and everybody else around me, except maybe Jehovah's Witnesses. They wouldn't have done it. But I didn't think along these lines. Survival, primitive, childish, basic—I don't know how to describe it. I mean, how can you think of marching to work in the snow with no shoes? So there were many instances of this type, surviving very often at the life lost to somebody else. It didn't matter. This is how we survived. We never felt any guilt about this. Down to this day, I don't really feel guilty. Maybe I should, but I don't. This was – everything was justified, rationalized, and it made sense.

So Melk was a tough camp. Many, many people died. The crematorium was always full, but even this became normal. There were always bodies lying there. I was – I remember the, for instance, I was walking down, and two guys are carrying somebody on a stretcher to the crematorium, and I knew the guy. So we stopped, you know, talked to him for awhile. Another body – you paid no attention to the body. Nobody cared. There were bodies all over the place and that left no impression whatsoever anymore.

Robert Buckley: So what's your feeling toward God now?

Joseph Kempler: At this point, I didn't believe in God. I mean, I don't know. At that time, I didn't know anybody who did. There must've been some people. And I heard afterward there were some people who kept believing.

[0:05:00] To me, it was inconceivable that God, if he existed, would permit things like this. I was – why would he permit things like this to happen if he saw it and he didn't do anything? We didn't do anything wrong to God or to anybody else. So there was a feeling of, maybe at first, maybe disappointment. And then there was anger, and then there was nothing, no feeling at all. He just didn't exist. I don't remember praying. I remember one time in Mauthausen. There was a vicious air raid. This was during the time that we were working in the stone quarry, and we were not allowed to go to air-raid shelter. We had to stay where we were. And I remember praying briefly that I'd rather go sort of making a deal with God. If he lets me survive, I don't mind coming to the stone quarry the next day, this kind of thing. It didn't last very long. I wasn't very serious. There was no prayer. It was a deal-making. And this was the last time I remember ever having even any thought of God because I had no use for him. Where was he when I needed him? And that, I guess, was the general attitude of most

people. That's why I was surprised about the Witnesses, that religion. Whatever their religion was I didn't know. Nobody knew what they believed. All I knew was they didn't believe in the Pope or the saints. This is the sum total of what I knew about their religion. But this in itself did not make any sense, why anybody would stick to religion and God and live, if you called it living, under these circumstances.

So, Melk by that time after Mauthausen and Melk, the levels of degeneration becoming, you know, more and more of an animal and less of a human got pretty well embedded. There was no conscience. There was no thinking. There was no – nothing left, just the immediate satisfaction to survive, to have a pair of shoes, to be able to have a piece of bread, to have – in some way to have a shovel that worked that is little less difficult to work with than another one, to maybe be protected from the wind, or maybe if you're working in the – I don't know. It's just total collection of these incidents and each one tragic and totally desperate.

So I won't tell you much more about Melk, except that I remember on April 13th—was Friday, April 13th—we were marched out from Melk to another camp. I remember April 12th. April 12, 1945, I was 17 years old that day, and we spent 24 hours standing at attention in the cold. Somebody escaped, so they made us stand the entire time. No food, no drink, no moving, no bathroom, nothing, and this was the punishment for somebody escaping. So this was the 12th. I found out this was the day President Roosevelt died. I remembered this on my birthday, the wonderful 17-year-old birthday.

The next day after all of this, they marched us out. This began the seven-day death march from Melk to Ebensee. So this was still April, was very cold. We were in the mountains in Austria. Both Mauthausen and Melk to Ebensee are in Austria. So, I mean, death march are pretty well known. If anybody fell behind, they couldn't work, they would shoot them. I made it, and we marched to Ebensee. We arrived there in the middle of the night. We stripped. We went into the shower. After the shower, we were driven out naked, wet, and stood in the frost all night long. They wouldn't let us in the barrack until the next day. I mean, this kind of thing, typical treatment

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Now, by that time, the foot Russians are greatly diminished. The people who were there when **the last phase**, and there was a lot of death from starvation. There was too much starvation. There was starvation in Melk too, and Mauthausen, but nothing like Ebensee.

And this is where I first saw the people who are going through the starvation steps. They begin to swell. They absorb water, and their bellies swell. Then their faces swell. Their eyes got puffed up, and this the last stage before they die. There was one block so they say, people who got to this stage, who could no longer work. They would throw them into barrack, and they would lie there until they died.

Robert Buckley: What type of work went on at Ebensee?

Joseph Kempler: Ebensee was also building tunnels for factories. Also, there was a railroad station nearby, a major network—not network—a terminal. It was running between Vienna and Salzburg and so on. And the Americans would come and bomb it, and then we would have to go and to try to fix it. I remember one time there was a big bomb crater and locomotive down at the bottom of it, of the crater. We had to get it out, this kind of work, no tools, nothing like this, brute force, no food. It was brutal. Then we didn't realize that Americans were very close and that last few days they wouldn't let us out. We stayed in the camp. We no longer went to work. But they wouldn't give us any food either. And I realized – I found someplace bark of a tree, which was used someplace in some barracks for burning or something, and I chewed on that. And I didn't realize at the time this actually helped me, stopped me from diarrhea because part of it was carbonized. And I had like the carbon in it, which is effective for diarrhea because many people were dying from diarrhea at the time.

