

## Summary of Oral History: Joseph Kempler

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**This Summary was written by a USHMM Volunteer on [04/2022]**

**Joseph Kempler** Born on April 12, 1928 in Kraków, Poland. Father: Max Kempler. Mother: Malka Kempler (née Glassner). Half siblings: sister: Judy, born in 1911; brother: Abraham (called Dolek), born in 1917.

Joseph's family lived in Kazimierz, the Jewish part of Kraków. His father, Max, owned a bar/restaurant and Joseph's mother, Malka, worked in the restaurant's kitchen. Joseph was educated at a private Hebrew school. Joseph's brother was drafted into the Polish army around 1938. In summer 1939, many German Jewish refugees who were expelled from Germany began to arrive in Kraków. At this time, Joseph became aware of acts of religious persecution against Jews. As the war began and the German army marched into Kraków, people fled the city east toward Russia. Joseph witnessed a German soldier ridicule and humiliate a Jewish man by cutting off half of his beard. Arrests of Jewish intelligentsia and others began, and Jewish schools were closed. In December 1939, German soldiers went door-to-door in the Kazimierz area requiring Jews to hand over their valuables. Anyone on the street risked being shot. After the *blitzkrieg*, many people who had fled began to return to Kraków. At a parade in the Kraków market square, Joseph joined in saluting while the German national anthem was being played because he realised he was the only one not participating in the Heil Hitler salute.

By January 1940, Jews were required to wear a Star of David armband. Those under 12 were not required to wear the armband, so Joseph could go into places signposted "Jews and dogs not allowed" and shops for Germans and *Volksdeuche* (Poles of German ancestry) because he did not look Jewish. By then, most Jewish businesses and apartments had been confiscated. In March 1941, a ghetto was opened for Jews who had useful skills. None of the Kempler family was deemed to have those useful skills, so six members of the family had to move 20 miles away from Kraków to the village of Nieznanowice. There they rented a tiny room without electricity or running water. Joseph's brother eventually returned from war and became an expert tailor. Joseph's sister, Judy, had married, and she and her husband settled in Tarnów, 50 miles from Kraków, along with her in-laws who had been expelled from Germany. Communication with an uncle still living in Kraków stopped, and the Kemplers later discovered that he had been arrested.

In April 1942, men between the ages of 17 and 45 were required to report to the authorities. As a result, Joseph's brother and uncle were taken to Rakowice labor camp. In June, the war with Russia started. The Kemplers had heard that Jews were being taken away in cattle cars and that others had been shot. In August, when Joseph was 14, the Kemplers and other Jewish families were told that they had a week to pack up their belongings and report to Bochnia, a town eight miles away, for resettlement. Joseph's sister warned them in a coded letter that they should not go.

A Polish policeman assigned to watch the Kemplers offered to help the family. The following day, Joseph's mother dressed up and went to the policeman's home alone. Though Joseph never knew for certain, he always thought that his mother must have given a sexual favour to pay for the policeman's help, and he felt betrayed by her. The following day, the policeman did not return to the Kempler's home, so the family were able to flee to the forest where they hid for several days. Joseph felt it was a heavy burden for him to lead his family through the woods. They had heard that other Jewish families

who had also fled to the forest were shot by the police when they were discovered. Joseph felt that there were too many of them hiding together, so decided to save himself and go to Kraków. He left his family without saying goodbye. He went to a road in the village where Polish people could wave down German trucks for lifts. Joseph was recognized by a villager and just as the villager was about to report him to the police, a German truck came along and picked him and others up. As the truck passed through the village of Wieliczka, Joseph could see long lines of Jews being rounded up. After arriving in Kraków, Joseph went to the building where he and his family formerly lived and spent the night hiding in the attic. The following day, Joseph joined a library to get an identification card. He said his name was Kemper which sounded less Jewish, and he wore a Virgin Mary charm necklace. Joseph spent his time reading and going to the cinema. He did not think about his family.

