

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Christian Koppenstein on March 24, 2018 in Overgaard, Arizona. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Koppenstein, for agreeing to meet with us and speak with us and share some of your story with us today.

It's my honor to have you do this.

Well, thank you. It's ours as well.

So the only thing that I would like is for you to ask the questions, and I try to answer them the best way that I know how.

OK. Thank you. And you know, that's what we'll start with. We'll start with the very basic questions from the beginning. And from there your story will develop. So the very first question I have is can you tell me the date of your birth?

My date is October 20, 1936.

October 20, 1936. And what was your name at birth? When you were born, what was your name?

Christian Koppenstein.

Did you have a middle name?

No.

OK. Where were you born?

When?

Where.

Where? Germany, at a colony between Romania and Russia. And they called it Bessaabia. And that's where I was born.

What was the name of the place within Bessarabia that you were born?

Fundu Sarasika.

Fundu Sarasika.

Yes.

And when you say Germany had a colony, did that mean that Germany ruled over this place, or it just was that it was colonized by German people?

It was colonized by the people.

OK. About how long had German people been in this part of the world?

As far as my knowledge, since the 1700s.

OK. And how did they get there?

I think the way I understand is they had even different countries, they come over there to live there in that area because it was not ruled by Russia or by Romania. So basically, it was ruled by the German people that lived there.

Oh, I had always thought that this was some place that was ruled by Russia originally, by Catherine the Great, who invited settlers.

She invited people basically from different countries that wanted to live there, and they were not all Germans. But they were also from different countries.

So did you have neighbors who had different nationalities?

No.

OK.

That particular town or village, what they called it was kind of on its own. And different villages had different people ruling, whatever they were doing.

When you were born in 1936, what country was this part of the world included in?

Well, I don't know about different countries because they were basically on their own merits.

So it was self-rule.

And the basic rule was they were ruled by Germany.

OK. Can we cut for a second? OK. I stopped the camera because I was a little confused. I was under the impression that Bessarabia was part of another country, not Germany, because in the book that you wrote that you self-published was a sentence where you said your father had served in the Romanian army. So if it wasn't part of Romania, why would he have to serve in that army?

That come a little bit later on because my father also was in the Russian army before that.

Was he?

Yes. And then Romania took over, so they kind of intervened or whatever to rule that. But the main fact still was it was still ruled from Germany because the Russian queen was German. And so that's how that came about.

So you're talking about 200 years ago, when the Russian Queen was Catherine the Great, who was originally German. I see. OK. Let's go on a little bit. We'll, I think, clarify things as we go along. Tell me, what was your father's name?

Reinhold Koppenstein.

Reinhold Koppenstein.

And he did not have a middle name, either.

Do you know what year he was born in?

Yes.

What was that?

In 1911.

1911. And your mother, what was her name?

She was [NON-ENGLISH].

[NON-ENGLISH]. That was her maiden name.

Yes.

And what was her first name, her given name?

Gosh.

I know, I've kind of caught you. She was mama, wasn't she?

She was my mother, period.

Yeah. It'll come to you.

Emma.

What?

Emma.

Emma.

Yes.

And did you have any brothers and sisters?

I had one brother. He was three years younger than me. And then I had a sister who was born in 1941.

OK. So your brother was born in 1939 and your sister was born in 1941.

Yes.

Do you know the year that your mother was born in?

Yes.

What was that?

1914.

1914. That's why they got a little mixed up.

Yes.

And tell me this. Your parents, then, sound like they were quite young when they started having a family.

They were.

Did you ever know how they met and how they got to know each other?

They would never talk about that. And the basic fact is I never did know for sure.

OK. Were they from the same village?

No, they were from different villages, both of them.

OK. Your mother, do you know the village that she was from?

No, I can't remember.

OK. And your father?

He was pretty close to Fundu Sarasika because when he got older, a little bit older, my grandfather moved there.

OK. And how did they put food on the table? How did your father put food on the table? What did he do for a living?

My father was a farmer. And at that point we had 600 hectares.

That's huge. That is huge.

It's just about two and 1/2 to to one.

So two and 1/2 acres to one hectare. So if we do the math, we're talking about--

About over 1,000.

Yeah. Yeah. Now had that farm come to him through his father, or had he purchased it?

He purchased that himself because my grandfather died in 1936.

The year of your birth.

Before, about a year before. So I never got to know him at all.

Did you know your grandmother on your father's side?

