

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with John Kowski

June 7, 1990

RG-50.030*0115

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with John Kowski, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on June 7, 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. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

JOHN KOMSKI
June 7, 1990

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: OK. We're on camera, we've started. Would you tell me your name please?

A: John Kowski. Jan Kowski--this is true Polish name.

Q: Where and when were you born:

A: I was born on uh...in February 3rd, 1915 in the small town Bircza, which is located not far from the San River and the bigger city which is Przemyśl; you know, in that area. This is still now in Poland.

Q: Um....

A: But then I moved out very, very early. My father came back from the World War I. He was in the Austrian army. He went...he came back, and we moved to his home town--named Rzeszów--on the other side of the San River, in the county of Rzeszów. And this is where my residence was. I lived...I grew up there; and I went there to the [Krauner (ph)] School and then there to gymnasium--which is their secondary school, their high school, and...

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

A: Well, the parents were just hard-working people, you know. They did...they are not...they were not doing very well. After war, uh, nobody really was doing well in those small towns. I remember from my childhood, from Rzeszów, when the mother would go to the town to the market place to...to uh, to get uh soup which was which was uh distributed by the committee, Hoover Committee. Yeah. So I remember vaguely this, this thing, you know. So uh, as I say, they were just...just hard-working people; and uh...and uh...uh really not excitement, not much excitement about what's...what was going on. But you know I was living close to the nature; and from the very, very beginning, I...I learned to love the nature. I used to go with my sister out to pick up flowers. Early in the spring, to the woods; but always alone, with her, as a small kids. And they was...they would let us go, and we would go very far. And maybe this was a, this escapades were very important in my life; because later on when I became alone, when I lived alone, when I had to make a decisions, I was ready to make any kind of a decision, you know. Which I think I contributed to my survival a little bit, because you know I would, uh, be able to, to, uh, to move around very, uh, freely.

Q: Let's come back to you as a child a little bit. Um, what kind of a school did you go to?

A: I went to a grammar school. This was uh this was boys and girls together, you know? Uh, big school...and uh, I only finished four classes; because from the fourth class I went to the secondary school, which was the, the...the...there were, you know, the Polish uh...uh schools were organized at that time. And I then attended eight classes. Eight years of...eight years of the high school. High school was a little bit different. It is, uh...high school plus two years of college, uh--that school, you know. When you graduate from that school, you go straight to university. And I did go the university, Jagie__oniów [Jagiellonian] University in Kraków, where I, uh, studied, uh, history of art. And this made me, you know, got interested in the art itself. So I joined...so I enrolled into the art school, Academy of Fine Arts, in Kraków; and I finished that school in 1939, just in time before the, uh, war broke out.

Q: What was Kraków like in those years?

A: Kraków? Kraków was a, uh, a very beautiful place to live in, you know. In those days, you know. Surrounded with so many landmarks and beautiful churches. Jewish synagogues. We used to go there. We had a...in, in, in uh, uh...I had to, I had to attend also the classes, you know, in the art...the art school, the history of art classes. Now the professor was Franz Klein. He's a Jew, you know. There were a lot of Jewish professors, you know. And he was, uh, very fond of Kraków, and knew everything. Kraków, it's a old city. In order to appreciate that city, you have to go into the basements; because in the basement you see the whole history, how it developed. You see all the styles that, uh, are not visible outside. So we went to the synagogues. There is a...in Kraków, there is one synagogue which was, uh, in...looks like a church, fourteenth-century church. It's in gothic. And it was donated to the Jewish community by the King Kazimierz Wielki, who brought the Jews to Kraków, and settled down...uh, settled this community in a town, uh, called Kazimierz. Yeah. So, uh, uh...they had, you know, very much a part of the Kraków history; and they lived there 'til '39. Now, I don't know what's happened there. You know, I haven't been there. But I understand, you know, there are no Jews, not many left. So, so apparently this uh whole section of town have changed, too.

Q: Did...as the war approached, did you have Jewish friends as well?

A: Oh, in my class, in our art school, I had...you know, there were several Jews, you know. I might even later on remember names, uh....

Q: That's OK.

A: This is...this was international, I would say, group of people. There was a woman, she was Italian. There was a uh...a Russian emigrée, a woman. There were Ukrainians. There were Poles. There were Jews; and there was even a French uh...uh, a French uh fellow, you know. So they're uh international in a group of people.

Q: As...what happened to this life when war broke out? Can you tell us what happened?

A: Completely changed. Immediately. Immediate chngement. When I left Kraków, uh before the Germans occupied it, and I went ...uh, I traveled through the villages and small towns eastwards ...uh, ahead of Germans. Because this was the order by the Polish military. We hope that we'll be drafted, sooner or later, to the military. And, of course, this never happened. So when I went too far--I went almost to the eastern border--and I found out that it is the Russians who are now marching westwards, occupying that part; so I have to, you know, make quick decision. And I chose rather to stay on the German side, so I moved back and joined the Germans, you know (laughter). I crossed that territory into...into the Germany, and I went back to Kraków. But this was, this was city looked completely different. First of all, the whole government of Generalgouvernement, moved into the...Kraków. Kraków became this uh...capital of that uh province, uh so there were so many Germans. The Germans uh were everywhere. And then of course the persecutions started immediately. All the professors at the university were arrested, and they were sent to concentration camp. People in my age, again, were being arrested all the time and sent as forc...forced labor to Germany. So I had to leave that uh...that uh city and go back to uh Rzeszów, where I found...uh, thought would be safer to live; but not because uh.... Again, I joined the underground uh organization; and, of course, because of that, you know, I was in in constant threat of being arrested.

Q: How did you join and why?

A: There is by, you know, a few people knowing, you know; and they.... This...this was, you know, situation where you never know more than three people. You know. So you really, know, was given a job to do and this was in organizing--very early, 1939 still, and 1940 at the beginning. So, uh, there was not, not much as the...the activity as more just the organizing uh process that we are involved, you know. Hiring more and more people, you know. But this was from the very, very beginning uh ...in action. On account of that, and also because uh uh again the Germans were, you know, arresting young people and uh taking them to Germany to forced labor camps, I had to uh, uh...uh... stay in hiding. Yeah. I had to...I, I was not sleeping at home for, uh, for many months; because, you know, it was, uh, uh, not safe. And out of that came the idea that I must go. Cross the border, and go to another country; and, uh, maybe again join the army in France, which was being uh...uh, organized at that time. Uh...so with three other people, uh, I...on...in March 1940, I uh...I went through the Tatra Mountain[s] to Czechoslovakia; and I traveled through the through the Czechoslovakia, yeah. And I traveled almost to the other end of that little country, almost to this Hungarian border. And here we...I, myself and another uh fellow, we were arrested; two survived and two escaped--but two of us were arrested, because we just, uh, ran into the uh...uh...set-up, you know, by the...by the police. They waiting for us. So, uh, they arrested us and then they sold us to the Gestapo. Yeah. Slovaks sold us to the Gestapo. I mean, they...I understand that they were paying money, being paid money for that, you know; because they were, they...in other words, uh, they were, um, working as agents for the Gestapo. You know, Slovaks at that time were cooperating with Germany. There was a government run by that uh uh priest Haha

[NB: reference to Joseph Tiso?]. Yeah. And uh... and, of course, they...they allowed German to...on the roads come in to the trans...military transport to go right through Czechoslovakia. So, uh, at the end, uh, they gathered us all arrestees--and there were thousands of people that were being arrested--uh, so about...a huge train, a huge train was going toward the Polish border one day. And we crossed the border to the town of Muszyna, where the Gestapo took it over. And that is why I got in contact with the Gestapo. And they were immediately, uh, segregating all those uh, arrested...arrestees. Uh, I tried to...I, first of all, I...made up a, uh...false name; and I stick with that false name all the time, because I was ashamed to let my parents know that I allowed myself to be arrested. (Laughter). Yeah. And so I stuck to that, uh, false name; and, of course, everything, all the personal data and everything uh, uh...was changed to and also falsified... falsified. And I figured that it would be good idea to uh to to be born in Soviet territory, because I was hoping, "Well, the Germans will never get there." (Laughter) How wrong I was! (Laughter) So I uh...I gave all the data and places in the in the territory which was at that time occupied by Russia...

