

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Kurt Klein
October 11, 1990
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Kurt Klein, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on October 11, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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KURT KLEIN

October 11, 1990

Q: Would you tell me...tell me your name please?

A: Uh my name is Kurt Klein. I was born on July 2, 1920 in a town called Waldorf, which is very close to Heidelberg, in Germany.

Q: Tell me about uh your parents and your family.

A: Well uh I grew up in the post-World War I era and, of course, those were really difficult times and my parents were struggling to get along during this uh economic chaos that existed during those times. You may remember uh there there was this very serious inflation. I mean it was ludicrous in a sense uh such as has never been seen before -- or since, I believe -- and that made it very difficult to to uh carry on anything at all. My father had a business that was made extremely difficult uh because of uh the economic conditions that existed after World War I. He was a broker for hops and tobacco and grain that he would buy from the farmers in the town that we lived in and uh and he and my mother helped him uh all she could and of of course they they along with so many others were just struggling to to exist in those days. But still you might you might say that I grew up in a middle class uh family and uh of course after going to elementary school in in this town, uh it was expected that I I would go to to a high school in Heidelberg. Uh really it was the called the Oberrealschule which was then perhaps on a somewhat higher level than high school, but uh uh those were, of course, already quite uh eventful times and I I grew up amid all this chaos of the different parties of of Weimar Republic fighting each other and uh from my earliest childhood on uh saw the formation of the Nazi Party and how they gradually gained strength and uh uh there were...early on there were perhaps times when one didn't uh take them all that seriously but it soon became apparent that they were a force to be reckoned with...

Q: Kurt, what is that...in your life, uh tell me tell me about how this affected you.

A: Well, uh it affected me in in the sense that uh later on especially uh when when people uh were won over by the Nazis, they they no longer uh were our friends or or or neighbors as as we had been used to it. And uh it also represented an an ominous threat because uh from early on, Hitler and all the others uh made it quite clear how they felt about the Jews and what they would be doing uh to to the Jews, but uh it it also uh meant that uh sometimes...you you would see all these slogans on the walls uh direct...many of them directed against Jews and uh so you you had a feeling even earlier on that you were truly being singled out. Uh uh you hardly knew for what reason, but uh but you knew that that all all this propaganda was directed against you. And it uh it it made it difficult at times to to carry on because you you uh you obviously...in my father's case uh I don't know the details, but uh you couldn't do business with people who felt that way. Nevertheless uh things were still more or less alright uh un...until Hitler actually came to power but I I could see that the Nazi Party was uh gaining strength and so could the others but uh uh actually nobody

believed that they were capable of doing the things which in fact uh it turned they they later did.

Q: Did you lose friends because of this atmosphere?

A: Uh once Hitler was in power...I don't remember losing any earlier, but once Hitler was in power uh uh it it...uh there was a gradual alienation from from the rest of of my schoolmates. Uh some of them were better than others but many of them initially apologized for some of the things that Hitler said he was going to do uh assuring us that he, of course, didn't mean people like us, my parents or our friends. And then gradually you could almost see the direct relation of their indoctrination in the Hitler Youth, let's say, uh of how much more hostile they became until in the end they stopped talking altogether or they might perhaps uh taunt you. Even then uh it was well-known that there were concentration camps and they would say things to the effect that uh if you people behave, you might be alright but uh but uh if you don't watch out, you might all wind up in concentration camps. And after which they uh of course didn't...I mean long before then they they had stopped to associate with you. At first uh uh these people had been in my house uh constantly and I had been in their homes and they had eaten in our home and I ate in theirs, and uh uh there there was really no difference. I grew up uh considering myself a part of that scene, never thinking that I was going to be singled out for something like this, and uh I I I saw the gradual evolution of of how all this changed. Uh uh it was bewildering to someone growing up uh amid the turmoil of that of that period.

Q: Tell us what was high school...what uh...tell me about those early years. What kinds of things did you do as a ...?