Yes.

What was her name, besides grandma?

Besides grandma, I can't really remember right this minute.

OK. But it was also Koppenstein as her last name.

Yes, that was her last name.

Did your father have brothers and sisters?

Yes, 11.

11? 11.

Brothers and sisters.

And did they live in the same village?

Till they were old enough to leave then, and they went elsewhere into different places. Within Bessarabia?

Yes.

OK. So everybody stayed within Bessarabia.

Yes.

Did you get to know any of your aunts and uncles?

I knew just about all of them.

OK. Did they visit, and did you visit them?

I did, yes. But it was hard by wagon and horses. And basically that was our own way of transportation was horses.

Did anybody own a car? No. At that point I didn't even know what there was such a thing as a car.

Really. Really. Well, that's common for Eastern Europe. That was common. In many villages, when a car would drive through, I was told, all the little boys would run after it because it was so interesting, it would be an event.

The only car that I can remember is there were trucks and stuff like that. That happened in the 1940s.

So after the war starts, that's when you see that.

The war started in the '30s.

That's right. That's right. Well, yeah. What was the language everybody spoke at home?

What they called [NON-ENGLISH].

[NON-ENGLISH]?

Yes. It's different than the normal German language that is out there now. That come at a later date.

So you grew up surrounded by [NON-ENGLISH].

Yes. And let's choose a sentence. Let's choose a sentence. The forest around us is green. How would you say that in [NON-ENGLISH]?

Gosh, I can't even remember a whole lot of German anymore.

Oh, really? Because I wanted to find out what's the difference saying it in [NON-ENGLISH], as you grew up, from the kind of German people would speak today?

Like a lot of things, you know, like potatoes or something like that, even there, at the [NON-ENGLISH], they had different ways of saying it.

So normally, it would be [GERMAN].

Yes.

How would you say it in [NON-ENGLISH]?

Gosh, I can't remember at this minute, either.

Oh, that's OK. When grandma's name comes to you, she'll be carrying some of those potatoes.

It happens. It happens. These are details, but I'm trying to paint a picture of what was your life like and how did people communicate, and what was that world like.

The language is not that far apart from what they call the regular German that is being spoken now. But the difference was just slightly. And you could always understand basically what you were asking for.

OK. OK. That's important. That's important to know. But did you have a dialect or an accent that, when you did come across other Germans in Germany later on in your life, they could tell you weren't from there?

Yes, there was. Just about the same as my English is today. And it's not really-- you have a dialect that a lot of people would understand what you're saying, but it's still a hidden kind of situation.

OK. Let's go back to the farm that your father bought, all those 600 hectares. Did he work it alone? Did he have help?

He had quite a few men that would work there, and also had a couple of ladies that were helping my mother.

Well, that's a huge farm.

Yes, it was.

Describe it for me a little bit. What kind of animals did you keep?

Mostly cows and horses.

Did you ever participate in any of the work as a little little kid?

Oh, yes, always.

What were the things you liked to do?

Well, basically, I got on a horse when I was very young, and a lot of times go and get the cows to be milked and stuff like that. And a lot of times got the well and got the water. The well that we had was quite deep, but I managed to get some water out of it.

Well, you know, we're talking about the years when you are just a little bit more than a toddler. If you're born in 1936, there's not a whole lot that a little boy age three or four can do. But they can be interested in things.

I was very interested in everything.

Yeah? Did you like following your father around as he was doing his chores?

Yes, I was. I was always outside. And as far as being in the house, I was not much interested. I felt like I was being-- I don't know what exactly to call it-- to be confined.

Yeah. Well, a farm can be a very fascinating place for a little kid.

It is.

What were some of the things that you were the most interested in when you were little about the farm?

Just about everything that went on.

Really? Yeah?

Yes. I'm a very nosy person, and I still am.

So tell me some of the things that would go on because a lot of people who will be listening to this don't know the first thing about farming and don't know the first thing of what it takes to have a farm run.

Well, you have to know your animals, for one thing for sure. And if you want to plant crops, you also need to know what to do with the land. You had to plow it, harrow it, plant it. And then hopefully it rained enough and stuff to where it would come up and grow into wheat or sug beets or any of those things, whatever your planted.

What is it that your father planted?

He had a lot of wheat and barley and oats. And of course, a lot of potatoes.

Oh, yeah. Potatoes are some of the mainstays.