Q: What was the false name you used?

A: Uh, Johann Barasz. The one that you see on that uh document that I show you [NB: Photograph shown at the end of the interview identifies him as "Józef Bara_"]. Yeah. And uh with this name I travel from, from...from Muszyna to another prison in uh Nowy S_cz, and to Tarnów. Now in Tarnów, on June 14th, seven hundred fifty-six young people uh assemble in uh mikva...is that Jewish name? Uh, mikva--yeah, that uh public bath--at night; and in the morning, we march to the station, boarded a train and started...and uh the train started west, you know, toward Kraków. But we didn't know...nobody told us where we are going, what's going to happen to him, to us. Uh, we just was riding in that train until we came to Kraków.

Q: Tell, tell us a little bit, if you would, about the people you were rounded up with.... And you were not Jewish, so why...why...why were you put on a train with Jews do you think?

A: These were not Jews. They were all Poles. This five hundred, this seven hundred fifty-six people, they were all like me; people like me who wanted to join the army. Or, maybe some who maybe wanted to do some black-marketing; because situation, economic situation, in Poland at that time was very bad. But uh...uh...and maybe there were a few oth...other who were arrested inside, in Poland; you know, on the underground activities. This is, these were the types of people; but mostly young people, you know? The oldest I remember was a sergeant. Uh he must, he must have been in, in...in forties at that time. I'm sure he probably did not survive. And uh...but mostly this was people in twenties, and everybody hopeful. People with uh...we, we are all waiting uh what's going to happen in France. You know, there were so many stories going on those days a big uh offensive, German offensive, being prepared uh in 1940. And, of course, we all hoped that it will end tragically for Germany, and the uh Allied Forces will win. How...when we arrived in 19, 19 ...in June 14th, on the railroad station, that is the first thing what we heard: that

the Paris has been taken by German army. And there was a huge celebration and the champagne corks popping, popping up, and uh soldiers shooting into the air. So it was a terrible news, psychologically, for us. People who...we did not know where where do...where we are going, what's going to happen to us. Afternoon that...that day, you know, train started moving; and finally we came to a very obscure small station. And above us hung a huge sign: "Auschwitz." Of course, we did not know what it means-- "Auschwitz"--because it sounded German. And some people thought, "Well, maybe we've already crossed to uh...to uh Germany." But a station worker, uh, explained to us that we are on...uh, really in O_wi_cim. O_wi_cim is a Polish name for the name "Auschwitz." And uh we were moved on the side track, and uh in about five minutes we found ourselves in the front of a large building. Uh there were three of them...middle building, uh large, it was surrounded by uh by the uh, uh...uh barbed wire fences with uh gates, watch towers. And this was a camp, the first camp. Now the buildings belong, uh, to Polish tobacco monopoly. Uh that uh first building uh, uh...uh, consisted uh really of two rooms; big rooms, you know, where we were herded, and we slept on the on the straw. There was nothing organized. It was just to keep us in. Before us came thirty kapos from Sachsenhausen, from...and they got, they were numbered from one to thirty. The man that I was talking about lat...uh before--uh, Otto Küssel--who escaped with me, was number two. Now so...first Polish number is thirty-one. I believe the last number of our transport was uh seven hundred eighty-four or eighty-five.

Q: That's what...so you were on the first transport?

A: In the first transport. It's funny thing about that uh arrival scene because, you know--as I say, I have to point it out--we still did not know where we were. We didn't know how the concentration camp looks like. Uh, as a young man in Kraków while I was a student, I heard about Dachau. I heard even about, uh, Buchenwald; you know, the famous camps. That were, you know...but we only heard, uh heard about, uh, the camps where the Hitler keeps his political enemies, you know. No one, never even occurred to us that this might be a place for us, too. (Laughter)

Q: When you got off the train, what did you see?

A: When I got off, no...before...when the train stopped, I saw on one side a line of soldiers, uh, with machine guns. On the other side in the fenced-in area in that real camp, I saw people in striped uniform. They looked like, uh...uh hospital patients. These were those thirty Kapos who were brought from uh...they... from Sachsenhausen. They looked so innocent, you know? Not... they looked just like a, like a patient; but when the doors opened in the train...these are the people who, you know, attacked us with the...with clubs, with, uh.... These was the soldiers' helpers; and we already know really, you know, we're in huge trouble from the very beginning. There was not time to grab the, uh, suitcases and all our belongings. We all just had to jump, uh, from the train; and right away, you know, uh, we are in, uh... beaten and kicked and everything. And this way we marched to the, uh, inside; and they right away, uh, uh...made a column of us, and were,

uh...we were, uh, processed. That means we have to be, you know, the...the...the data, the personal data, was, uh, was written under; and then they...then they shave our heads. They gave us number. My number was 564. And, uh, immediately they started a gymnastic with us. There was nothing else to do; so, so they says that first an gymnastic, uh, the German call it Hüpfenrollen, all kinds of, uh, terms. I remember a beautiful grass around that building; but in few hours, there was no grass at all, you know. In the next few days, it was really uh necessary to go and find something to do other than gymnastic. You know, a real work, even a hard work. And, uh, I was assigned to a group that was going to a military compound, uh, nearby to clean uh uh the rubble which was...uh, they partially destroyed this whole building. And in a week or two, we moved over there to a small camp consisting of three blocks in one corner of that compound. And this was the beginning of the camp Auschwitz. Out of that, uh, area we would then go out and build first of all a kit...a prison's kitchen, and then surround the whole area--which was twenty-one, uh, brick blocks--with uh barbed wire, electrified barbed...uh, barb...barbed wire fence. And immediately after uh after this was accomplished, this...the new transport start arriving. And there are transport who had come from Silesia, from Kraków, from Warsaw; and uh from other countries, too. And ...and uh to the end of that year, to the first winter, the camp was probably about uh, uh fifteen thousand people strong, you know. Immediately, Germans began uh to...uh enlarge the camp by building new blocks. They built another eight blocks; and uh so the...so the thirty, thirty-nine blocks was the end of the...of the whole construction in that area.

Q: Tell me more about what your...what a day was like in Auschwitz? From the morning 'til night. What was a day like?

A: Well, we would get up very early, even before the sun... sunrise. And immediately...and eat and get a uh uh substance that was called "coffee," which was made out of the bark uh of a...some tree, I don't know. I mean, it was bitter but it was black, you know. And it was bitter, and...that's it. Now if you have saved uh some bread from the day before, then you're lucky and you'll eat that uh that piece bread before going to work. But if not, then you just drank that coffee. And then immediately you were thrown out. Regardless of weather, you thrown out uh...outside and you'd have to stay and wait for a roll call. The reason being that people, uh those who are um... who are um...who are uh assigned to do the cleaning would uh clean up the rooms where we slept; and they themselves would then join us and go to work with us. And certain hour after, uh we would all assemble and there was a roll call. A roll call uh is the...it is a ceremony that the Germans never stopped uh doing. It was uh at certain times uh three roll calls a day; in the morning, in the uh at noon, and in the evening--and later on, too. But not less than two. And after roll call--if everything was OK, if there was nobody missing, you...you...all the dead from the night before were counted.... And they were, have to be counted because at night the offices, German offices, were closed. So if anybody died, you would be counted as alive until the offices opened so he could be uh crossed out in the big book and say that he is uh...he is dead. So anyway this was...if everything accomplished, and uh and nobody, as I say, was missing, then you would join the groups, working groups. So the people would