In 1942, Jews living in Kraków ghetto were allowed to leave the ghetto for work and then return at night. Joseph managed to sneak into the ghetto and joined a group of Jews who worked near the labor camp where his brother, Dolek, and his uncle were. When he got to Rakowice, Joseph asked permission to be admitted into the camp so that he could be near his brother and uncle. Dolek worked as a tailor while Joseph was assigned to work in construction. Joseph and Dolek found out that their parents had settled in the Jewish ghetto in Bochnia. By this time, Joseph was religiously neutral, although he had been serious about his faith while growing up.

In December, prisoners were permitted to travel back to their home towns to get warm winter clothing. Joseph, Dolek, and their uncle travelled to their former home in Nieznanowice. They were briefly detained when local villagers reported them to the police. Upon release, they retrieved warm clothes, visited their family in Bochnia, and returned to Rakowice. In April 1943, Joseph again visited his parents. On that occasion, Joseph refused his parents' request that he stay in Bochnia with them. Joseph later found out that shortly after visiting his parents the ghetto was emptied; some of the Jews had been shot and others had been sent to Auschwitz.

In 1943, the SS relocated all but 20 people, including Dolek, from the camp at Rakowice to Płaszów concentration camp. Joseph was 15 years old when he arrived at Płaszów. He and other new arrivals were ordered by Commandant Goeth to assemble at the *appellplatz* to witness a public hanging. Jewish police commanders in the camp had positions of power in the camp hierarchy including the task of selecting Jewish prisoners for execution. SS guard Strojewski would make prisoners undress and kneel in front of him before he shot them at the back of the neck. Twice, Joseph escaped execution although he had been in groups of prisoners selected for execution. Once, when a prisoner escaped from Joseph's work group, the others from the work group were ordered to go outside to be hanged. Joseph stayed behind and hid in a bunk. He later found out that his work group was spared when the Jewish head of the police, Chilowicz, persuaded Goeth to shoot other prisoners who were not suitable for work instead of Joseph's work group. Over 200 men were killed on that occasion.

Joseph felt he was emotionally desensitised even when shocking things happened in the camp. He felt detached, like an observer, and felt that he was becoming dehumanised. Joseph even became convinced that the Germans were superior and prisoners in the camps were subhuman. He had by then erased any religious feelings from his mind.

When the camp at Rakowice was closed, Dolek was also sent to Płaszów. In April 1944, 150 prisoners, including Joseph, were sent out for three months to Zakopane to work on the construction of a hydro-electric plant. They were assigned to remove rocks while standing in freezing water.

Because the Germans supervising the work thought the plant would never be completed, they felt as though they had been given a two-month “vacation”. In July 1944, they all returned to Płaszów camp.

In August 1944, as the Russians approached, prisoners were moved west, and Joseph and Dolek boarded a cattle car heading to Auschwitz. Cattle cars with a capacity of 70 to 90 people were filled with 140 persons, so no one could sit or lay down, and there was no toilet. The heat in the overcrowded, sealed cars caused some to collapse and die even before the journey began. At that time, many Hungarian Jews were being sent to Auschwitz, so the cattle car Joseph and Dolek were in was sent to Mauthausen instead. On arrival at Mauthausen, the prisoners were marched to the camp, where they then had to wait outside in the open for two days before entering. Prisoners were taken to the shower rooms not knowing if they were actually showers or gas chambers. Joseph was given the prisoner number 87719, which was sewn onto his uniform.

The barracks were filled to five or six times their capacity. The prisoners were squeezed on the floors of the barracks, like sardines, in unbearable conditions. After Dolek was moved to another barrack in the main camp, Joseph never saw his brother again. Mauthausen was a Class 3 *Vernichtungslager* (extermination camp). Joseph found out that the German *kapos* were looking for young boys for homosexual activity. Joseph’s work group was assigned to work barefoot in the granite stone quarry. Prisoners had to carry heavy stones on their backs, walk up 186 steps out of the quarry, and then walk for another two miles. If anyone dropped their stone, they would be beaten to death or killed by being pushed over a ledge into the quarry.