Yes. And of course, my mother at the garden, which grew a lot of vegetables and things like that as well.

Did you have fruit trees?

Yes.

What kind?

We had apples, pears, cherries, and plums.

Were you self-sufficient? Yes, pretty much.

Did your father have a mill for the wheat to make it into flour?

No.

He brought it someplace else?

He took it to the flour mill, where they were grinding it up and made flour out of the wheat.

With 600 hectares, that's more than just feeding the family. Who did he sell the excess to?

Took it to the village. And there were always buyers there that would buy basically everything because there's a lot of people had no idea where does stuff come from.

Of course. Of course. Were their market days in the village?

Yes. You know, lot of times like what you called Saturday market or something in that effect. And they had a lot of that going on. But my father never was one to hang around very much because he sold it to some brokers, and then they would distribute whatever was available.

So that's a difference, because some farmers who have more land, more produce, a market day is retail. It's not wholesale.

No, it's not.

Yeah. Did your mother ever take anything to market?

Oh, yes. She did a lot of that as well, loaded up big wagon full of stuff and hauled it to the village.

What were some of the things that she had grown or made that she would sell?

Gosh, I can't remember all of it. She basically just, about all the vegetables that she could. And being anything over the winter time over there, that was quite impossible because it was quite cold.

Did they prepare food for the winter?

Yes.

Did you ever help in that or see how it was done?

Usually when they would butcher an animal, then the first thing they would do, they would smoke it. And then a lot of it, they would hang it in the rafters in the house. And it kind of was preserved that way.

Why would it be hung on rafters in the house?

Well, animals, mice, rats, stuff like that.

So that they couldn't get to it.

So they couldn't get to it at all.

Did you have any pets?

Yes, we did. I had a German shepherd dog.

What was his name?

Just a dog.

Just a dog. Didn't have one. OK. Did you name any of the animals?

No. Basically, there's too many.

Too many. Tell me a little bit about the house, what did the house look like that you lived in, from your memory?

It was basically a single story house. But the roof was quite steep and had slats which was made of straw.

So it was a straw roof, a steep pitched roof.

Pitched roof.

What were the walls made of?

Some old timber.

So it was wooden.

Wooden.

Wooden. And the floors?

They were also wood.

How was the place heated?

Wood stove.

Not coal, wood.

Wood.

Wood. And how many rooms did the house have?

That particular house, we had approximately, I believe, about six or seven rooms.

That's quite large.

Well, we had a lot of people that lived there and they stayed in our house. So it was just a big family affair.

When you say a lot of people who lived there, does that mean the hired help?

Yes. An we also had what they called a summer kitchen.

OK. Where was the summer kitchen?

Which was a house on its own, which they would use in the summer when it was quite warm, and that way they kept the house quite cool.

OK. Well, that makes sense. I wouldn't have thought that, but of course, without air conditioning in the heat, who wants to cook and warm up a house when it can be hot outside?

If you want a drink of water, sometimes you could break the ice first, and then you could get a drink of water. That was in the house.

In the winter.

Yes.

It could get that cold.

It was quite cold, yes.

Did you have any electricity?

There was no such thing as electricity.

OK. How did you provide light when it would get dark?

We had candles for the most part, or some oil lamps. And then later on, we had some carbide lights.

What are carbide lights?

A carbide is about as big around as your finger, and then you could turn it down into the water and then it create a gas. And then you would burn that. It was quite dangerous in one way, but it was quite efficient.

Describe the village a little bit for me. Was it a village where everybody knew everybody?

For the most part, yes.

Do you know about how many families would have been living there?

Probably about 30 or 40 families.

So that might be a couple hundred people all told.

Yes.

Did it have a store, like a general store?

It did. But it was very limited because everything they got they had to go and transport it in by horses.

By horses. And was there such a thing as a baker, or did everyone bake their own bread?

Everyone baked their own stuff.

OK. And there wasn't like a communal baker where you would prepare your loaf and bring it and they would bake it.

No.

OK. Was there a church?

Yes. We had a church. Basically, everybody went there. We only had one church in that village.

What denomination was it?

Lutheran.

Lutheran. So you were born into and brought up in the Lutheran faith.

Yes.

Was your family very religious?

They all knew what the Bible was, and they could all read it. And basically that's what it was. On Sundays they kind of got together in the village. And us, like being out on the farms, we did go into the village, but not every Sunday.

In your book, I think you mentioned that there wasn't a minister attached to the village, but that you had a traveling minister sometimes.