A: Well, I actually I did all the things that uh any young man does or likes. Uh uh I I I engaged in sports uh just as the others did, and I liked soccer. Uh I I liked books quite a bit and that helped me later also when when I was sort of shut off from the outside world, but even early on I I I liked books and uh I belonged to a uh organization of uh young uh Jewish young people. We we went on on hikes very often. Uh went mountain climbing, swimming, skiing. Uh we did all the things uh that young people are apt to do and uh I liked movies a great deal. Also American movies in those days were quite popular and uh uh I read books also by a also by American authors. Uh I I remember such things as Jack London, uh and many oth...Mark Twain, of course. Huck Finn...I I did all those things and uh so in that sense I I I had a normal uh upbringing uh and then later on when uh all the other boys turned away from me uh and there were very few Jewish friends in the town that I lived in...there were uh there was no...nobody exactly my age but there were some other boys close to me, but no more than two or three. Uh the rest of my Jewish friends I found in in Heidelberg uh which was, of course, large enough to have a larger Jewish uh con...uh population, and uh that to some extent made up uh for my not being able to associate with anybody in the town in which I lived and I have some very fond memories of, for instance, of this organization that I mentioned, of going off into the mountains and going hiking, sometimes for uh a few day trips, uh staying in youth hostels overnight and uh those were all things that that sort of made

my my formative years quite interesting and and and to some extent enjoyable. And that went on even after the Nazis came to power, but uh it it stopped when I was approximately uh fourteen. At that point uh my father uh was no longer able to to send me to high school which had which required tuition and so it it was thought best that...uh for Jewish young people at the time it was quite common to to to learn a trade and uh so I uh I thought about what I would like to be and uh since I had always liked books I I chose printing as as my vocation and I I did in fact uh get a job in in printing in the town where I lived. In fact, it was on the same street where I lived and this man was quite willing to take me on and I worked there for a number of months and then the authorities uh heard about it and made it impossible for him to keep me on, so then I I I had to stop that and I later on uh worked uh for a Jewish firm. It was...that was still in existence at that time uh which was a uh tobacco factory where where they actually made cigars uh and I I found some sort of a job uh un...until the time uh that I uh in fact left Germany, but it was becoming more and more evident that uh that uh Jews should leave if uh anybody at all would have them, and not very many countries would have them. It it wasn't quite that easy but especially young people uh...it was suggested for young people to to leave because there there was obviously no future for them in in Germany. And so uh we too uh came to that conclusion, that I...and since we had some relatives uh in the States that that seemed to be the the natural place to go. Uh the...I was fortunate and now in retrospect I know that that uh must have saved my life. Uh my sister who was older than I uh was then in nurses' training uh in Germany, but uh she also decided, of course, that it was time to leave and as someone vouched for her on this end and and so she came here a year ahead of me and had she not been here, I I would not have gotten out, because she was able to go after people and and and ask them for for the necessary papers that one needed in those days, an affidavit of support, and uh so she she did that for me and so that by 1937 uh I was able to to leave also and come to Buffalo where at that time my sister lived and uh uh and so did uh various other relatives, among them an uncle and an aunt and their daughter in whose house I I then stayed the first few years uh when I came to Buffalo. Uh I also uh uh was able after a couple of weeks to to find a job in printing again so that I could continue that uh that training and uh that is in fact what what I made my career. Uh there were, of course...when I was still in Germany, you you could see the uh the gradual more and more repressive measures that were being directed at at Jews. Uh the the thing that I remember so well is uh being in school and uh having uh having to attend...it was mandatory attendance at at uh these propaganda films that uh Leni Riefenstahl did in those days, Triumph of the World being one them, and I I I still remember them vividly because uh I could see at first hand how the films like that affected especially the young and how uh how they swung them over to unquestioned obedience to to the Nazi cause. And uh but but everybody was affected by them...the the the older people too, and you could see that the more uh that they...this propaganda worked on them, the the the more they believed it.

Q: We're going to have pause a moment...

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION - PAUSE

A: Well, I remember uh uh attending such films or listening uh to the speeches on the radio and I was a teenager then and and wondering that uh how did I ever get into this position. I I personally don't know any any such people as they describe, and uh I uh how how is this possible and uh how is it possible to have all this venom directed at you when in fact you you haven't done a thing and and you've just lived a a peaceful life and my parents were simply uh law-abiding citizens who who were struggling to get along in in a very difficult economy. And uh and that, of course, was very, very puzzling to me. Uh but the the point I was trying to make was that the the Nazis knew like almost no one else how to use the power of the media to to sway people's opinions. Uh you know, radio had come into its own during my early childhood and and they used that for propoganda purposes as no one else had had before or since. And uh that's how they were able to uh to to sway people and and get them to do the things they did.