go, you know; some would go to the uh...uh to...with the wheel-barrows and uh spades, you know, to do the work on improving the roads or to the agriculture or, you know, or to the so-called "Bauhof" [Ger: "building yard"], where all the professionals were working. Uh, uh...all the skills like uh...uh masons and uh...and uh carpenters. There was a, also in Auschwitz, in that area, a group of uh sculptors from Zakopane. They would do this...they would, they would create the plates for SS; and, you know, the ashtrays--all kinds of things made of wood. So I, I even work with them for a while. Also there was another jobs, very important; of course, in...in uh offices. I work, my first work was in uh...an architect's office; and uh I was assigned to do the renderings, color renderings, of uh projects that were in...in uh...on the drawing table. Uh, all these drawings will then, will go with the plans to Berlin for approval. Everything has to be proved; approved in Berlin, or in Sachsenhausen or in Oranienburg. I also had a secondary responsibility uh...in that office. I would help the surveying team. From the very beginning, uh, the surveying team would go in the terrain and do a uh...work on the map. And they were really hurrying; the German wanted it, that map, because the uh area around Auschwitz was being depopulated, the vill...villages destroyed, people taken to the concentration camp. Uh so, uh that any terrain would have to be measured...uh all the roads and all the buildings or everything, and sent; because on it, that basic map, they would do the planning what's going to be there in the future. On one (cough)...one area of that uh big territory there, the camp on...later on they built a huge compound "Birkenau," which is the village of Brzezinka. In Polish, it's called Brzezinka. In German, they call it "Birkenau." Uh, this is where later on, in 1940, would be start the Holocaust. So, uh, until the evening we would do all kinds of things. Uh, all of this outside of the camp; uh, so we would go in the extra guards. Extra guards--there are large garrison in Auschwitz. Uh, they would set out some...1941, some hundred guardsmen, and they would join--few of them with every group--and go and stay the whole day. Again in the evening we would all return. And, uh...uh on the average day in Auschwitz there were always orchestra playing, and uh the people would return and form like a small parade. Yeah. With the tools in the hands that they used during the work. They would march to German tangos and (laughter) and uh...military songs; and this was must. And to attention, of course, while the commandant and all the SS would watch. And you have to do, uh, march very briskly, like uh...like a soldiers; because the German, they like make of us soldiers. Uh, to a point, yeah. And then of course we would assemble on the roll call place, and there would be the roll call again. If the roll call was successful--nobody had escaped--uh, then we would go, and we would get your our uh...our uh supper. If there was a situation what somebody escaped, then instead of going to the Block, we would wait. And, uh, meantime the search party would go out and search for, uh...for a man who has escaped; and the search party would be, uh, composed of the soldiers and the Kapos, uh, from there. So there would be about three hundred, four hundred people going around and looking for, uh...for an escapee. Usually it was not, uh...it was almost impossible to leave entirely the area of the...where, where the during the day the guards were stationed; because, uh, it is always, uh, open...that area was open...and there was no, uh, no places, no...no bushes, no trees, nothing, you know. So app...usually an escapee would have to know, uh, have to, uh, get the hiding somewhere in the building in that area outside of the

camp, and then wait for a night to come. So that is why most of those who escaped, uh, usually were found. Now if a man was found, then he would go to a bunker for a while, true uh...uh. And he would be asked question: why he did it, how he did it. Gestapo were interested in that. And then on the next day or day after, he, uh...he would be paraded through camp; and then, uh, on the, uh, roll call, uh, ceremony he would be hang on the gallows. And this was a regular punishment. If a...if this was not the case, then we would go just simply to the blocks and get our soup and bread and margarine, whatever. And it was all kinds of, uh, uh...and this diet was, uh, usually a watered soup and a slice of bread, and a little bit of of margarine. That's it. And then after that, uh, there was about one hour of daylight; so in this time you would have to repair your uniform, you know. Under the supervision of Blockältester, who was the...the manager of the Block. And what is the Block? Block was a, uh, a number of people who lived on...in...on one floor. Blocks, uh, buildings, were two-story buildings; and that means in every building, uh, would be two blocks, uh...because there were two different floors. Sometimes even on, uh, in, uh, on attic they would form another Block. And generally was not more...not enough room more for some hundred and fifty men. But I remember times when there were up to one thousand people in every Block. So in one bed, we would sleep six of us. So there was actu...actually no sleep; we were just sitting, you know, the whole night.

Q: When did things begin to change in Auschwitz? When did you get the museum in Auschwitz?

A: The museum in Auschwitz, uh, was in, uh, in 1941 established. The idea was, uh, uh, came from the, uh, comman...the camp manager. His name is, uh, Fritzch, Commandant Fritzch.¹ He created two things. Museum and the orchestra, symphony orchestra. Uh, symphony orchestra was, uh...uh, very large. It was opera...uh, run professionally. It was so good that they would, uh, allow her to go to the neighboring town and have a concert, for Germans, in Katowice, in...in Bytom, even in...in...in Wroc_aw [Ger: Breslau]. Now, museum was beginning, uh, from, started from small beginnings that Franz Targosz was the manager of that.² And his, uh, function was to go and look, and...and, uh, confiscate a more interesting items that the people used to bring when they come to camp; so in museum were things like, uh, national flags, uh, military, uh...uh, orders. You know, there were Jewi...Jewish bibles. There were, uh, there were, uh, folklore uniforms, all kinds of, uh, maps, all...this kind of things, you know. And there were...now, the reason why the German, uh, allowed this--uh, and they even, the German even allow a big area for that at certain point. Why? Because they were always expecting a International Red

¹ SS Hauptsturmführer Karl Fritzch, deputy to Rudolph Höss at KL Auschwitz. Transferred to KL Flössenburg in January 1942.

² Franciszek Targosz, prisoner no. 7626, persuaded the SS to set up the Museum and organized a Kommando of painters, sculptors, jewelers and watchmakers for that purpose. See Garli_ski, *Fighting Auschwitz*, pp. 89-90.

Cross, uh, visit. So if this would occur, then they would have a, uh, opportunity to tell, "Look, and...you know, the prisoners here are uh doing alright, you know. They are living, they are...you know, they are having even a museum!" And things of that sort. In the museum there were, uh, several people working--or employed--were, you know, to send, that, uh, were sportsmen. I, I mentioned before [Czerk (ph)]. He was one of the...of the steady people working there. He was painting on glass. There were two Jew, Jewish fellows who were translating with the bible. It was also Fritzch's idea. He wanted to have a bible, uh, translated from, uh, Hebrew to German; so there was a, uh, uh, older man. Uh, he was a rabbi. And he knew the bible, and he was translating into Polish. And there was another, uh, friend of his who translated it from Polish to German. Now in four years, I understand they translated two pages. (Laughter) And they both survived, because the Germans just simply have forgotten about them. This is something that happens very often in, in, in the big camp--that, you know, once you establish yourself then they will forget about you. And then you are on your own. It is up to you, to survive. That means you have, you have a...you, you learn the...you learn the tricks how to not be beaten, how to, uh, stay in hiding if it's necessary. And, of course, there was always a time, uh, an opportunity, to get an extra food, too. And this was also important. So those two fellows, you know, survived. You know, with all this Holocaust, they...nobody bothered them. And of...and it goes for other people, too. Those who are chosen when the transport came, and they were chosen to go as prisoners--I mean to be uniformed as prisoners and go to for work...they usually, uh, survived, most of them, you know. Unless they were either, you know, run into the trouble, uh, with the...with the Kapos, with, uh, Blockältesters, or they got sick. A lot of people, uh, died in Auschwitz, unfortunately; because of the, uh, uh...like uh...there was a typhus, you know? The typhus killed thousands of thousands of people. Another way to die in Auschwitz was to go and be executed, you know. The Gestapo always uh, you know, was the final judge and, uh, on the fate of a man. And they would...and they sometimes wait a long time before they, uh, would, uh, send a man for execution. Sometimes I know people who, some who survived two years in camp; and then they were executed. Uh, and they were never told for what--for why, yeah. The execution was taking place in Block 11, uh, on the courtyard between Block 12 and Block 11, and that execution wall still standing in Auschwitz today. And uh...at the beginning, uh, execution was performed by a platoon of soldiers, uh, with, uh, with rifles; and it was very noisy. People in Auschwitz knew about it, that something's going on in in the camp; uh, because there was that salvo. So later on the Germans changed the whole, uh, occurrence. They would, uh...they would use a silencer; and one man would execute a, uh... the prisoners by pointing to the neck, you know. And, uh, I remember, uh, I know the man who was executioner. He was, uh, a top sergeant. Uh, his name was, uh, Palitzsch.³ He was a twenty-nine year old man. He had a family and four children. But at the end, he fell in love with Jewish woman; and he was sent, uh, to the

³ SS Hauptscharführer Gerhard Arno Max Palitzsch. Employed as Rapportführer in KL Auschwitz.

concentration camp and to the east front.⁴ Nobody knows what's happened to him. But these men, these men had certain...in 1942, executed in one afternoon three hundred people.