Yes, sometimes. And sometimes it was just people that go up there. And they were not being a minister, but they would go and talk about the religious parts of it.

So they would hold the services. They would hold the services themselves.

Yes.

Was there a school?

There was. But right there in that village, I never went to school there.

You never went to school there. You were too little.

I was too young. But I did know how to cheat about wanting to go somewhere.

What do you mean? You mean like when you wanted to play hooky?

Something like that, yes.

Well, I think that's part and parcel of being a kid, you know, particularly a little boy. Little boys play hooky.

Back in them days, that was probably the only time I was a boy.

Tell me a little bit about your parents personalities. What kind of nature did your mother have, for example?

My mother was a very mild lady in one way and very tough in another.

OK. Explain that to me.

For one thing, the religion kind of dictated to where she was because if you'd done something wrong, we also knew what a belt was. And so you get educated very nicely in that direction.

Did that happen often?

No, not to me. because I did not like the belt and I did not like to get into trouble anyway.

So you were a good kid.

I tried.

OK. And was she the one who then administered the belt when it had to be administered?

Not really. My father was the one that done the real damage.

OK. He was the disciplinarian.

Yes.

Let's turn to him. What kind of a personality did he have?

He was very soft spoken. But his word was law, and that's the way it went. And sometimes I could hear the two arguing about certain things, but it didn't matter on the end results. He was still the law.

OK. Since he had so many siblings, was he amongst the youngest or the oldest, or where was he?

He was just about right in the middle. And he had older brothers and older sisters. And then he also had younger brothers and sisters. So he was somewhere in the middle of 11 children.

After your grandfather died, where did your grandmother live, your paternal grandmother? Did she move?

She stayed with us.

She moved in with you.

Yes.

OK. And now let's turn to your mother's side of the family. She came from a different village, you said.

Yes.

Did she have brothers and sisters?

Yes, she did.

And how many, do you know?

I think they had 12.

Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness. And did you know that side of the family, too?

Yes, I did.

Oh my goodness. Your house was never empty, was it?

No. But they had a farm on their own, and my grandfather was a blacksmith. And so he had other things going as well.

Well, that sounds like it could have been an interesting thing to see.

I enjoyed? Being with him because I also learned what he was doing as a kid.

It's fascinating.

And right now I have a grandson that wants to follow in the similar position. But I don't know for sure where he wants to go yet because he's still going to college.

So he would like to do something like ironworks?

Yes.

That can be quite creative. It really can be. Some beautiful things are done with ironworks.

I will show you a little tiny thing that he made for me already.

OK. I'd love to see it.

I'll show it to you later.

Thank you. So your maternal side of the family, did you visit them or did they come to visit you?

Both ways.

Both ways. So they must have lived fairly close by, that you would be visiting them.

Well, sometimes it took almost all day to get where they lived, and same the other way.

Do you remember the town or the village they lived in?

No, I can't remember that anymore.

Do you know if your village ever had a name in another language, or was it always Fundu Sarasika, you said?

Fundu Sarasika.

Fundu Sarasika

Yeah. As far as my knowledge of it, that was the only one. And if anybody wants to look it up on the internet, that was the one that you still have to use now.

OK. Did you have playmates your age at that time?

We had a neighbor. And their kids were slightly older than me. And we had a game going.

What would that be?

We had an apple tree, and so did they. And the whole fruit was all red all inside. It's a very nice trees. They were quite large. So we had this game, and we went over to their place to get some of those apples that we could eat, and they'd come over to our place and get them.

Because the apple is greener on the other side.

Well, that's not exactly what our neighbor said to my dad. He said, I think stolen apples must taste better. Not that we needed it, but we just did it.

Did you get into trouble for this?

No.

No.

It was just a fun game.

Well, and there must have been enough apples to go around.

Both of them, they were very huge.

Were there ever strangers who would come into town?

Occasionally.

Who would they be?

They called them gypsies. Now what they were, I have no idea.

OK. But did you see any of them, like Roma and gypsies? Describe what they looked like.

I don't know. Just like-- to me, at that time, they looked like anybody else.

Did they dress differently?

Yeah. They kind of had-- on their own way, they made their own clothes and stuff like that. And whenever they come over to your place, if you were not there specifically, they would take some stuff. And then they would also leave some stuff.

Oh, really?

It was more of a trade than it was a theft. And nobody minded that at all.