In September 1944, Joseph was sent to Melk labor camp, which was built underground. There, Joseph noticed a restricted barrack surrounded by barbed wire. He was told that it held Jehovah’s Witnesses, who were kept isolated to prevent them from speaking to other prisoners about their faith. He had not previously heard of Jehovah’s Witnesses. It was hard for him to believe that they were German citizens who refused to say *Heil Hitler* or join the German army and that they could be released if they signed a document renouncing their faith. By comparison, he knew that there were prisoners who would kill their own father for a piece of bread. Many of the Witnesses had been in the labor camp since the 1930’s, so they had good positions like gardeners, nannies, and barbers. Joseph didn’t know anything about their religion, but he admired them because he observed that they helped one another and that they were being punished because of their stand against Hitler.

Joseph felt that primitive, basic instincts helped him survive the camps. For example, because his shoes were worn out, he had to wrap them with cement sacks and wire. However, he noticed a Hungarian prisoner who had recently come out of the hospital barrack with new shoes. Most prisoners would stay away from men released from the hospital since they were often weak. The prisoners were required to walk in groups of five with locked arms, and if one prisoner collapsed, the others would have to support him. Nonetheless, Joseph befriended this prisoner, waiting for an opportunity to take his shoes. Joseph said this was normal, accepted behaviour in the camps and the only way to survive. Joseph said that only Jehovah’s Witnesses did not behave in this way.

So many people died in the Melk labor camp that the sight of dead bodies no longer made any impression on Joseph. He stopped believing in God because he felt it was inconceivable for God to permit all that went on. At first, he felt disappointment, then anger, and later, he had no feeling at all about God. This was the general attitude of prisoners in the camp. Joseph could not understand why Jehovah’s Witnesses kept their faith under these circumstances. After being in Mauthausen and Melk,

Joseph felt more like an unthinking animal without a conscience that was only interested in survival, than like a human.

On April 12, 1945 Joseph turned 17. Because a prisoner had escaped, the other prisoners were punished by having to stand outside for 24 hours in the cold without food, drink, moving, or using the bathroom. On April 13, the prisoners were marched to Ebensee where they showered and then were made to stand outside in the cold—naked and wet—all night. In Ebensee, Joseph saw people suffering the various stages of starvation.

By May 1945, many of the Germans had abandoned the camp. Commander Gans announced that the Americans were approaching. Dead bodies were stacked like firewood out in the open because so many prisoners had died in the harsh conditions and the crematorium could not keep up. Russian prisoners of war in the camp would cut flesh from the dead bodies to sell or trade. When the Americans liberated the camp, Joseph was too weak from starvation to move. The Americans found stocks of food in the town and made a soup to feed the prisoners. Due to their starved condition, some prisoners died while eating, and others died shortly afterwards. A picture at the USHMM showing the liberation of Ebensee shows a group of prisoners without pants. Joseph explained that because so many suffered from diarrhea, they could no longer wear their soiled pants. When the camp was liberated, Joseph was a *muselmann*; a living skeleton weighing less than 60 pounds. He had nowhere to go, but he refused to go to the Red Cross hospital. In his camp experience, going to the hospital usually meant death. Joseph struggled to get help and finally got to a displaced-persons' camp in Linz, Austria. His sister found him there and took him back with her to a displaced-persons' camp in Landsberg, Germany. There, Joseph studied radio technique at a school run by the Organization for Rehabilitation and Training (ORT).

The American authorities asked if Joseph could identify any SS guards from Mauthausen and other camps. He was able to identify two guards so was summoned to Dachau to give a statement. While there, Joseph became friendly with two German men who were Jehovah's Witnesses. One told Joseph that he had been hung from a pole by his hands to break his faith. He said that he would not testify against the SS guard who had tortured him because he felt "vengeance belongs to Jehovah." Although Joseph was very impressed with the Witnesses, he did not understand their faith, because he no longer believed in God after his experiences in the camps.

Joseph's sister, Judy, and her husband emigrated to America. They were hidden for over two years by a Polish family in Tarnów, thus surviving the war. Judy said that the father was a Bible Student who always talked about the Bible. In November 1947, Joseph also emigrated and stayed with his sister, who lived with a Jewish family in Brooklyn, New York. Joseph worked at Fisher Radio and later a venetian blind company.