Q: Did you see it, and can you tell us about it?

A: I didn't see the...the action; but I saw the corpses being driven on the big wagon and the...with the blood running to the street, as they were uh...uh...on their way to crematorium. This we saw, all...all of us, because you know, we were waiting for a roll call at that time when they were going right through, to the main gate, you know. Yeah. Now, uh, this three hundred people, this was a transport that was arrested in 1942 in a restaurant in Kraków. Uh, mostly artists and actors and uh...and uh, teachers (cough); and they were brought, uh, to O_wi_cim, to Auschwitz. And they, uh, were assigned the works; but only they work about two weeks, and they were all called up--their numbers called up--on the roll call, and, uh, assembled in, uh, Block 11 and shot, you know.

Q: You survived. One of the ways you survived was by contact through the Museum. Can you tell us what you did, and how you did things in the museum--what your contact was?

A: I, uh...no, well I really can...uh, my contacts were actually uh with the surveying team--earlier, you know. Museum is something that you do in your spare time. Uh, I was always working. I really never worked in the Museum as such; but I did lot of work over there and a lot of paintings that are still there, because it was a meeting place uh for many artists. There were about five hundred artists that I know in Auschwitz. So uh many of them...there was even a hard place, a hard time to get a place to stand in the Museum and do some work. But, uh, the contact with the civilian were done uh...uh, when the...we would go, allowed to go and out to Auschwitz as a surveying team. Because automatically we had to have a contact with people, because we were going into the areas which was uh in process of depopulation and there were always few people still left uh wait...waiting to be transported somewhere. So that is how all the contacts grew up with the families and underground. And, uh, as you...when we were about to escape we had a very good contact with underground. And there was a plan drawn how; and where this will occur and in what time, on what day, and who's going to be waiting. And it worked the same way as was planned, after many months of uh missed opportunities and, you know, in uh disappointments; because you...you...you never are sure, you know, if you really succeeded. But uh....

Q: Tell us how you...how did you plan it, and who did you plan the escape with?

A: I was planning with another man whose uh name is on that picture, Kuczbara [NB: identified on the photograph as "Bolos_aw Kuczbara"]. Sometime, some day, as we were

⁴ See Garli_ski, Fighting Auschwitz, pp. 285-287.

walking--at that time I was working in a different uh job. I was uh in "Arbeitseinsatz" [NB: "Special Work"], which is uh a uh labor relation office. And uh as we were wal...returning to the office one day, we just talked about it; and we found out that each one of us is...has a false name. And uh...and we came to the idea that this is a good...that is a...the next step would be...uh, should be an escape. And, of course, he told me that he's a Polish general's son, and that he goes to the certain areas in the camp and listens to the radio. Yeah. He has a communication with it.... I don't know if this is uh true, because he was this kind of a fellow who imagined a lot of things; but anyway he was always very active. So, we had in our office a uh a sergeant, German sergeant--uh, blinded on one eye--older man, who was a teacher before; and he was the manager of that office. He was...he had a apparently large family, and he was always in the need of money. He was worrying so much about that uh family of his, so that Kuczbara--who...you know, who knew almost everybody, uh...especially in in uh...in the area of...in the hospital area.... Because he also was a dentist--although he told me he never was a dentist--but he was pulling the teeth in...he, he he was acting as a dentist in...in the camp. So he knew a lot of people there. And, see...so, uh, that...that German uh asked him for money, and he want us bring several hundred dollars...uh, marks, German marks. But there was this...there was a prob... there was a stipulation that we would have to go to Auschwitz to get this money; because it is our family that will bring that money, you know, and hide in certain area near...near town. And if we go there and we find money, he'll get it. Now this was a plan of escape. We were supposed to escape from that point. He'll get that money; but we will, we will escape. And there was a idea that uh we will give him something to drink.

Q: Give who something to drink?

A: A whiskey with a uh with uh...with sleeping pills in it. Or something. But what's happened: he didn't drink. He was not drinker, you know. This was one of uh thousands of soldiers who didn't use any (laughter).... So it, it didn't work, you know? We have to come back. There were several other ways we tried to escape. Never work. And finally we came on idea that we will never do it unless one will uh be dressed as a soldier. And we started organize a German uniforms. This took, took months. And uh...uh I, my job was to furnish...to give him all the documents the sol...the German soldiers uh usually carried in the wallet. And, uh of course, the main thing was to...to make that main, most important uh document where he needs a photograph. So, again, Kuczbara uh found...uh found...in his, in his bag on his arrival he apparently brought, you know, some pictures of his. See he went there and he found that uh, that one picture. He gave it to me. I painted a uniform on that pictures. We sent out then later on that photograph to the underground in Auschwitz, and they made a copy out of that. And the copy came back, and here was Kuczbara in the SS uniform. (Laughter) Yeah! So we used this uh...that photograph on that document; and uh, of course, other documents--that was, everything that a soldier should have in his wallet, he [NB: Kuczbara] had. Now there was a question of a revolver. Now, the revolver uh...we took from the office uh where we worked, because we saw a sol...a SS man locking a revolver in the drawer while uh on the weekend he was

going to the Catholics. So uh we broke into that uh...table and took the revolver. So we had a revolver. Now, two other people joined us. Uh number two, who is that Küssel; and...and uh Januszewski, who was also at "Arbeitsdienst." And these, we...people, we took because they were...they had a way of uh organizing almost anything in the camp. So what happened: Küssel went to a SS man in agriculture, and uh uh tried to uh loan from him a wagon and two horses. And for these, he offered him the...uh two...uh some furniture.... I, I forgot, you know, what it was. Anyway, uh the uh SS needed something for furnishing his office. And, of course, if he would go, you know, straight away through a sign...through a signing the papers and the...and ordering this--you know, in official way--would take a month, you know. But here he come, he got in uh contact with the prisoner, and prisoner could do this immediately; because in everywhere in all these places...uh warehouses, there were always prisoners who worked. So this way we got the uniform; because, you know, it was the prisoners who work over there, too. And you know, you give prisoner uh some margarine or, you know, you do him a favor. And uh we were very important agency, because we could uh gave a man a good job uh for this, for...for...for uh giving that, you know. We would, you know, have another favor from, from other people....

Q: At this point I need to stop. We need to change tapes...

A: Yeah.

Q: ...and then we will come back.

TAPE #2

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: OK. Uh, John, tell us now...you had uh, you're in the middle of planning for this escape...

A: Yeah.

Q: OK. You had uh arranged for the uniform?

A: Yeah.

Q: Alright. What happened then? If you could just repeat, you know, after the uniform?