Q: OK. Let's move forward now. You had been talking about you in Buffalo. Uh...

A: Right. Well, in Buffalo I uh I was in printing and uh uh I I gradually uh improved myself a little. I found some other jobs in printing and uh I uh in the...of course at that point we...from then on uh both my sister and I uh were trying to to make it possible for our parents to follow us. Uh I should mention that I also had an older brother who came uh to the States about a year after I did, uh although he uh initially settled down in uh...I forget the exact sequence...uh first in New York, then in Boston, then back in New York again I believe is is how it was. Uh and uh we, of course, tried very hard to get our our parents uh to follow us, but uh those were difficult times here also and uh it was not easy to get the necessary papers uh for my parents. At least it was difficult to convince anybody that there was any immediate urgency about getting them out and the answer usually was, yes, in due time uh after you have established yourselves uh you you will see them also follow you, and so while we continuously worked on it, uh really nothing that much happened uh and until uh really until 19...November '38 when when Kristallnacht came. And uh then people began to take some notice. Uh and and, of course, there was absolute panic in among the Jews in Germany about getting out. Uh unfortunately uh my parents hesitated a little too long about registering at the American Consulate in in in Stuttgart and so they got a very...they had a system of of priority numbers in those days and so they got a very high uh number which uh made it impossible for them to uh to contemplate leaving immediately. Uh uh there there many attempts that we made at the time uh to have them leave on the basis that we the children were asking for them but as we eventually found out, you needed to be a citizen in order for for I believe it was called Form 575, or something like that...uh which meant that some people were allowed in outside the quota, but basically uh they had they had to adhere to the quota system and and the high priority numbers which, of course, everybody wanted to get out at the time. So uh this went on and on and uh but in each letter I uh I...it it so happens that I uh have every letter that my parents ever wrote to me uh during that period, from the time I I I left uh left them and uh each letter would uh would be full of some news of more repressive measures that uh that were taking place, so that before Kristallnacht, for example, uh they had written to us that now they had been forced to...my father had been forced to sell his business and the the Nazis had effectively throttled Jewish businesses anyway and uh had uh

through their boycott pointed out to the uh German population that they ought not to buy from Jews or associate with them, and and those measures were, of course, felt uh in in pretty short order so that there came a point when my father was forced to sell his business and uh a very short time later also the house that they were in uh because they simply couldn't keep that up. Uh and after...they had already made the arrangements for selling the house, but the man who bought it was not going to move in uh until the following spring because he was going to do some renovating, and so it became an agonizing decision for them to...uh should they stay in that house throughout the winter, largely without heat or other or income, or should they avail themselves of whatever was was uh offered to them in a very run-down, dilapidated part of the town, also uh and should they take while that was...while the taking was still good and uh uh this is what they were agonizing over at the point when when Kristallnacht happened. After that they were under orders to move and and all these decisions were were taken from their hands and uh as it wound up, they they moved in with another uh acquaintance, a Jewish lady who...in fact the uh wife of the owner of the of that cigar factory uh for which uh I had worked and and and where my father had subsequently worked for a little bit uh in in the office when he could no longer have his own business. Uh they they...she had an old house somewhere in another part of the town and they were ordered to move to uh what was really above a stable...uh what had been a stable...it was not then anymore, and in in just one room of uh...of course, uh during Kristallnacht uh we were to find out that some of the uh some of my schoolmates...uh one in particular...had become the leader of of the of this gang of hoodlums who had invaded my parents house and and lined them up against a wall and proceeded to smash all all their furniture and everything they could lay their hands on. And uh they they took my father with them that night and he had to spend some time uh in in the local jail but was released a few days later, probably because of his age and uh uh but...that was by far the the better part of what happened on Kristallnacht because uh most men were simply sent to concentration camps, but what I was going to say about uh the gang that that invaded my parents' house...uh this is uh this then a boy who had been in and out of our home and had eaten at our table and and he led this gang in in really making threats towards these elderly people, uh defenseless people, and uh and and treated them in the in the most abombnibal manner and vandalized the whole place.