In 1953, Joseph married a German Jewish girl who had been evacuated to Coventry, England, during the war. They had a daughter in 1955. When Joseph's wife was in the hospital, suffering with Hodgkin's disease, he bought the book entitled *This Means Everlasting Life* from a woman who came to his door. Joseph thought that Jehovah's Witnesses were a German religion so was surprised to learn that the woman was a Witness. When she returned, Joseph explained to her what he had experienced in the camps. Joseph began to study the Bible with the Witnesses although he resisted the idea that he could make room for God, faith, or religion in his life. Joseph shared his newfound belief in the resurrection and everlasting life his wife while she was in the hospital. She died in 1956, and their daughter was later adopted by Joseph's sister.

Joseph's Jewish background and knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures helped him to understand the Bible, but having been persecuted by Christians during the war, Joseph at first thought he should not become a Christian himself. He later understood why Witnesses were willing to suffer in the camps, and Joseph became one of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1958. He felt his faith was mainly an intellectual one because he found it very difficult to feel love for God and neighbour, although he knew this was a principle the Witnesses live by. Joseph said that to survive the extreme trials during the war, he had to shut down emotionally. Although he felt he was intellectually advanced, emotionally he was a 14-year-old, the age he was when he first went to the labor camp at Rakowice. Joseph felt this had affected his marriages and that love only meant suffering and death.

In 1963, Joseph married a 23-year-old American woman who was one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Joseph and his wife had two sons, but his emotional immaturity caused difficulties in their marriage. Due to his experiences with his family in Poland, the idea of assuming responsibility for his wife and children triggered fear in Joseph. When his sons were teenagers, Joseph could not identify with or help them because he had never experienced being a normal teenager. Joseph could speak freely about his wartime experiences only with other survivors since most other people could not understand.

Joseph knew that he made people around him unhappy, but he did not know how to unlock his emotions. It was many years before Joseph could speak freely about his wartime experiences. Slowly, his trust in God and the belief that God understands his feelings grew. For many years, Joseph felt totally dysfunctional, convinced he was *untermensch* (subhuman). He prayed to God that he could become first, a human, and then, a man, a husband, and a father able to care for his family. Joseph still feels that he is making progress every day through his faith and that without his faith he might have died of alcohol or drug abuse.

Joseph said his psychologist told him that he had an impenetrable defense mechanism that he would not let go of. He attended group therapy for Jewish-children survivors with similar experiences to his own. Through his faith as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, Joseph feels he has risen from being "seven levels below human" to having faith, love, and hope. This makes him very happy. Joseph is thankful to God and Jehovah's Witnesses and feels that without them he would still be emotionally dead.

Joseph shows photos of his wife and says that they are now happy but feels sorry for the pain he caused his wife and children in the past. Joseph knows many Jewish survivors who blame God for their suffering. Some no longer believe in God, and others become super religious because they feel that they were being punished for not having lived up to God's requirements.

Visiting the USHMM felt like a homecoming to Joseph; like it was his museum and that the other visitors to the museum were guests coming to visit him. Joseph spent three days going through the exhibits. In the archives of the USHMM, Joseph finally found out what happened to his mother. He wants to continue to go through more of the archives in order to make sense of the past and finally put it behind him.

### **Keywords and Subjects:**

#### **Topical Term**

Declaration of renunciation

Goeth, Amon Leopold, 1908-1946

Jehovah's Witnesses

Muselmann  
Conscientious objector  
Holocaust survivors

**Geographic Name**

Auschwitz (Concentration camp) [Oswiecim (Poland)]  
Dachau (Concentration camp) (Germany)  
Ebensee (Concentration camp) (Austria)  
Mauthausen (Concentration camp) [Upper Austria (Austria)]  
Melk (Concentration camp) [Upper Austria (Austria)]  
Płaszów (Concentration camp) (Poland)  
Rakowice (Poland)  
Bochnia Ghetto (Poland)  
Kazimierz Ghetto (Kraków, Poland)  
Zakopane (Poland)