I began to at that time beginning to swell already, so I was getting into the last stages of starvation. And, finally, I remember I was in the barrack. I was – I didn't go to work anymore, didn't have to go for the *appellplatz*. I was just lying there. And then on May 5th, we were all told to go to the *apell*, to the *appellplatz* there, and the camp commander made a speech. And by that time, the watchtowers were already half empty, not guarded. There were very few Germans there. And he made a speech saying that, unfortunately, the Americans are coming nearer. And they will be forced to turn over the camp to the Americans. And because of the potential battle between the Germans and the Americans, they're concerned about our safety, so they would like to put us in the tunnels until the Americans take over the camp. This was a request, and everybody said no. And they couldn't force it anymore because, apparently, most of the Germans had already gone, escaped, so we stayed in the barracks.

Robert Buckley: And what was the name of the camp commander? Do you recall?

Joseph Kempler: Gans, G-A-N-S, Gans. Then the next day, I was already in sort of a stupor. I mean, typical, there were small bunks. They had four people in a bunk, narrow bunk, sleep together head to toe. In the morning you would usually wake up and one or two would be dead. So the death was just people dying like flies. As a matter of fact, we had a crematorium, which could not keep up with the death rate. So they stacked the bodies like cordwood outside of the crematorium. And Russians, we had many – Russian prisoners-of-war were not kept in POW camps because of the Russians that had come to the concentration camps.

[0:15:00] So we had many Russians there. They would take some of the – cut some of whatever flesh remained, whatever flesh remained on the bodies, and would sell it or trade it. You know, this was cannibalism, you know, so I had some of that too. I mean, the time was – it was desperate times. The very end was difficult, difficult time. And the death was sort of taken for granted, and I was ready for that too, I mean, not thinking about it. And then the call came through the barracks, screaming and yelling: "The Americans are here! We are liberated!" And I could no longer move. And I did not respond to that, just like it didn't count anymore. This was meaningless.

Then somebody said that the Russians have broken into the bakery. There's bread. Come get it. I sort of lift myself up and tried and couldn't make it and never got anything. But at least I was still moving. I did not die. The next day the Americans came, assembled us, and moved us to another camp nearby in Ebensee, which had better quality barracks, and they put the prisoners in there in the camp.

Robert Buckley: What type of food did you receive to start getting –

Joseph Kempler: This is just – I'm coming to that. I don't remember whether we got any food, whether there was some rations left from the Germans. But what has happened, we moved into new camp in the morning. And about noon the call came out, "Soup – all you want!" It turned out that the Americans saw our situation. These were advance reconnaissance troops. They had no food with them to feed thousands of people. They went to the town of Ebensee and liberated some warehouses full of cans and supplies. This was pork and beans and all kinds of fat stuff and various things. And they made it into instructions, make it into a soup and give them all they want. Can you imagine that?

Now we knew. We were talking. Even before the war ended, we were saying how one day maybe – you're talking always liberation as how we'd have to be eating very carefully, that we won't be able to eat any heavy stuff, sort of knew that. The announcement was made to get the food. Now, all of our possessions were every one of us had a metal dish covered with enamel, all beaten up. You should always carry it with you. It was always suspended by a wire to your pants. And the spoon was tied in within the buttonholes of the shirt, the striped uniform.

Normally, when you stood in line to get soup, after you got it, you eat it and never dared to go back in line because they'll kill you if you try to get the second one. But this time they said: "Don't worry. There's enough. You can have second one." As a result, when we got this big plate full of this heavy fat stuff, instead of eating it, in some way savor it—the first time a real meal—everybody gulped it down as fast as they could in order to wipe – first of all, we had to wipe the dish so there's no – even though this was freedom. But nobody – you still don't go in line the second time. You'd still get killed. People still didn't realize that things had changed.

But we dared to go into a line. We're wiping the dish efficiently so people wouldn't think that this was the second time, and we got the second bowlful. I couldn't eat anymore. And I remember I took that bowl of soup and carried this to the bank, and I sat there all day long watching it because somebody would steal it. But in the evening the call came, "There's more soup." By that time, the soup got cold, and there was an inch of fat, hard fat, on top. What do I do with it? Well, throw it out? Can you imagine throwing food out? So I ate that, again swallowed it quickly. I went back in line for more.

[0:20:00] So that day people began to die like flies. I mean, the food not only, I mean, just went right through. I mean, there was no digestion, no attempt anything like this. But not only that, but people would actually die while they were eating

Robert Buckley: Did they know why it was happening?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah, it was too late. I mean, people who were literally starving [to] death, I mean, that stuff was tasty too but actually was the worst thing. The Americans didn't know any better. They were stupid. They didn't think along those lines. So what has happened is that people were, I mean, they never had the chance to go to a latrine or like this. They would just drop their load into the pants

and within a day or so, nobody had pants on because everybody lost it.

It's interesting in the museum they had this special exhibit in '95 called "The Liberation." And the front, the frontest piece, the theme was a picture of liberation of the camp of Ebensee. And there are a bunch of people standing there behind the barbed wire, and nobody had pants on. And interesting, I don't think anybody on the museum staff knew why, but this was the reason—because nobody had any pants left. I finally got a pair of pants. I had this diarrhea and stuff like this. But somehow I with my strength or whatever, I made it. And I pulled a pair of pants off some dead body, which died for other reasons, so I had a pair of pants. So this was the new freedom.

The strange thing was—well, maybe not so strange—I was living in the camp. Even though we were free, I had no place to go. I didn't know where to go. And what's more, even though I regained some of my strength, I was a *muselmann*. A *muselmann* is the phrase which describes the living dead, the skeletons of the worst type. Everyone was a skeleton, but a *muselmann* was the worst type. It comes from the Polish word *muzulmanin*, which means "Muslim," which absolutely had no meaning as such. For some reason, it was adapted throughout the whole world of concentrate camp. So I was a *muzulmanin*, a *muselmann*. And other people began to fill out and began to get strong, and they began to look normal. I couldn't do that. For some reason, I was weighing less than 60 pounds.