Q: And you were hearing all of this as it were through the letters your received?

A: Yes. Well, some of it was only through veiled references that uh my parents were able to make, but uh we uh we could usually...we learned to read between the lines and we we knew what they meant when when they made references. For instance, uh they let us know that their furniture had been smashed because I still remember my my mother's uh used the phrase that they now were possessors of mini-furniture and uh all this was actually confirmed to us by uh an uncle of mine who was fortunate enough to leave after those times and because he had a a daughter in England and a very influential son-in-law who got them out and they eventually wound up also coming to Buffalo where I lived and where they had a son uh so they were able to fill me in on some of the details of what happened.

Q: What did you...uh what did you do now? This is is after Kristallnacht...uh tell us about you very briefly so that we can move into the war experience for you.

A: Well uh I I should, however, also uh mention that you know we kept on trying by every means to to get them out, but at at at every turn something else happened and uh and the next thing that that happened was was in 1940 when in uh in the fall of 1940 we received a letter from a relative in Switzerland who informed us that...he said you will, of course, have read the reports in in the newspapers of what has happened to your parents along with uh all the Jews of the province of Baden and the Palatinate and that namely that at the whim of the local authorities, they were told within twenty minutes to two hours to pack up a few things and uh and take along with them and they were in fact deported to the south of France. Uh what...to what was then the unoccupied zone of France uh to a to a camp that had at one time served as a refugee camp for the civil war refugees that came from Spain, because it was near the Pyrenees and and the Spanish border and uh they were they were simply dumped there with with without blankets, with...without adequate, with without anything and and and uh the Germans told the French to take over and uh so we we...of course, it took a long time until we then established some direct contact with uh my parents because they uh at first they couldn't write and when they did write it it took...that...those things took weeks and weeks in those days. Uh and uh also because the there was already a war going on in Europe uh by that time, of course. Uh that in '39, of course, added to our complications. When the war started, we again were set back incredibly far back as far as as trying to help them to get out of there because normal escape routes were out of the question and you you could only find uh certain ones and and that only if you had quite a bit of money uh either to bribe officials or and and just for the passage and and everything else. Uh but at any rate, uh being in the unoccupied zone of of uh of France was uh at the same time...they were, of course, segregated. They were not allowed to live together there. Men were in a different camp than than women, but they were usually once a week allowed to to visit each other and and, of course, we got their letters then and we wrote to them. We were able to do that, and uh uh this is uh quite a record of what went on in in those camps, but where...whereas it it was, of course, a catastrophe that this had happened to them, at the same time it still uh made it possible for them to perhaps get out uh easier uh than if they had remained in Germany because they they could go to the American consulate in Marseilles. If they were summoned by the by the consul, they were allowed out of these camps uh to to take care of this matter, but somehow or other there there was always a flaw and always a new complication that...and this went on I mean in an absolutely half-assed way. At at every corner there was an...another obstacle and we we had booked passage for them many times and they had to let those terms expire because their papers weren't ready and and so it and and then they were moved. My father was was sent to another camp, closer to Marseilles and uh and so so it went on and on. Uh uh they could in fact with the right papers have left by way of Spain and Portugal. We had a Portuguese ship, the passage for them on on several times and each time something...uh they could never get clearance on time. And uh this this went on, on and on. In the meantime uh I uh...by the...this was now running into 1942 and uh by the summer of uh '42 uh actually perhaps five, six weeks later, one one of my letters was returned from there...uh address un...unknown. Left no forwarding address. And as we found out through a