A: Well, we waited for a word from the outside people where, when the escape will occur. When, and what time. And uh we were given four days. We couldn't go...there was a plan for four days. Uh, we couldn't go in the first day because first day was a Christmas. The second day was a very bad weather after Christmas. So at the end, it was on 29 of December that in the morning we decided that we're going to go. And it happened this way: I went uh...Kuczbara and myself, we went to the office on usual schedule; and then went out of the office with the papers to, into...into the area where uh the people, usually new people, usually used to come and wait, you know, to...for, uh uh... in...interrogation, you know. That was our job. Two other people--uh Otto [Küssel] and uh Januszewski--they were uh the "Arbeitsdienst"; they had to uh send out all the columns out of the camp. And then they would come to our office and have to write a uh a report. Every morning. This I have to emphasize, how...how this uh uh the pro...procedure in, in our office were. Every morning, they had to write a report on how the employment of the whole camp looks like--where, how many they were uh... there were people employed in what categories of jobs, how many there are sick, and so forth. Now these reports written on a special typewriter, big one; was then be taken by a messenger--a soldier--who traveled to Oranienburg every day. Oranienburg was a uh headquarters of the labor, of all the labor assignments in the...in, in the...in the camps in the whole Germany. And uh on that particular day, 29 of December, they had to do that in order to be free. After that they could do whatever they wanted because, you know, they were not [Czerk (ph)]. You know, they would uh they would visit uh various uh working groups in the field, or in the uh uh area inside the camp. So Otto went to that SS man, who...uh and he got from him a pair of horses and a wagon; and drove this, this uh vehicle through the camp, through a main gate, to Block 24 where we all lived. And he grabbed four or five prisoners who were wandering in the camp, and made them go into the attic; and from the attic they brought down four uh cabin[et]s, wooden cabin[et]s. They loaded it on the, on that vehicle--which was a platform--and he drove out of the camp again, went to that SS man he was dealing with, gave him two cabin[et]s for...for just uh making that deal; and with two uh... two cabi...cabinets on that wagon uh he would uh ride to a place where, in between, Kuczbara would dress into the uniform, SS uniform. Uh, and...and I was with him; and we were waiting for ...for those two to come. We took from our office about

sixteen thousand names, files uh of people, uh of transports. Some transports were completely annihilated. You know, we took this as a...as a sample what is going on in our...in Auschwitz. Also, we took a list of uh people who were executed in uh...in Auschwitz--on the Block 11--with the signature of the, the top uh doctor, SS doctor. Uh, he had to countersign them, you know. So we had, you know, some twenty-four thousands of names that we took with us in our briefcases. And when the Otto and Januszewski arrived with that wagon, we jumped on and we uh drove off to the main gate, again. And at 11 o'clock, uh we drove through the gate. The soldier opened the barrier. Uh Kuczbara told him, "Heil, Hitler!" And that's it, and this was the end. (Laughter) Because we were posing as a working group. We had a...these uh cabinets. This was supposed to mean that we are, you know, delivering a furniture to a SS house somewhere in the area. So nobody bothers us. (Laughter) That's the way! And then we drove through on the road around the...near the uh Sola River, through Auschwitz to the village of [Brzeszkowice (ph)]. The village [Brzeszkowice (ph)] was already empty. People were already thrown out. There were still buildings; and in those buildings the underground put in, you know, our...the, the civilian clothes for us. We changed. We... we uh...drove that uh vehicle into a...into a alley under the roof. Horses to the...also. We take care of that. You know, all the documents were thrown to the well, uh deep well; and some stones thrown on the top of it. And then we went on that attic, the uh dress in the civilian clothes. And went outside and to the bridge on uh the River Vistula [NB: Wis_a (Pol)]. That [Brzeszkowice (ph)], this is a triangle made of two ri...rivers, Vistula and Sola. It is isolated place. This is why we chose that place. We know not many people around; and on that bridge, uh Sola/Vistula bridge, there were four men waiting for us who had the bikes. Each one of them took one of us, you know; and then we had walked to the second village uh Libi_z, where we stayed for a week. Now the man...yeah, the man who, who was uh managing this whole uh project was a village manager of the the village Libi_z. And he had Germans living in his house. (Laughter) So uh this was also a very safe place this way, because it was no suspicion that it might be some... some, uh, strange people living in that area, you know. So, uh, we got contact with the, uh, underground. They came. They make a photographs of us, you know. They, uh, promise us to send us the, the German Ausweis, this documents; you know, personal documents. They took all the names of all those--you know, the killed people--in Auschwitz, and, uh, make some photographs, and that's it. And they left. The next thing what we did, was that we all at night crossed the border from that village for the next village not far from...from Libi_z, to Generalgouvernement. Generalgouvernement was a section of Poland that German considered Poland, but it was surrounded by the Germans and the governor was famous, uh...uh, Governor Frank. And, uh, when we, uh, crossed that border at night, two of the, uh, the men immediately boarded a train and went to Warsaw. Two of us, you know, walked to the next village; uh, and we were prepared to hiding over there. We waited for about one week, until two ladies came from Warsaw with the documents for us. And we boarded train again from that village to Kraków, in order to take a night train to Warsaw. I was supposed to get a studio in Warsaw, a hiding...a, a place where the the people from the underground would meet, you know. An camouflage thing. And, uh, we made it all right to Kraków from the place Brzeszkowice; and as we were waiting in

train, uh, to depart, the whole train had been uh was surrounded by the German tanks and the Gestapo went into the cars and arrested everybody. Took everybody. Men, children, women--everybody-- including the two of us, not knowing whom they have. So, uh, uh ...when we were arrested, we...we uh decided that we're going to have to...again try to escape again; because it was only three weeks after a escape and everybody would know now, uh recognize us in Auschwitz. And we knew that this transport will go for sure to O_wi_cim. So, uh, at the, at the moment of, uh, transition from the truck to the, uh, gate in Prison Montelupich,⁵ I escape again. I threw out two of the soldiers and I start running, but the...Mietek,⁶ I don't know. He didn't do it, you know. So because we had it planned that we will, you know, go one in, uh, one direction and another one in other direction, and sort of a But, you know, he didn't do it. And they all, those soldiers, about forty of them maybe, you know, they, uh, start chasing me. They, they sho...uh, fire uh...shots were fired, you know. One hit me in the ankle, and that's it. I couldn't run anymore, and they captured me. And immediately they almost, they wanted to execute me right there, right on the street, you know? And I, uh, remembered that moment. I will never remem...uh, forget it to the end of my life. In the split of second, I was able to to see my whole life, all...I, I...in that split of second, I converse with my family; with my sister, my my parents, uh friends. And then I was ready to die; and I even have uh enough time to wonder how I'm going to be uh looking on that snow, you know, after uh...after uh uh...dead, dead person. Yeah. But uh eventually, they uh...they did not do that; uh because it was a public place and I heard them uh talking among themselves that they going to do it on the...on the coal. There was a heap of coal uh right in the courtyard of the prison, and they usually execute people over there. But as we were walking toward that uh prison, uh the Germans were very nasty and somebody hit me with a with a revolver here in the head; cut my head, and this blood was start running. And I came inside that prison in such a bad shape, all bloody and so forth, that they didn't know what to do with me. So they sent me to a ambulatorium to stop the blood; and this is how I escape, because they forgot about me again. (Laughter) And uh the transport... Anyway, Januszewzki, the next morning, in the morn...went back to Auschwitz; and as I say, said, you know, Januszewzki had that big knife. Uh, he probably committed suicide, uh because he never arrived in Auschwitz. And I uh was sick for a few days, sick...and they and they used to come, you know; they would come, the soldiers, and they were very angry. And they would, you know, threaten me with all kinds of consequences; but at the end they were, they were proud of me, that I dared to escape. And we start talking, and they found out that I am an artist. In two days, they brought, you know, all the uh paints and uh material; and I start painting portraits. (Laughter) And uh it came to the point that they, there was one SS officer who wanted to release me. And he uh started an investigation into who I am, and so on. And, and here comes a uh uh...and...here the whole blame, you know, comes to... to that...to that bad document I...I received from the

⁵ Montelupich, also known as Montelupi, was a prison located in Kraków.

⁶ Nickname for Januszewzki, whose first name was Mieczysław.

underground, because they uh...they sent me something. They told me that I am living in Warsaw and...and on certain street. This street was non-existent. Everything was...was uh fake, and... instead to be released, I fell into such a suspicion that then lasted several years. That I wound up with beating and everything; and uh...and this is why they send me to those uh other camps uh later on, you know...

Q: OK. Stay where we are. Stay where--you are now in the prison. They had discovered the false papers...

A: The false papers, right.

Q: What did you do? Where were you sent from there?