And one – I mean, this is a little side story talking [about] the life after the war. One of the things that we used to do, we used to go to call organizing. "Organizing" is to get something from people for nothing, trying to get something. So what some of the prisoners, ex-prisoners would do is to go out in the countryside in Austria and try to beg food and stuff from the Austrian peasants. Now, the peasants got wise after awhile. They wouldn't give it to them. You know, people were coming by the hundreds, wanted to have food from them. So they'd take me along. I was still wearing my stripes, and I looked like a *muselmann*. So, they used me to get pity, so that's how we got stuff.

Robert Buckley: Did you have enough strength to walk?

Joseph Kempler: I had enough strength. I used to, yes, I was still – had the same strength I had in the concentration camp, but I couldn't move forward. So I remember one night the American Red Cross came

into the barracks and says: "Is anybody sick here? We can now take you to the hospital."

And people there were saying, "There's one guy sick." They pointed to me. I was in the bunk sleeping, lying down, weak.

So, they came to me and said, "Okay, come with us to the hospital." I said, "I refuse to go. I'm not sick." I denied it because to me hospital was still the same idea. Americans or Red Cross means anything. Hospital was death, so I refused to go. Had I gone, I would have been doing okay. But that's how I was, so I didn't go, and I did not move forward.

Another thing, there was an American camp outside a few miles away. And it was a field camp, so they have a field kitchen. You know, they were the Marines, so you know that they had those pots set up.

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Everybody was dealt their dish and their canteens and their trays. And after they finished eating, they would throw it in one big garbage can. So they had their leftover food and their napkins and their cigarette butts and their coffee. And we would take, every once in awhile we just gather around it when there are not too many people too close. We would run like mad and scoop out the garbage can and organize and eat. So even though we were liberated, the idea of the need for food and the need to scrounge any way possible was still there.

Robert Buckley:

So from Ebensee you went to where?

Joseph Kempler:

I stayed in Ebensee for awhile but I couldn't – I wanted to go to the hospital later on, but they wouldn't take me anymore. It was full. This is an interesting story in itself. I needed medical attention, but there was no way of getting one. I mean, the camps was still – UNRA was supposed to come and sort of run things, but they weren't there. It was too early, still chaos after the war. I wound up, which is quite a story in itself, in a German hospital for Luftwaffe officers who had TB. I mean, how *[laughs]* I got there is quite a story.

But, anyway, I was the only survivor, you know, Jewish survivor. I wouldn't tell them I was Jewish. I was scared, surrounded by Germans, but I began to recover. I was gaining weight at the rate of 12 to 14 pounds a week. But even then, I would – there were many people who had TB, and they were dying. I would go out at night, and they had some outside of the rooms—people who were

dying who couldn't eat—they had food left outside, you know, their doors. And I would go to the bathroom and steal the food. I mean, food was sort of the magic of food. **Started** gaining weight, recovering and, finally, they dismissed me, which is sort of a side story I want to tell you.

All the Germans, the Luftwaffe officers, since they were just dismissed, they were still officially in the military. They had to go to a town to be – first of all, they had to be—how you call it—dismissed, discharged from the army. Then they had to be de-Nazified. And then they were given ration cards and tickets to go home wherever they were going, so I went with them because I didn't know where to go. So I went with them because everybody went there. And they all go to the room one by one.

Then I go in there and I say, "Well, I need money and ration cards and tickets, so I can go back to Ebensee."

They say, "No, you're not a soldier."

I says, "What do I do?"

They say: "I don't know. We can't help you." *[Laughs]*

So I managed to go get to Ebensee, the DP camp that was there. When I came back, there was by that time UNRA was running it, and there was an American there. And I said: "I came from the hospital back to the camp. That's where I was."

And they said: "Well, how do I know? You have any papers? How can you prove that you didn't escape from someplace? How do I know I cannot admit you to the camp?" They said, "You have go back to the hospital and get some papers. We'll let you stay one night, but that's it." So I made my way back to the hospital trying to provide documentation that I'm a genuine DP. I was still – I was wearing the striped pants and the, yeah, striped pants and an Air Force jacket. This is my uniform that I had at the time.

But it illustrates the point that the Germans didn't want me. *[Laughs]* The Americans didn't want me. The DPs didn't want me. I mean, that's – so this kind of a setting. Here I was back free. What do I do next? The Polish authorities found out about me, and they wanted me to go back to Poland because they were repatriating all the Poles. And at that time, I didn't tell them I was Jewish, and I refused to go. They gave me trouble over there because they wanted to force all the Poles. I don't want to go back

to Poland. Then I found out – I won't give you all the details because of time. But then I found out somebody said, "Your brother is alive." So I went traveling to Linz.

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And I found out then, "No, your brother died in the camp of Gusen outside of Mauthausen. But your sister is alive, and she was seen in Krakow." I went to look for her. She wasn't there but she was somebody – I didn't go back to Krakow, this his was in Austria. Anyway, I finally settled in a DP camp in Linz, Austria. And I was trying to sort of come back to normal. I don't know what normal was. I mean, I was trying to read. I was trying to learn English. I was living in a room with about six or eight others waiting for something to happen, but nothing was ever happening. I wouldn't go back to Poland, so I became stateless.

So I was living there, and I remember somebody – this was in Austria. Somebody came from Germany, from Bavaria, some Jews, and they said that they knew of my sister. She's someplace, living someplace, in Germany in DP camp. So I wrote a letter to my sister, addressed it "DP Camp Someplace in Germany," and she got that. I have the copy of the letter, another copy. I have the letter that I wrote to her. She kept it—what a letter.