And would they hang around for a while, or would be just like passing through?

Just passing through.

Did anybody in the village have a radio?

No, because basically they had no batteries. They had no electricity or any of those kind of things. And so they did not have a radio.

How did people find out about what was going on in the outside world?

Just talk.

Word of mouth.

Yes.

And were there newspapers?

Not to my knowledge, not there.

Was there a library?

No.

OK. What buildings? We talked about a church and a general store and a marketplace. Were there any other kinds of buildings that were sort of like community buildings in the village?

Not that I can remember at all. Not there.

So when you were that little, and your parents were working, both of them quite hard, but having help from hired help, was your hired help also German?

Yes.

So the same language amongst everybody.

Yes.

All right. I can't imagine that as a three-year-old, you would have heard conversations that had to deal with politics.

There was no politics, to my knowledge, anyway. And as far as my parents, they never talked much but anything other than the working that had to be done on the farm.

Were they storytellers?

No.

No. So they didn't tell you stories of their own childhood.

No. That was a misfortune on my part.

Well, it sounds like the life sounds good. It sounds like you were well to do. For farmers, 600 hectares is a lot. But that there is also very little time, that they're busy.

They never had much time. That was from daylight to dark.

So did you get to know any of the hired help?

I knew all of them.

And did they come also from the village, or were they from further away?

I have no idea where they all come from or any of those things because to me, they were just people that helped my parents.

OK. OK. Tell me a little bit about-- oh, I just had a question, and it went that way. It happens. Oh, yes, I know what I wanted to ask about. You said your father served in the Russian Army.

Yes, he did.

How did that happen and when did that happen? If he's born in 1911, that means he's military age by 1931, something like that. Maybe a little bit before.

Somewhere about '31, '32, maybe.

So this is before your birth.

Yes.

And did he ever tell you how that happened that he served in-- it would have been the Soviet Army.

Yes, it was.

Did he ever tell you about that?

Not very much ever, because my parents never talked about much of anything that would even matter in my life or any of those things.

They just mentioned that he served in it.

Yes.

Do you think he was drafted?

Yes, I know he was, because he wouldn't have never went because he was not what you would call a military man. He never was.

Tell me about that.

Well, I don't know much about the Russian situation, except that he talked to our neighbor occasionally, and I heard some of that about some of the horrible things that he had to do as a Russian soldier. And then Romania took over Bessarabia, and I don't know the political stuff what was going on. And we basically didn't much care.

And then he went into the Romanian Army. And to this day I have a picture of my dad in the Romanian uniform. And my grandfather in 1935-- that was before I was born-- got a visa to go into the Romanian army to go see my father.

And my mother thought-- his name was Christian, the same as myself-- and she thought that visa was mine.

Was yours?

That's what she was thinking about. But it actually was a visa for my grandfather to go see my father in the Romanian army.

So your father was stationed someplace else.

Yes.

And all of this is happening before you were born.

Yes. That's the only thing that I got is I got my father's picture of the Romanian army.

Do you have that visa still?

Yes, I have.

Oh, maybe we could look at it later because that's very interesting as a document. So do you think he was also drafted into the Romanian army?

Yes, he was. That I'm sure because like I said, he was not a military man.

Parents have things that are important to them, values that they think are important to them that they want their children to understand. What are some of those values that were important to your father? My father had very little of that kind of stuff. But my mother always tried to carry as many pictures as she could possibly do during all of the later on situations. How she kept all of those pictures and whatnot, I have no knowledge. She just kept them.

So it was important for her to kind of have some sense of what your identity is, who are the people you're connected to. Here are their photographs. Here is a document, or something like that.

Yes.

But you say your father was not a military man in a very definitive way. So something tells me that that was transmitted to you. And I'm trying to get a sense of what were the values in your father that that made him like that?

The farm because he had a big farm back then. And then later on, then, when we had to move away from there, the only thing that we could keep was stuff that we could carry. There was no horses, no nothing, just whatever you could carry. That's the only thing.

OK. So the things he valued was his farm. That was his world.

Was his life. Then later on, the same. He was also, then, later on in the German army, and he didn't like that, either.

Well, we'll come to that. But I'm still focused now about your first years before any war, before any changes. Did you ever see any soldiers coming through town of anybody?

Yes. Well, not so much in town, just passed our farm. And in one way, I was kind of fascinated at a young child about the uniform and those kind of things. But it was not something I would have been interested in at all.