A: From there I was sent to Auschwitz. I came to Auschwitz, and again I was recognized immediately on the gate. But it was my friend who recognized me, and he ran to...to other people in the uh area in museum, in museum. And uh he told them who...that I returned, so they started to do something uh...uh to save me. So first of all, what they accomplished--they uh...they accomplished this: as they, that the whole, that the transport I came with was sent not...it was not uh processed in Auschwitz, but in Birkenau. And then sent me to Birkenau to a quarantine camp, where there's absolutely nobody knew me. And I stayed there for about two weeks; and from there I went to Buchenwald, on the transport. The transport was by train, uh and it lasted about three days. And uh then we uh uh it was, the situation in that...I mean, that uh whole transport was so dirty, uh so miserable that, you know, I got sick, got that eczema on my face and in the head. And the first thing what happened to me in uh Buchenwald: I got sick and I went to hospital, but again this eczema was so terrifying that the doctor, German doctor, got interested in. And I was under the personal care of the main doctor in, in uh...in Buchenwald; uh because he medically was so much interested in that case. And when...and, of course, it took about uh two months before I got out of that hospital; and when I did, there was a traveling paper for me waited waiting already in the office. I am supposed to go back to Kraków. But they didn't tell me that that I am going to Kraków; but I was transferred from one prison to another, some sixteen prisons on the way from Buchenwald to Kraków. And when I came to Kraków again, something uh encouraging happened for me. There was a uh uh uh...the...I mean, the access to the whole, to the prison, was uh was uh staffed by...I mean, uh there was a...there were epidemic in...in prison. I, I forgot now what kind of epidemic; but anyway, the the SS did not come for some time. So I had a time to uh...to stay and, you know, think about my case; and in between I became a chef of the kitchen. (Laughter)

Q: They, they...dur...during all of this, they never knew that you had escaped from Auschwitz?

A: They never.... See, this was my point. Always do all kinds of things, create all kinds of lies; never tell them the truth that I ever was in the concentration camp. Yeah. And this

was to the very end. This is why my case was so complicated to the very end; because, you know, I never knew what was going to happen next. And, you know, they try all kinds of things. I remember when I was in that prison, once, uh, in the morning, you know, the...the keys turn in the lock, you know. The SS man, the officer, uh, walks in and he has my document, uh, uh...that they, uh, took away previously; and there I am there on that photograph with short hair. He say, "Why you have a short hair?" And I say, "Because I had a louse." (Laughter) So he stopped, you know. You had to have a good answer, all the time.

Q: So you were taken to Buchenwald...

A: I was taken to Buchenwald. I was released from Buchenwald, went back to Kraków. And now there is a Russian front coming in. See, the Russians, uh, came and they, uh, occupied...they, they, uh, were engaged in fighting Germans on the Oder River. This is in Silesia. Uh, meanwhile...I forgot that in the meantime I was, uh, transferred to, to Groß Rosen, you know, from, from, uh...from, uh, prison, yeah.

Q: So you went from prison to Buchenwald...

A: To prison...

Q: ...back to prison...

A: ...and then to Groß Rosen. Because of the situation on the front, they have to evacuate Montelupich; and they send me not to Auschwitz anymore--because Auschwitz was in danger--but to Groß Rosen. And this where the...I, uh...why I again, you know, got a good job in that, uh, office, uh, uh...for the labor relation, where I could see how they, uh, uh, sent out people to another camps to, uh...how they sell them to the private contractors. Uh, in, in Gross Rosen, this was a ceremony, you know. The owner would come to camp, and he would personally pick up the people and touch the muscles and, uh, uh...and, uh, after he was satisfied, then they would go, uh, to various places. Mostly it was the factories. Mostly it was a, uh, factories that, uh... that work on, in...in defense, you know. There were two factories uh that belonged to our, to Groß Rosen, that produced the poisonous gases--Dyhernfurt.⁷ There were, uh, factories in, uh...in Wroc_aw [Ger: Breslau], producing, uh, parts to the tanks and so forth. You know, very important industries, you know, uh, uh...defense industries. So people were, uh...those who had any profession, a good profession, uh, they would be treated very well. They would be paid the same, uh...the same wages as the German workers. This I have to add: that in Germany, in all the camps, also in Auschwitz, uh, people were on paper always paid. They always were paid wages. And our office consisted of two parts. One part was,

⁷ **NB:** Dyhernfurt I, one of two subcamps by this name, operated as Anorgana GmbH, a subsidiary of I. G. Farben. Location: Prussia/Lower Silesia.

uh...dealing with assigning people to work. Another part was, were people who are counting the profits; and all those profits, from every day of work the prisoners earned, would be then transferred to the treasury of the SS. Now the same thing happened in Groß Rosen; only, uh, it was, you know, a more, uh, smoother operation and bigger one. Because, as I mentioned before, we had eighty-five camps. Some camps were five times bigger than the Groß Rosen itself. Another, uh, job that was...that the people from Groß Rosen would perform is a, uh...uh, is, uh...dig the, dig the stones in the ...and there were a lot of...how do you call that? I forgot the name.

Q: Quarry?

A: Quarry, yeah. Yeah. There was a huge quarry in Auschwitz, and they were, uh, producing the monuments to the cemeteries, you know. The people were working, too; and there was another, uh, the big job was assigned building the blocks, barracks. Because...because of this, uh, situation on fronts, the Auschwitz was being already in process of evacuation. We were expecting lot, lot of newcomers to come in; and they really come. Thousands of them, at the winding days of the history of the...of Groß Rosen. And, of course, we ourselves later on would all go and be evacuated; and some went on foot--mostly perished those who went on foot--and I was lucky again. I got a, uh...I went to a next camp, which is Hersbruck, in train...

Q: Can we hold that for one minute? I want to stay with Groß Rosen for one minute. Uh, did you do any painting in Groß Rosen?

A: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I was...this is always...that, uh, play a very important role, uh, in protecting my life. I was always able to utilize this, uh, for some, somehow. So I painted landscape mostly, and portraits; and, of course, by working in that, uh, office, I was, uh, assigned to a map that was hanging--huge, uh, war map--hanging in the commandant's office. And on it, I had to, uh, write in gothic, uh, characters all the data concerning that particular camp, and all the camps, you know. So to the very end I had to do it, even when...when we all were already locked up in the camp. There was no work. They still were calling my name. I would have to go to the commandant's office and change that map on a given day. Therefore, I knew completely everything what is going on, all the secrets. Uh, how the front, where the front is, how many people they...they have lost from that, from that crew of the concentration camp. And which camp was taken over, which camp was lost, and so forth. So uh...and later on, I fig...I discovered that...that this was a very dangerous job that I was doing; because usually people who knew so much they would eliminate, too. I even didn't realize...uh, realize at that moment that I...I would be on that list, but I probably was on that list. Only through a very lucky circumstances I got mixed up with new, uh, crowd somewhere in, uh, along the way, and that is why I survived. I also mentioned, uh, that story, that part about Groß Rosen, about being in camp with all the soccer teams. There were fourteen soccer teams, all uniformed. And they would all play on Sunday, a games from the six o'clock in the morning to...to the end of the day. And, uh, the beginning of it would be a parade, which would.... I mean, the

commandant would stay and ...and, you know, accept the parade. First was always a, a, uh, band walking in the front. Then would be some comics, you know...we had some comics, you know, entertainers. (Laughter) Yeah. In every camp entertainers had, you know, a chance to survive, you know? Uh, sportsmen, boxers, uh, soccer players, of course, you know. So then later on, all those teams would be marching; and two first teams would start playing, and they...when they finish, there will be another. And it was for championship, you know. But Groß Rosen was all...not always only soccer, because in Groß Rosen I saw hang peo...uh, six people hung [hanged] on one gallows and I saw a lot of people being hanged for committing a sort of sabotage. When we...yeah. And also on ...in Groß Rosen--before the evacuation, all the sick people in the hospital was, uh, put aside; and later on they were all eliminated, because they didn't want to take, uh...to the evacuation, uh, program include all those sick people. So it was a, a, uh, a very murderous game too, you know, although it looks so nice, uh, uh...on the outside.

Q: Is there anything else you want to add about Groß Rosen before we move on?