Robert Buckley:

We'll put that on film.

Joseph Kempler:

Well, it's hard to see because it's written in pencil. It's sort of faded. Anyway, I didn't know she got the letter. One day I'm sitting in my room over there and—lying down, rather—early in the morning and she shows up. And this was the shock of my life. I couldn't speak for, for longest time. Anyway, she found me. She crossed a river at night—because it was illegal to go from Germany to Austria the other way—to find me. She found me. She brought me back where she was in a DP camp in Landsberg in Germany. And then the life began to sort of get back to normal. I joined the school, a school which was run by ORT, the ORT, which is an Organization for Rehabilitation and Training, which is an American-type organization. They establish a school in there, and I began to study radio, you know, radio technique while I was there.

Robert Buckley:

And how old were you now?

Joseph Kempler:

I was – this was '45 so I was 17 and a half. This was within six months after the liberation. I was 17 but I looked, I guess when people saw me, like 40. And inside I was still 14, the same age I was when I was in the meadow when my mother went to the policeman. I'll tell you more about this later.

When I was in Landsberg, the Americans came with some photographs of camps, I mean, guards from the concentration camp in Mauthausen and surrounding camps, to see if anybody identified any of them, and I identified two pictures. Within a few weeks, they send me a summons to go to Dachau, the former concentration camp, which was now converted into a prisoner-of-war camp with the German SS. And the purpose of that was to collect evidence against guards, people who nobody knew about except the ex-prisoners who could identify them. So it wasn't a trial yet. These were the depositions for collection of evidence and statements.

So the way this was done, they had a small like theater auditorium where the witnesses were in the audience. They would bring the Germans one by one on the stage, and they were interrogated by two Americans. And later, any one of us who had anything to say could question them or file a deposition, whatever was the appropriate thing to do. And we were staying in a very large barrack like for all of the prosecution witnesses.

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And there was a separate barrack isolated from us, which were defense witnesses. We didn't see eye-to-eye, so the Americans kept us separate. So my bunk was next to two people, two Germans who were called in to testify, very nice older gentlemen and it turned out they were both Jehovah's Witnesses. So I was – I remember Jehovah's Witnesses from Melk, so I became friendly. I admired these people, so we stayed together. We sat together during the interrogations.

Now, one of the two Witnesses was partly paralyzed. One of his arms was totally paralyzed, and the other was partly paralyzed. And the reason was, he explained to me, that they would – part of their treatment of Witnesses trying to break them, they would hang them on a pole with their arms behind their backs. And they put the bolts between their fingers, you know, and then lock them up from the top [*descriptive gestures*]. And they were hung by their hands with their arms behind them like this for eight hours or more. So that's what they did to him, and the result was that he was paralyzed. So one day we're sitting there, and they bring the man on the stage. And he pokes me with his elbow in the ribs and he says, "This is the man did it to me." So when the time came to testify, for us to testify, he didn't budge. So I said, "Well, aren't you going to testify?" He said, "No." I said, "What do you mean?"

He says: "I'm not going to testify against him. The vengeance belongs to Jehovah."

So I was furious with him. "This is your opportunity. Look what he did to you!"

He wouldn't budge. He just sat there calmly. He was puffing on a pipe, and he was just sitting there totally calm. I mean, there was not like no anxiety or nervousness. He just sat there and didn't speak a word. So this was another thing, I mean, this impressed me beyond belief that these people really mean business. I mean, they speak their religion. They really live it out, not only in the camp. But now after the war, they wouldn't even get even with people who did it to them so, to me, this was beyond belief.

So they talked to me. They talked to me about salvation, about all kinds of things. And I listened politely, but this doesn't make any sense to me. I certainly didn't believe in God. So I was very polite with them, but this [had] not only no meaning but it was totally just going way over my head. And even though it made sense, my former Bible training, Jewish training, was sufficient so I could understand what they were saying, the Messianic age and all this. But I totally ignored it because God was not on my mind. I admired them, but it was not for me.

So when we parted company, they gave me one of their books in German—was called *The Creation*—written by one of the Witnesses, their president, and that was the end of it. I read the beginning of it, which was very interesting. But the rest of it, when it came to religion and the Bible and stuff like this, I had no mind for it, and I rejected it but the impression was left. All for years afterwards, I would be telling people about the Witnesses and anybody who would listen. And they asked me, "Well, what was the religion?" I'd say, "I don't know." [*Laughs*] Had no idea what they believed. All I knew what they stood for and their actions. So what I was impressed is not by their religion but how they lived it.

So that was interesting. So I was in Landsberg. While I was in Landsberg – this is a short aside. I was underage but less than 18, and I had an opportunity to go to the United States outside of the regular quota, being under 18. So they moved us to—not a labor camp—a children's camp with a nice location, a wonderful place on the lake, where we were awaiting immigration to the States. In the meantime, we had to go through health and all kinds of other things. They found a spot on my lungs, the possibility of TB, so they put me on hold three months and three months more. And

finally, in the meantime, I got over 18, so I could no longer qualify, so I had to go back to Landsberg.

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In the meantime, my sister who found me, she and her husband, who survived—and I'll tell you in a minute how they survived—left for America. And I was there left alone not knowing whether I'll be able to go because they wouldn't clear my lung.

Now my sister, who survived, she – you'll remember that she was in Tarnow. And the last time I heard from her was she sent us a letter saying, "Do not report to Bochnia," back in 1942. And this was the end of it, and I heard she survived. How did she survive? Her husband, as I said, was a musician. And while they were living in Tarnow in the ghetto, he supported himself partly by teaching music to some people, including one Polish young girl, who he was teaching her violin; was outside of the ghetto. This was before the ghetto was closed and they could no longer get out.