Well, most little boys find uniforms interesting. So do you know what army those soldiers were part of?

Yes.

What army was that?

Well, the difference and the colors and whatever in the uniforms, and the different dress and that type of thing. And just knowing where my father was and what it would be. And I also have a picture of my father with a Romanian uniform.

Yes. Do you have any photos of him in any other uniform?

No. Not even the German ones, because we were not allowed to have cameras or any of those things later on.

When you were still little living in Fundu--

Sarasika.

Sarasika. I keep forgetting the second part.

I forget it, too, occasionally.

You say that in peacetime, there were soldiers who would sometimes come by.

Yes.

Were they Romanian army soldiers?

Either one. There for a while, it was the Russian, and then later on the Romanian.

OK. So you saw Soviet soldiers. Yes.

Interesting. Very interesting. Did anything happen when there were Soviet soldiers around?

No.

Anything happen when there were Romanian soldiers around?

Not at that time, no.

OK. So life was pretty much like it always had been.

Yes.

Did anybody in the village seem nervous, or life just kept on going?

Everybody just done their own thing. And that's the way life was at that time. They worked from daylight to dark, and they didn't care much about anything else.

So tell me, when did things start to change? What happened when things really started to change in your life?

In my life, things started to change in 1941.

When you're five years old.

Yes. We had to move away from that place.

How? Why?

Because Russia wanted that property, and I guess the war was starting to start for the Second World War already in the upper '30s. And of course, we didn't know much about that. But we had to move because--

Who told you to move? The German SS.

So the German SS. That was the Third Army. That was the Third Army, but my father was not there yet at that time.

So the German SS, or the Germans, the German army comes into your part of the world.

Yes. And they told us that we can't take nothing out of that village whatsoever. And to this day, I could probably claim that property, but I would have to live there where we were. And still to this day, there is no electricity. There is no facilities whatsoever.

Have you ever been back?

No. My cousin, she's from Canada right now. Her and a couple of her-- my mother's sisters, they went over there through the church. And they found our place that used to be. And they said the only thing that remains there is the well.

Really. So the house is gone.

Everything is gone.

Summer kitchen is gone, the barn is gone.

Everything.

Everything.

There's nothing there but the well.

Does anybody live there in the village?

Not after we all had to move, no.

So it became abandoned.

Yes.

A completely abandoned place.

That's right.

And nobody ever moved into it.

Can't.

Why not?

If you want to live around with wolves and stuff like that, it would be great.

But was there any government that prevented people from living there?

Yes, the Russian. Right now it's all Russian, or they call it Moldova now.

Ah, Moldova. OK. So Bessarabia is synonymous with Moldova.

Yes, it is now.

Yes. And there is a part of Moldova called Transnistria which is very contested territory between the Russians and the Moldovans.

Yes.

OK. But then that part of the world would be under the Moldovan government.

I would believe so, yes.

OK. Well, do you remember when the SS came to your house and told you to leave?

They told everybody. They had a community meeting, and they said either you move now, or you wind up in Siberia.

So in other words, they were saying what would happen to you, not what they would do, but what would happen to you if you didn't know.

If you didn't move, yes.

OK. Well, this sounds like it was around the time when Germany and the Soviet Union no longer were allies.

Basically, they still were at that time.

They still were. So do you remember from later the date that you moved? Do you remember the year and the month?

I don't know the month, but the year was in 1941.

Was it springtime?

I'm not quite sure. But we had to go and walk wherever we needed to go to. And then they put us in a truck. And then we wound up in Poland.

If you could only take what you could carry, what did you carry? What did you take with you?

Mostly clothes, I believe.

And your mother and father?

Well, there were two siblings that were pretty young.

So somebody carried them.

Somebody carried them.

Did you or grandparents go with you?

They had to go on their own.

That's your mother's father and mother.

Yes.

What about grandma from your father's side?

She went along with one of my father's brothers.

Who was also from that village?

Yes. So we all wound up, eventually, in Poland, which was we were quarantined there. We couldn't go anywhere. We couldn't go to town or any of those kind of things.

Excuse me. I'm going to go back a little bit. You said you went by truck?

They had trucks at that time. And so they let us get into the trucks. I mean, they were very nonfunctional stuff. But anyway, they finally got us where we needed to go.

You never got on a train.

Not at that point, no. As far as I know, I didn't even know there was such a thing as a train. And then we wound up in Poland.