A: Well I could add only this: that the Germans, uh, ordered the whole camp be burned. As soon as we left the camp, the group of Kapos that, uh, remained, you know, put fire to all the blocks. All the blocks were wooden barracks. So today nothing left; only foundation and only the building--uh, one brick building, the entrance to the camp--which is still standing. Everything else was completely destroyed. There is absolutely no proof that there was a camp.

Q: Tell us what happened to you. Where did you go? Where were you taken when you left Groß Rosen?

A: I was, uh, taken by train to the next...to the...to the camp of Hersbruck. Hersbruck was a sub-camp of the big camp of Flossenbürg. And, uh, again, in, uh...I landed in, uh...in office over there. I had al...yeah...I had the same; and this...this job, uh, I knew, you know. They always appreciate people who know, are familiar on the job, you know? Germans are very practical people. They might be very cruel, and they might...but you know, they are practical; and for, uh, for, uh, for this practical purpose they would use that man to, you know, to the very end. Uh, I was, uh, getting a good job. As I watched what the other doing, the whole transport that came from...from, uh, Groß Rosen were, uh, detailed to the work in the underground factory, uh, in the hills around Hersbruck; and to clearing the station, uh, of Nuremberg [**Ger:** Nürnberg] after the, uh, air raids. So, uh, part went here and part went there. And of course, you know, this was a murderous, uh, uh, assignment. There were a lot of people who died because, uh, the situation, the living conditions was at that time already disintegrating. The...so, was so primitive that, uh, even the strongest people have a hard time to survive. I would, I would not dwell more on that, uh...on Hersbruck. Hersbruck was a camp, uh, built on the swamp, right by the river. We had to walk on, uh, on the, on the raised uh walks that was raised about three feet above the ground. All of the blocks were built the same way. They were raised, because there were water underneath; and of course this is being a sub-camp, they didn't

care about, you know, routine...regular, uh, camp routine. There were no roll calls anymore. The roll calls were performed, uh, uh...privately, on each block. The main thing was to do the work, you know. And the most important work for them was to work...uh, clear the destruction caused by the planes on the main station of Nuremberg. I went there several times. And I remember the first time we went to the Nuremberg, which is about twenty-six kilometers from the camp, uh, Hersbruck. It took us six hours 'til we arrived in, uh...in the Nuremberg station; because, you know, all the tracks were, uh, uh, in...completely destroyed. So uh Hersbruck was a target of the constant attacks by planes. The situation was such that there was a town of Hersbruck, and a camp in a valley--narrow valley--and there were hills on both sides. And you would see those planes coming from one side of the hill and then disappearing on the other side; and they would throw bombs, everything what they had, in that area. And they were... and they were throwing bombs everywhere, camp or no camp. They were attacking all the plane...uh, trains that were approaching that station Hersbruck. Uh, sometimes the bodies would...uh, would land right in the center of the...of the camp, after... after they'd attack. So we were always, you know, under attack. But on uh second day, day after Easter, we all gather in the, uh (cough)...in the camp; and then we started the evacuation. There were ten thousand people that marched that day. We came after twenty days of the death march uh...through Dachau, only less than two thousand men. Everything was...everything was killed or died out of hunger uh in, in between. Five days we didn't get anything to eat or to drink at all. Uh we were, we... we came as a ghost, really, to Dachau. And then in Dachau, nobody wanted to take care of us because Dachau itself was already in the process of evacuation. There were thousands of prisoners coming out of...uh coming into and out of the camp. So uh when they finally process us, they didn't give anything to wear. We were naked, and we were only wrapped in a...in a blanket; and this way I lived several weeks. It had a uh some advantages, because I didn't attend, didn't have to attend uh roll calls; and I didn't have to go to work because I didn't have anything to wear. And this way I came, I uh uh...waited to the ...to the day--you know, 29 of April--when uh the...the uh final liberation came. It uh, days in Dachau were uh really quiet. You...uh camp was not working. Only the essential things were in operation. Otherwise the pri...prisoners were in the blocks, and there were planes above Dachau all the time uh patrolling. Nobody was shooting at those planes; although there were thousands of SS in, at that time, in Dachau. Everybody was uh uh very down. Even the SS. The SS would not even go to the camp. And there were no roll calls of any, uh, no...this famous drills that usually, you know, taken were were in the camp. You know, in Auschwitz or in other camps. And uh, on the day of, uh, the, uh, liberation, the day looks even clo...more quieter than usually. But after noon, they order us into the blocks and they lock all the doors. They locked the doors, and the only people allowed outside were the, uh, fire, uh, uh, brigade made of, uh, SS and now of Kapos. And then we were receiving our supper, which is around five o'clock, a...an attack started, you know. A hugh, uh, uh...I mean it's, uh...you heard, you know, the guns and you heard the revolvers and you heard, you know, all...all the front, all the all the fighting, you know, that is. And it lasted about, uh, twenty minutes, and then came the silence; and in those twenty minutes we all grabbed our things and we were ready to go. Nobody know where, but we

were ready to go. But then there is a silence; and everybody paused and waited and...and thought, "Well, what's going to happen now?" And then I look in the windows, and I see thousands of people running towards the gate, towards the electric wire. I jumped myself from the window, and I ran and I come to the, uh, uh, the barbed wire fence and I see everything is pieces. Prisoners are shooting from the rifles, you know, to the air; and everybody enjoy. You know, and I saw first American soldier. And this is how it happened. And, uh... in Heaven are, uh, hundreds of, uh, various flags, national flags were flying over Dachau.

LONG PAUSE

Q: How long did you stay in Dachau after liberation? What did you do? How did they take care of you?

A: They didn't take care at all. I mean, they...we were... the only...the, uh, man responsible for us in the Block--because we were in, uh...in an area where, which was behind the barbed wire too--was a, uh, Blockältester, who was a prisoner himself. And he didn't know really nothing, what's going to happen, just like we did. As I say, it was such a disorder everywhere that uh there was no work. There was no food. We were almost as hungry as during the, uh...this march from Hersbruck to Dachau. And there're some women over there--behind in the next block--too, you know. There were just a miserable creatures. They brought ...you know, Dachau was not known of having a women camp, but they were brought from somewhere. Probably a, a, a group that was traveling on foot and uh came to Dachau as the nearest camp. From there, they were sending people toward, uh, Garmisch-Partenkirchen [**NB:** Sub-camp of Dachau in Bavaria]. You know, toward the Alps. Now, uh, Dachau was, uh, liberated on 29th of April. The same day--at night--on orders by Himmler, Dachau was supposed to be burned to the ground and everybody killed. And there were special positions of, for additional machine guns everywhere between the guards; and, uh, uh...the Americans really came about one hour before the deadline. They also had to fight after having liber...liberated us, hav...have to--at night, because a division of SS was marching from Munich to Dachau. Dachau is about 14 kilometers from Munich. And they were kept from coming and, uh, taking over the camp only by American guards that first night. But we couldn't sleep, and there was all that for us. We were supposed to be, you know, sent out not from the Dachau in case of emergency; but the emergency did not materialize.

Q: What...af...you were liberated. What did you do? What did you, John Kowski, do immediately after liberation?