And then when the ghetto was going to be closed, they, the family, said: "The war"—this is 1942—"The war is so close to the end. The Russians are going to win. We will hide you. The war should be over within three months." And they put them in their room behind a big wardrobe. So during the day, they were hiding; standing all day long behind the wardrobe. At night, they would move the wardrobe forward so they can lie down. And then during the day, they were there two years and three months like that. So it was survival in a different form.

The interesting thing is my sister didn't know anything about, at that time, my experiences yet with the – and she was saying that "the people who saved me is really because of the old man. He was a funny old man. He was one of those Bible Students." And it was Rutherford's influence that the family took them in to save their lives.

Robert Buckley:

So, the family was not a Bible Student family, but the father was.

Joseph Kempler:

The father was, yeah. He was one of Jehovah's Witnesses. And she didn't know anything about them either. But she says he was always quoting about the – talking about the Bible and Armageddon and stuff like this, but he was funny, you know, strange because he talked like this. So here we have another incident. Here's my sister, the only survivor of my family. And she survived because of being saved by Jehovah's Witnesses. And here my encounters with Witnesses left a powerful influence.

So, anyway, so she went to America. Eventually, they cleared me of my lung. They said that the spot did not change. So, therefore, whatever it was was no long progressing. And I came back *[sic]* to the States in November of 1947.

Robert Buckley: Settling where?

Joseph Kempler: Settling in Brooklyn, New York, in the small room that we had with my sister and with a family, an American family, who took us in. We rented the room from them.

Robert Buckley: Jewish family?

Joseph Kempler: Jewish family. And I began to work right away.

Robert Buckley: What type of work did you do?

Joseph Kempler: Well, in the beginning because I got training in radio, I tried to get some jobs in the radio, which I worked for several months. Radio then was beginning to fade. Television was on the horizon. I was working for a company—it's still a very well-known company—Fisher Radio, which today is a major Japanese company. It was formed by Avery Fisher. He is the one from, you know, the famous philanthropist of the Avery Fisher Hall near Carnegie Hall. He was the – anyway, he was making in those days very expensive radios, which cost in those days about \$1,500 to \$2,00, so I got a job there. But at that time the FCC changed the FM band. And all the radios that had original bands became obsolete, and he went bankrupt. He came back eventually and made a mint. But I had to – for the next few years I was working as a grease monkey in a company that made venetian blinds and window shades doing sort of a menial-type work, working for two Germans who were really Nazis. *[laughs]* I was still afraid of them even here.

[0:45:07]

Robert Buckley: How did they treat you? Did they know you were Jewish?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah. They didn't treat me very nice. I mean, this was a typical apprentice—very bossy, very arrogant, very unpleasant. But in the meantime, I was trying to – I never went back to school. I only was in school until the fifth grade in Poland. But because of my ability to learn from reading – reading was my passion. It always was. And I had the ability to pick up any book and learn from it. So actually, during this time, I was studying radio and electronics and eventually wound up in that field doing quite well without ever

taking any additional formal courses. So this worked out okay for me in this sense.

So, back to New York, we were in Brooklyn. I was working in this venetian blind company. I met a girl, a Jewish girl, who was German, Jewish-German. During the war – no, no, pardon me, before the war, a number of Jewish children were sent from Germany to England. They were adopted or foster homes trying, you know, trying to get them away from Germany about 1938 or so, and she was one of them. And she spent the war in Coventry, England, twice bombed. Once her life was saved by a dog, who jumped on top of her when a roof collapsed. So she had her difficulties.

Anyway, we got married in 1953. In 1955, we had a baby daughter. In the beginning of her pregnancy, she developed a sickness that turned out to be Hodgkin's disease, which is a form of a blood cancer, and she died in '56—was 23 years of age. My daughter, I never had her home. She went directly to an orphanage because I couldn't keep her at home. At the age of 11 months, the people in the home pressed me to give her away for adoption. I couldn't take her home. I couldn't take care of her. My sister who was remarried and living in Denver, she couldn't have children, so I sent her to her – sent my daughter to her to Denver and, eventually, she adopted her.

But some of these experiences, you see, as I said before, I'm 67 going on 14. When – during the war years and the camp years, everything was put on hold, as I found out later by studying and reading and so on. Adolescents who went through this kind of extreme trial—this is really new research—caused a total cessation of the maturation process. So after the war when I came out, I was totally blocked emotionally. This helped me to survive because I didn't know I didn't feel. Lose my parents, my brother—didn't make any difference—or a guy with shoes. It didn't matter. I didn't feel it. I wasn't aware of it. It didn't count as long as I survived. And this worked for me, and I could manage unpleasant things by running away. I could run away physically, as I did from my parents, or I could run emotionally. It worked just as well. I was immune from pain this way.

But my brain worked very well. I mean my, as I said, the intellectual ability to read and to learn; almost had a photographic memory, which is gone now, and so intellectually I advanced. But emotionally I was stuck where I was at 14.

[0:50:00]

And no matter how I tried, I couldn't move ahead except I wasn't aware of it. I knew that I was different but not enough because if my mind was basically, or my whole life was basically, taking place in my mind, then it was I could deal with it. Whatever situations, I could solve intellectually or mentally. The fact that I wasn't emotionally involved, did not interfere with me.

Robert Buckley:

So what type of relationship did you have with your first wife?