tracing bureau after the war uh they were in fact deported to to Auschwitz, along with all the thousands and thousands who were there. Uh this also uh this time was the time when I was inducted in the Army. Uh so that uh uh it it it all happened together and I I recently found a notice for from the State Department uh that reached us in November of '42, a time when I was already in the Army, that said that they were now pleased to let us know that that our parents had gotten clearance. This was three months after they had been deported to Auschwitz. But at any rate uh I I was inducted in the Army and uh to me it was a great relief and also perhaps a source of pride that I was able to finally uh do something about this. Here we had been literally paralyzed for years, always at the uh whim of the uh of whatever authorities were in charge and uh and now I was finally able to to to fight this this big ev...evil. And uh I I was in the Army and uh actually never finished basic training before they found out that I had a language capability and in those days of course they were looking for for German-speaking personnel and German-speaking personnel that uh no doubt they could trust. Uh so that uh I was pulled out of the uh away from the unit that I had been assigned to in those days and sent to a military intelligence uh training center in Maryland in fact uh which uh in which we uh were assigned to these uh different jobs of either prisoner of war interrogation or or some military government or some other, some other activities and I wound up with a unit that uh was charged with prisoner of war interrogation and uh we uh first went on maneuvers and this was now '42. Uh no...this was '43, and uh later uh by the end of that summer I...we were sent overseas, first to England and then I spent uh nine months in northern Ireland where I was assigned to the unit that I I went through the actual battles with, namely the 5th U.S. Infantry Division, and uh as such was attached to a regiment and uh my job was, of course, to to uh interrogate prisoners for whatever tactical information they could give and that's what I did. Uh I uh I went through the various campaigns. I uh I went through Normandy uh not too much after D-Day and uh went through the various campaigns and also in in Luxembourg and uh later on in in Germany and first in the north in the Ruhr area and then another time more in the south, but at one point we were called...we were...I belonged to Patton's 3rd Army and uh we had to uh we wound up in in Czechoslovakia. This was now toward the end of the war and uh uh...(cough)...we were uh in a in a town called Elernordheim (ph). Uh from there uh...this these were the the final stages of the war, that it was becoming quite obvious that it would soon be over, but uh reports reached us that uh the town a few miles away from there was ready to surrender because there were uh flying white flags uh from from their houses and uh so it became my job, along with uh a very small medical detachment and and the military government uh detachment, uh to go to that town and take take the surrender. It was my job to uh uh see if there were still any any Germans uh soldiers, prisoners...I mean soldiers there and uh we we went to that town, just about three jeeps, on the evening of May 6th uh and the uh military government uh colonel took care of the civilian surrender with the with the mayor of the town uh whereas I went about my business looking for for Germans and I only found a few in a uh in a German field hospital. They had converted a school house into into a hospital, and I I I found a few of them and made arrangements, made some mental notes what to do with them the following day. We were not in any position to do anything right then and there. Uh but uh we uh...it was late in the day and we uh the war was still going on. We still have received some shelling even on the way to the town. Uh but so we decided to go back

to our unit about uh six, eight miles away from there, and it was getting dark, so when we got back uh I compared notes with the uh military government colonel and he told me that in fact they uh had come across a group of about a hundred twenty uh Jewish girls who had been uh dumped into an abandoned factory by their SS guards, and that we would uh see what could be done the following morning. Uh and that was the first inkling I had of of that particular incident. Uh the following morning I went back with a greatly uh augmented group of people. Uh the medics were there in in great numbers and and again with the military government colonel also and uh I uh I drove into that factory and uh and I saw this courtyard and the and there were some what I I can only describe them as as living skeletons walking around, going about certain chores such as getting water uh in the courtyard and over in a doorway I I saw another young woman sort of leaning against the doorway and and she seemed to be in slightly better condition than than the rest that I had just seen and I walked over to her and addressed her in I think both in English and in German, and uh because I assumed of course that she spoke German uh and uh which she confirmed, and I uh I wanted to see, of course, where the rest of of her companions were, and I asked her about them and she just motioned me in and I...uh we went inside and uh that was of course a scene of devastation that nobody who has ever seen it will will ever forget. Uh I mean these girls, young women, mostly were were lying on scraps of straw that they had found..in in various stages of disease or close to death and uh uh I mean...it it was just simply something that uh that one couldn't believe, that anybody would permit that, and the the young woman I had seen there uh did a most remarkable thing uh that that really uh I mean it it just uh shattered me. When we came into this large room where where all these women were were lying, she pointed at them and then quoted some lines from a from a well-known German poem by Goethe called "The Divine," and the words are...freely translated mean something like, "noble be man..." she made a gesture, "...helpful and good." And that really simply devastated me. And I started to to talk to some of them, and uh one of them addressed me in English and uh when I tried to reassure her that now she was alright, she she went like this and said no, it's too late, too late. And in fact I heard later that she did die only hours later. Uh of course, our unit made immediate arrangements to uh to take care of of of these girls and uh we evacuated the hospital of whatever Germans were still in it and we we took them to the hospital and uh where they came under the care and supervision of uh of our American doctors. Uh I should mention perhaps that this girl I met first and who was my guide is, has been my wife for forty-four years and that we have eight grandchildren, three children and and eight grandchildren. But uh this was still May 7th and that was just when the war was coming to an end and uh I uh I mean I was totally shaken by this experience but I but I had to go back to my unit because now uh all these German troops were uh surrendering en masse uh uh and I really had my hands full for for a few days. Uh when I was able to get back to the hospital a few days later uh I, of course, wanted to...I saw all the girls but I wanted to see this girl in particular and I found that she had in fact also collapsed on admittance to the hospital and that she was listed in critical condition and uh at one point during that time the doctors wanted to amputate her legs but uh she wouldn't let them and fortunately uh she was right. Uh despite the fact that she was that ill uh we carried on quite a quite a lively conversation and uh uh she...when I was ready to leave she gave me a few sheets of paper and they happened to be some thoughts that uh she had expressed on