A: Well, I was, uh...first thing what we did, we organize a...a, uh, artist, uh...uh, group; because, uh, uh, the problem was immediately after our liberation how to get out of the camp. The, the Americans closed again...repaired the holes in the...in the fence and put the soldiers on the guard towers; and they were shooting if somebody was trying to get out of the camp, uh, not... in a not authorized way. And they would really did not issue

permits for...for allowing people to go out, because there was a situation that they were afraid that the prisoners, those who would venture into the village, would kill Germans. Because there was such a hate for...for...toward the Germans that the Germans did not show up on the...on the street in towns or in the villages. They would sit locked in the houses. In Dachau itself, in the city of Dachau, their main street was a, uh...was a camp; military was camping right in the street, cooking, doing all kinds of things. Playing baseball, you know. And the Germans were sitting in the locked houses for weeks. The same thing was in the villages. They would not dare to go, venture outside. So, because of that, and also because of, uh, the epidemics--uh, I got also, uh, sick later on--uh, they would not allow to, uh, mix, to...to allow the prisoners go outside. And they keep them in...in, you know, and they tried to inoculate them and sort them, and...and, uh.... And they did not help, because, uh, they didn't know how to deal with such a problem. First thing, first of all, we were all hungry. When the liberation came, next day they put us together. They again order a regular roll call, as the Germans used to do, and they counted how many they have of those liberated people. There were forty-four thousand, uh, at that time in Dachau. Later on they brought us food, which was a...a, uh, loaf of bread. Everybody got a loaf of bread and a pork, uh, uh...can of of condensed pork fat. And some hungry people ate it, everything, immediately; and in five hours most of them were dead. Sixteen thousand people died after liberation, yeah, you know. Because the, uh...because they just over-ate all of a sudden, you know. I saw situation like this that, you know, we were receiving a, uh, soup in the, uh...very rich soup at noon; and the man get gets the soup, eats and then lays ...uh, sit down by the chimney, and in five minutes he is dead. Yeah. There were incredible--and then there were...people were, uh, were, uh, have a dysentery diseases, all kinds of, uh, of, uh, of stomach problems, because of that. And I got sick...I got a...a fever and I was in a hospital. I almost died too, you know. There are a lot of people, thousands of people that died in American hospital in Dachau. And when I finally get out of that, the camp was already, uh...breaking up, because Americans needed that camp for, uh...for another use. They wanted to use then for, uh, military, for the prisoners of war camp. And, uh...prisoners of war who came to Dachau were the SS people. So by this time I was already in other camps, uh, in the displaced person, uh, camp; and they used to bring us very often to Dachau, and they would sit us in the front the barbed wire fence. And the Germans would parade behind, on the other side. And they, we would point out the people we knew because they were preparing court cases of all those arrested Germans. Uh...

Q: Tell us very, tell us very briefly where you went after this and how you got from Europe to America. Tell us what you did.

A: Well I, uh...first thing after I...I, after I get out of my sick bed, was I went to Garmisch-Partenkirchen. I always was very fond of mountains. I heard about that that they are beautiful Alps, so I made that first trip. It took about one day--hundred kilometers, one day; but finally I got to Garmisch, and I, uh, went to the Zugspitze there. I went to the Zugspitze...uh, there is a special train that rides up to the mountain, and it was impossible to get a ticket, you know. And here I am waiting and deliberating, uh, in the station what

I'm going to do next, and here comes an American soldier. And I recognized that this is my friend from Auschwitz, an artist, who in between, you know, he...who was from Auschwitz, evacuated to Buchenwald. He was liberated earlier than me. He was liberated, Americans came earlier than that, and he joined the American army. Not only that, but he was already in action and he had... he had a medal for his service in American army because he got in trouble somewhere in the...in the Trieste. You know, in Italy. So he bought me a ticket to the...to Zugspitze, and I came from that Zugspitze back in the evening. And I found two girls, you know, walking on the street, you know. The one was my wife, future wife. She was with her friend, you know; and she lived nearby, near the station. There was a question--where are you going to stay for the night, you know. So here was a very convenient, uh, uh, way, uh, to...to arrange that, you know, by knowing somebody; so I...I started out, uh. I came later on again to Auschwitz; and then my wife came to [Wagenril (ph)], to that, uh, displac...displaced person. She got a secretary job over there. And then again later on we both went to Garmisch, and... where we married. And because she was in Garmisch, uh, before the war ended, so she had a rights to to be considered as a...as a person with permanent resident in Garmisch. So for that reason--uh, because I married her, you know--I got that residence too. And I could stay in Garmisch until we moved to a special house for the former prisoners of, uh, from the concentration camps in [Munau (ph)]. [Munau (ph)] is about three, three kilometers toward the Munich. And, uh, from there...there, we, uh, applied for the papers, you know, to United States. I had an uncle at that time, who died already, and I got in contact with him. He sent me that affidavit...he wants to, uh, you know, bring me to the United States; but it didn't work. It, uh, it took more than one year, uh about two years before...because, before the papers were filed in uh in the in the consulate or in the embassy, I don't know where. Anyway, it tooks years; and finally I came, uh, uh... and a Jewish organization came along and helped me. And with... uh, through them, you know...this was an organization based in New...New York City.... They really, you know, helped; me because they were, uh, organizing a transport to the United States and I went with them, you know. Actually I, I went for the second, the second, uh, transport that...uh, under the...under this new law that was passed in Congress about the DP, you know; dur...during the Truman years, you know. So I went to United States; but, you know, uh, the situation was completely different than it is right now. Nobody cared about the poor displaced people who had came. I didn't have a time...I have very hard time to get a job. I...there was, uh, impossible to get odd job any, anywhere. Although Elizabeth [**NB:** New Jersey], where I lived, was not very far from, uh, from, uh, New York City; so I went to the factory in the, uh...and I work in the factory for a year and a half before.... And later on again, I went to Germany on the contract with United States Government.

Q: I need to stop here. We want to save some time to show the pictures. Uh, I just want to ask one quick question. I'd like you to go back to Auschwitz, to the museum. You did some painting in the museum at night, didn't you? In Auschwitz?

A: Yeah.

Q: OK. Would you tell us just very briefly about the...what you painted?

A: I painted scenes; uh, usually these were, uh, scenes with people, and from a, uh, illustration to the German musicals. Wagner, for example, is a...has, you know, the dramas, you know. Things like that. The things that German allowed, and really uh were interested in. So, for example, uh, troubadours; you know, medieval scenes. They were very fond of it, you know. The whole SS was found on this principle of some, uh...some of a knight; knights, you know, in a medieval times. You know, the...Himmler himself, I think he organized that that way. So, uh, I painted this kind of a scenes; and a practical, uh, uh...pictures, like portraits. Portraits. This is how I uh could survive and live a little bit better than other prisoners; uh because uh they were bringing me uh food for that, you know. They, they sometimes were very gracious, and they bring the food; and...and uh it uh ...or even, uh even when uh Holocaust started, we had, you know, all kinds of things in Auschwitz. We used to call it "Canada." Now all these remnants of the Jewish property that was confiscated by Germans, sorted out and sent to German stores or to the front; uh part of it...all of this was stolen, and appeared in a...on the black market, and this black market was called "Canada." Now, uh...

Q: We need to stop [here. I'm sorry. OK. But we do need to stop and we're going to do the photographs. Thank you. That's quite a story. All right. I don't know how, you know, listening to your story, John, of of escape from Auschwitz, I still don't know how...I heard you, but I still don't...it still boggles the mind...it really does.

A: You know, after a while, after that escape, after I have been liberated and...and uh some times, very often when I when I work at night in my studio, in my home, I sometimes remember...it comes to my mind all those things, and I laugh about it. I feel how how this was a stupid thing. There was...this was this was so many...there was such a hazard involved in it. I could have been, you know, caught many many times, you know. I didn't, so maybe because...] **[NB: Text in preceding brackets does not appear on videotape.]**

PHOTOGRAPHS

- (1) ID photo strip--3 photos of prisoner in striped uniform with shaved head, resembling police mug shots. Left hand photo labeled: "No. 564, KL Auschwitz."
- (2) Photograph of six persons seated around a table, circa 1942. Mr. Komski explains that four of these persons (including himself) were those who escaped from Auschwitz. The other two are the headman of the village Libi_z--where the four escapees were hidden--and his daughter. All six are identified by name. [**NB:** The same photograph is printed in Garli_ski, Fighting Auschwitz, between pages 288 and 289. However, the names of the four escapees are spelled differently than on the copy shown here.]
- (3) Landscape painting of O_wi_cim castle and bridge. Painted by John Komski on one of his trips with the Auschwitz surveying team to explore and map territory outside the camp. Oil painting commissioned by an SS officer.
- (4) Painting--postcard painted by a prisoner at Auschwitz. Shows Native Americans torturing white captives, used as an allegorical theme to express to the recipient the true nature of Auschwitz.
- (5) Folder/letter, with painting of white flowers on blue background. Used by prisoner as officially sanctioned message home. No text.