Joseph Kempler:

Well, I didn't realize it. See, the love – there were many losses I had during the war. So the people I loved, including my mother, is something I had to cut off and run away from. Love became a very painful word. My relations with my wife was not all that bad. She was also affected by the war. We sort of clicked together in a way. But I certainly deprived her emotionally, deprived everybody emotionally except I didn't know that. So I went through the motions. We used to love music. We used to do things together. And we shared all kinds of things, but it was not in any depth.

When she died, it only confirmed to my mind that love only means death. Love means only suffering and there's just – there's no room in my life for it. So this – it certainly caused me difficulties, but at the same time, I realized that I felt immune from emotional pain. I had no conscience. I felt no pain. I felt satisfied with my world that I created for myself, whether it's books or whether it's – whatever. I was living partly in a world that I made up, partly was a fantasy world that I created for myself without knowing that I was different from the others. Because I functioned intellectually on the outside, I looked normal and I behaved normal[ly]. So people actually looked up to me as having a certain amount of wisdom and know-how and sort of being there mature. I would hide it from them because I wasn't. They never knew any better; sometimes would fool myself.

Robert Buckley:

Did you share your experiences at this time with anybody?

Joseph Kempler:

Not really. My – I didn't know very much about my wife except what happened in Coventry. I never told her things. No, at that time I couldn't talk to anybody except a few people, the few survivors. We went through the same thing. I still was in contact with a few of them, and I could talk to them freely but only to them. People on the outside, you know, talking to Americans, you know, I stopped very quickly. I remember making some statement to somebody. He says: "I know, we had a very tough time. We had sugar rations. We had gas rations." So they told me they understand, so I stopped talking because it didn't make much

sense. Other people pat me on the back, "No, no, never mind this. You'll be okay. You're an American now," and they cut it off. So between lack of understanding and things, I didn't talk about it, but there's still other reasons too. I wasn't ready to talk.

And one day I was at home, and my wife was in the hospital. And it was a tough time—no money. I couldn't pay my bills and ... Anyway, there was a knock on the door, and there was a woman there having a book, a public something about the Bible. And she said the book is 50 cents. I didn't know what the book was. I –

Robert Buckley: Now, what year was this?

Joseph Kempler: This was in 1955. She died in '56. So I didn't know what the book was, but 50 cents hardbound book is like a bargain. You know, I couldn't resist books, and I got rid of her. I took the book at that time, put it on the shelf. The book was called *This Means Everlasting Life*, something like this. Well, two weeks later she's back, with a man. And so they wanted me to – wanted to talk to me. Says, "Can we talk to you?" So I invited them in. And they're telling me things and, apparently, it's a religion. So I said, "What religion do you represent?" And by that time, they knew I was Jewish, and their faces dropped.

[0:55:00] They hesitated, and they said, "We are Jehovah's Witnesses."

So I said: "Ah, Jehovah's Witnesses! I want to talk to you." I said: "Let me – fine. Tell me why is it?" I was talking about what I saw in the camp, and I said: "What makes you people like this? What's going on? What makes you people?" I said: "I never knew there were Witnesses in America. I thought it was a German religion of some type, so you are in America, too." And they pulled out the *Watchtower* showing there were hundreds of countries all over the world. Had no idea who they were or what was going on.

So, anyway, I finally understood better as to what made them tick. I said: "Well, this is wonderful to have a faith like this. I wish I had it. But, obviously, I can't have any faith like this. This is something unique."

So they said: "Well, yes, you can. You can develop a faith like this."

I said: "No way, no way. I have no room for God, for faith, for religion. It's rotten. I want no part of it."

But they left me some literature and they came – make a long story to short, they told me, they showed me a scripture, which made an impression on me, in the Bible. It says: “‘Come now, let us reason together,” says Jehovah.’

And I said: "No way. You can – faith is something you don't reason about. You accept it because you want to or because you can, but you cannot reason."

And they say, "Yes, you can."

I say, "Show me." And that's how it started. I began to study. They loaded me up with all kinds of information, literature about every question I wanted to find. They gave me the answer. And I found out, interestingly enough, that my Jewish background and knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures sort of tied in together. All the sudden, the whole thing made sense. Well, my first reaction was that if religion is right and God is there, then really I certainly should not become a Christian. As a Jew who was persecuted by Christians, I don't think I should become a Christian. I don't care who they are. So maybe I should become a better Jew. So I was struggling with this for awhile and finally realized that intellectually there was – this was the truth. I tried –

Robert Buckley: What these people were teaching?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah. They told me – I mean, first of all, they used incentive. They were talking about the Messiah that all the Jews wait for. They really proved to me that Jesus Christ was the Messiah – is the Messiah. He had to die. The Jews didn't believe that. The Jews believed that the Messiah would come to save them. They showed me from the Hebrew Scriptures that the Messiah had to die to pay the price and then comes back to fulfill the things that the Jews hope for, which is living on earth in paradise, and everlasting life, and no more war, and all the wonderful things. I began to understand why they were willing to suffer because by being loyal to God, they would be rewarded with something which is so far superior to anything else that any man can offer.

So I began to believe. My faith, though, which began to be quite strong after a short time, was an intellectual faith. In other words, I believed and I could prove it and I could document it. I used to read books to find fault with what the Witnesses teach. But every time I looked deeper into it, the Witnesses always turned out to be right and the Bible. I began to believe the Bible strongly. I was totally convinced in a short time, and I became a Witness in 1958.

Robert Buckley: By this time, your wife had died.

Joseph Kempler: My wife died in 1956, right.

Robert Buckley: How did you take her death now with this beginning of your Bible knowledge?