liberation and what it was in fact was an ode to her liberating uh Americans and perhaps you can see why I became interested in her. It uh...she was an unusual person with a certain aura about her that I I just knew I had to get to know better, and from that evolved our relationship and I was able to visit her later, still in the hospital. Even after I was transferred from the immediate area, I would still come back a few times and later on made it possible for her to be nearer where I was and uh I found her some lodging...her and friend in in Munich where I had been transferred after the war. Uh our our story sort of uh came to a climax when when we married about a year later in in Paris. I uh I had been...I had gotten a leave from the Army by that time and uh and gone back to Buffalo, but I came back to Paris and uh after a great deal of difficulty with the with the local authorities there, we finally got married and that is our story. The...I uh...it uh...it's difficult to think back to those times and and to think that we are really those people but uh but that is what happened to us. Uh I of course had some very interesting experiences while I was in the Army. Uh I among other things what happened to me was that I that uh one of the uh uh German soldiers that were brought to me for interrogation happened to be Hitler's chauffeur and uh he gave me the the story of the last days of of Hitler and Eva Braun in the Bunker in in Berlin uh which has has gone down in the history books as as being the definitive uh story of of Hitler's last days and he told me how he uh how Hitler had instructed him personally uh to dispose of his and Eva Braun's remains by pouring gas over their bodies in in the courtyard of that Bunker uh because they didn't want any remains to fall into Russian hands. The Russians had, of course, taken Berlin...uh were taking it shortly thereafter, and uh so he carried out all all those orders and that is that is the story that came down to me and I see uh by the history books also to to others. Uh that is apparently how it happened.

Q: Did he describe to you the last days in the Bunker?

A: Well, he did but I don't have a very detailed recollection of that. Uh they must have been chaotic but I I really can't tell you details that uh that, you know, that would uh throw any light on it now. I uh I do remember that he described uh his personal duties that that Hitler had instructed him to do, and uh and so that uh I I think that in fact that no no traces were ever found by the Russians uh of Hitler and Eva Braun, his mistress, so that is the story of that. Uh as as I said before, un...unfortunately we we found out after the war that uh uh my parents along with so many others had been deported to Auschwitz and so I certainly knew if not first hand at least I had an understanding for what uh had gone on during the war. Uh I will say this that I always...I I really did think the Nazis capable. I knew their mentality and I did think them capable of doing the things which which in fact they did and they did do. Nothing truly surprised me. I merely didn't know the details. I also always knew that it would come to a war, even as a young boy. Uh the the signs of it were there and in the turmoil of that world and quest for revenge that the average German had at the time...I just knew that it would come to another war in which I no doubt would be involved.

Q: I thank you very much. That's quite a story. Is there anything else that you want to add or to tell us?

A: Uh at the moment really nothing comes to mind.

Q: OK. Thank you very much.

End of Tape #1

Conclusion of Interview