Joseph Kempler: Well, I remember I was beginning to study while she was still in the hospital. And I began to talk to her about resurrection, but she didn't hear it, but I began to believe that, that she's going to be resurrected. This is part of the belief of the Bible, of the resurrection, coming back to earth and having another chance and possibly living forever, even for people who once died. So, the religion of the Witnesses – I accepted Christianity, and I accepted everything they taught. But the principle on which the Witnesses operate is love—love of God and love of neighbor, love for each other. And this is one feeling, which was sort of foreign to me.

[1:00:00]

In other words, love was something that I knew I ought to have, but I couldn't feel it like other people did. Even my relationship with God was a little bit of a cautionary side because initially, for many years, I suffered from feelings of guilt, which I wasn't even aware of. The survival of my parents and so on, my – there was a guilt. I didn't feel right. I didn't feel – even though this was the truth, I did not see myself as being on the receiving end of all these blessings. I didn't deserve it.

And then I began to read that if you do all these things for the wrong motive, without love, it doesn't really count. There's a sense of 'I want to want to.' So this was a difficult thing, but I could live with it as long as I was doing what I was supposed to do. Whether I like it or not, I did it, and I enjoyed it without feeling the deep feelings that I admired in others I couldn't have myself.

And in 1963, I [re]married my present wife, who was a very strong Witness, a young girl. She was 23 at the time. I was 35—and very soon found out she was the all-American exuberant young girl full of hope, full of love, and found me strange. She could never figure it out, and I couldn't figure this emotional immaturity, this feeling of running away. There's all kinds of strange behaviors and all of this was puzzling her—made her very unhappy, very difficult. I told her many of my things. She was the only one who really understood many of the things in my past. But in the long-run she really – whether she understood or not, it didn't make her life any

happier. Being a Witness, she expected much more from me than I provided, so I was always pulling away.

Robert Buckley: In the way of emotional ...

Joseph Kempler: Emotional, only emotionally.

Robert Buckley: ... backing?

Joseph Kempler: Then the children came, first one then the other, yeah, and the children – oh, this is my ...

Robert Buckley: Yeah, would you want to hold it up?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah, two sons. I don't know if you can see that.

Robert Buckley: Back it up. Back it up a little bit. Yeah, right there.

Joseph Kempler: Okay, they are now 28 and 32—fine boys, both Witnesses, doing very well. But when the children were first born, I withdrew even more. There was a tremendous fear. See, the responsibility—I understood later—responsibility for my parents. I assumed responsibility for them in the forest, and then I run away from it. I couldn't cope with it, so I always felt as a failure whenever I tried to assume responsibility for somebody else's well-being, I'm going to – it triggered the old feelings. So when the children came and I was the father responsible for their well-being, I had a tremendously hard time with it. And my wife was the one who really had to bring them up, and I became very much like a zombie.

Robert Buckley: So could you draw close to your boys?

Joseph Kempler: Today? Well, I'm coming to that. That for many, many years while the boys were at home and they were teenagers, I could not help them at all. I was never a teenager. I could not identify with teenagers. I couldn't help them with everyday problems, with everyday life, and I run away. Very often I run away without knowing I was running away. I was here, but I wasn't here. I mean, the kids would call me and say, "Dad? Earth calling Dad." And there was very, very unpleasant terrible feeling, but I didn't know what to do about it. I made people unhappy, but I didn't know how to correct it. And it was only – I didn't make much progress. I mean, I was active. I was doing everything I could, and I was trying. But it did not come from the deep-down emotions. They were all blocked and destroyed. And only in the past two or three

years, three years ago maybe, I began to make some progress, and it gradually began to snowball. The progress is becoming better and better and better. I mean, the last few months is outstanding.

[1:05:00]

What has happened? I don't know. First of all, it takes many years before things loosen up that I began to face, to talk about it and even face things myself that I didn't want to face before. And then, the next thing became my trust in God, that he is on my side and he is my friend took awhile to develop. I'm really not the one who doesn't deserve life, but he understands. I mean, it took me – to most Witnesses, this is a matter of fact. They know the first day. To me, it took years to develop that.

Robert Buckley: Since 1958?

Joseph Kempler: Yeah, until now. And now it's every day there's new progress. And I feel that the progress is entirely through my faith. If it wouldn't be for my faith, there's no question in my mind I would've been dead by now, derelict or something with drugs, alcohol. I would have escaped to something. So the faith kept me going all these years even though I wasn't functioning yet. I was dysfunctional totally and now becoming a human being again.

As a matter of fact, my prayers were, first of all, that I become human and then become a man—not a man in the sense of a male, but a man as a, I mean, as a man who can authority, courage, standing, position, and then to be a father and a husband. Now, I've – the idea of human, which is maybe to most people would be hard to explain that the person who is intelligent enough would want to be human. What does it mean not to be human? But this has stuck with me. The Germans really convinced me that I was *Untermensch*, subhuman.

And the idea of a husband—the last thing that is coming—husband, I'm doing very much better. I'm happy with my wife. The children are finally coming around, but this is the last obstacle—to become closer to my children, who have been hurt. They never understood that.

Robert Buckley: So you're trying to build a relationship now that you couldn't have built prior?

Joseph Kempler: Right. At this point, the relationship is – I'm making the effort and they're sort of saying they are still suspicious. So they say, "Let me see how it works out." They're watching me to see whether – how real this is because the saw all this time that it wasn't real.

So I went through the – I went to the psychiatrist to try to help me and they, there's one psychiatrist—psychologist, rather—he told me that I'm so well-defended that I cannot be reached. My subconscious created a defense in me that the outside world cannot penetrate. Only I can break it down. Nobody can do it from the outside. And it's worked so well for me all my life that I don't want to let go of this. Then I become vulnerable. And I attended for some time group therapy with Jewish child survivors, very similar situation to mine, some worse than mine. But a very similar reaction so I realize I'm not unusual. This is a pattern.

But so I went, you know, according to psychiatry maybe seven levels below human in the camp, but I'm rising now to the level as a Witness, which most people today would consider to be about the usual in terms of faith, in terms of love, in terms of devotion, in terms of hope, in terms of living up to the standards and the principles enough to be affected by the modern world and its morality and so on and honesty. So I have gone up so much, and I can see the contrast today, but I'm still growing. I still consider myself – maybe I'm older than 14, but I don't dare to say that. So emotionally I'm growing, and the progress is being made, and I'm very, very happy for it. And I have to thank God and the Witnesses because without them I couldn't have made it. I could have survived and being emotionally dead because the intellect worked for me.

[1:10:00] So I could be successful in work and in business and whatever I do, but without having the emotions come into the picture. But there's no relationship with God or people or family without letting the emotions out. So I'm very happy to say it's working.

Robert Buckley: That's good to hear.

Joseph Kempler: I have retired a year ago. And, as a result, I have – when I was working, work was my whole life—no, not my whole life—but so much of my life that so much of my self-esteem came from it. Invariably, everybody who knew me said, "He's never going to retire." Well, I did. And since I retired, the work totally disappeared, doesn't even come into my consciousness anymore. I'm not involved in it. The things that I'm really concerned about is now is now ... I'm sorry. What do you have there? Oh, some pictures? We have to focus on them.

Robert Buckley: Hold it up close to you. I'd like you to show –

Joseph Kempler: Anyway but won't you have to zoom in on that? Then I'll focus on it as you zoom in.

Robert Buckley: Hold it up higher, please?

Joseph Kempler: Okay and then reset the focus. Here we are.

Robert Buckley: Now, you'll have to back it up. You've got to back it up.

Joseph Kempler: Okay. Now, this is my wife next to – that's a recent picture. And my wife is happy with me, and I'm happy with her. And she for the first time has a hope that there is something we can share together beyond the fun times. There is some depth to our relationship that she can feel comfortable and secure. I feel very bad for all the pain that I have caused. But by the same token, I also see that there's a future for me, not only in the new system, in the new world, where we'll all be perfect but even now.

And I know quite a few people, incidentally, I know quite a few people who are survivors who remain Jewish, and they're struggling with the idea. They're in much worse shape than I am. You see, the Jews who survived come into two groups, the majority that believe nothing because they believe God permitted this, they don't want God. That's the way I felt. And then there is another group, which became super-religious because they feel the reason why it happened because God punished them for not living up to his requirements, and they are trying to sort of appease God.

But neither one of these is satisfactory solution. So most Jews who are survivors are totally unhappy with any question of religion, that there's no future. And in many cases they have miserable life, which has affected now second and third generation. This holocaust idea sort of carries with them, and the children resort the guilt and discomfort, carries all the way. So I'm very fortunate that with my faith I – even though I caused unhappiness, I did not cause this type of trauma that these other children have or grandchildren.

Robert Buckley: We'd like to thank you, Mr. Kempler, for sharing your experience with the Holocaust Museum. We'd like to ask you a brief thought in connection with the museum. I know a few months ago, you went through it. What was your impression? Did you learn anything from the museum or what were your feelings?

Joseph Kempler: Well, that's interesting question. I spent about three days in the museum altogether. It was not enough, but the first time going through the permanent exhibit, I was there with my wife. And

everything there was familiar. It wasn't like going through a museum seeing something I hadn't seen before. I said this is the only place in the world which has the story of my life. So first of all, I felt all of this was just like a homecoming in a way. And many of the things that I had forgotten were right there: pictures and sounds and so on.

So I felt that this museum is my museum. I wasn't a guest visiting. The other people were coming to visit me in my museum. The second time I went through the permanent exhibit, I was concentrating on people and their reactions, so I was an observer. But even though many of the things there were very powerfully

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done, unfortunately, at that time it still didn't have as an emotional impact as I was looking for. I wanted to feel something beyond observing. But this emotional block of mine is still working. And now I look at these things, and I see pictures all the way from the early days in Poland all the way to the liberation in Landsberg. Everything is there, even people I knew, and the movies. So it was a very powerful experience, but I wish it touched me more than it had.

Robert Buckley:

How about your mother and father? You found out what happened to them?

Joseph Kempler:

Yeah, I found what happened to my mother. Yes, this is part of the archives. They helped me out to find out. I found many interesting things. I did quite a bit of work in the library. I'm still concentrating and trying to understand new developments in understanding the trauma, particularly this new research in adolescents. So I feel that there's still a lot I have to do. So at 67 I don't feel that I'm too old or life is over. I'm working very, very hard to reconstruct myself and make myself into a full human being. And it's very productive, and I'm setting up new goals, and life has assumed new meaning. Before I had none of that. Everything sort of dealing with immediate, right now. The past doesn't exist and the future doesn't exist. So this is a major job of reconstruction. And I think that the museum – I have to go there again. This is a question of there's so much more there. I went through – there's a whole library, a whole roomful of things which people send in which was never even classified yet. There's so much more there. So, I like to do this, and maybe one day I get to feel what really happened to me and make it behind me. That will be a great thing.

Robert Buckley: Well, we'd like to thank you, Mr. Kempler, once again for sharing your experience ...

Joseph Kempler: Thank you.

Robert Buckley: ... with the museum and we know the many people who are going to be observing your life story, and we know that it will be a teaching tool. We'd like thank you on behalf of the Holocaust Memorial Museum of Washington, DC.

Joseph Kempler: Well, thank you. You're very welcome. I'm glad I contributed.

[End of Recording]