So do you know what part of Poland you wound up in?

It was pretty much on the northern end of Poland.

In that quarantine camp.

Yes.

So that's quite a journey.

It was.

Do you know how long it took?

I can't remember that anymore, either.

Was the truck covered?

No.

So it was an open truck.

Open truck.

And how many people did it fit? I can't remember that, either. But anyway, it was pretty well loaded down. And they

had a lot of them. And then my father decided we were supposed to get a farm in Poland according to the SS or whatever. They said you can be reimbursed.

For the farm that you gave up.

That we had. And unfortunately, I guess, according to all politics, that never happened. So my father went and bought another farm in Poland.

So he had some money.

Well, he had some money, yes. And I have no idea what the cost for any of those things were. So he bought a farm. And then we started farming again.

But let's stop at the quarantine bit because you say you were in this place where you were quarantined.

Yes.

And was it a place that was like surrounded by either a wall or a wire or a fence?

A just big building. And there are records around it, and you could not leave the grounds.

Do you know why you were there?

Because they didn't have any place for the people to go. And so they kept them there until they found out what they really wanted to do with all the people.

OK. So I'm trying to get a sense of whether or not, when you talk about the SS and they tell you that you've got to leave, it sounds like you don't have much choice in the matter.

Well, we did.

You could've stayed.

We could have stayed and wound up in Siberia.

Did you know of anybody who did stay?

Yes.

And what happened to them?

Eventually they had to leave there because there was no food or anything like that. And they were kind of shirttail relation because the brother that my father's sister married, it was the brother to him that stayed. And then eventually they had to leave Siberia. And they didn't let them leave. They just went on the black market and got out that way.

So the threat was real.

It was very real, yes.

So if you stay, then you will be deported. So this was, in some senses, an evacuation.

Basically, yes.

But to a small child, when you're not given a whole lot of choice, it's just this is what you have to do. It probably didn't

feel like an evacuation.

Well, it didn't because it was just, OK, we're going to go to another place.

Did your parents talk about any of this on the way, or were they silent? Or what was their demeanor?

They talked very little about any of it. They just figured that's what they had to do, and that's what they did.

And so you're in this quarantine place in Poland, which sounds like a holding place.

A holding tank, you might say.

Yeah-- like a holding company, but different-- until it's figured out what happens with all the people.

Yes.

About how long were you there?

To my knowledge, we were probably there about three or four months.

That's quite a while.

It was quite a while.

And was your family all together in that quarantined area?

Yes.

So you were together?

Somewhat, yes.

So it wasn't like the men were split from the women or kept apart.

It was that, too.

It was both.

It was both.

The men were in one building and the women were in another building.

And where were you?

I was with the men.

OK. You were old enough that you were included.

And so was my brother.

Oh, and he was really little.

Yes, he was. And at that time, I had a little sister that was born there.

She was born in the quarantine facility?

Yes.

Oh, your poor mama.

I called her a Polack.

You called her what?

A Polack, which is not a very nice thing to say.

No. No, it isn't. But if you want to tease your sister, you'll find a way.

Always find a way.

What was her real name?

Lily.

Lily. Well, yeah, but I'm thinking of your mother. And it must not have been easy to be uprooted and carry a baby inside, and then maybe another on your arms. And did your father work while he was there? Did you do anything? or? Was it like everybody hung around during the day just waiting to hear what would happen with them?

That part of it I can't remember. But I know he was gone just about every day. But then at night, he'd come over there and be with us.

Did they give you rations?

Yes, they did.

And do you know what they were like? I mean, do you remember them?

As far as I can remember, it was mostly soup. And I'm not quite sure if I'd feed it to some animals now.

Not very good soup.

No.

So was this the first time that you tasted food that didn't taste very good?

Yes. But I learned how to maneuver to keep my stomach full, if I could.

How did you maneuver? How did you do that?

Well, I was kind of crafty sort of a guy. And whenever I could find a cook somewhere or anything like that, I went over there and I wanted to help, which sometimes they did just for the fun of it.

But that's pretty resourceful.

It kind of kept your stomach filled.

Yeah. When you think of it, a five-year-old, to have his wits about him to be able to go and figure out a way when you know that your parents are helpless to help.

That's right.

That speaks for that little kid.

I'm still that way.

So are there any other memories that you remember from that sort of quarantined area?

No, all I remember is there were great big huge buildings. And as far as I could remember anything at all, it had more than two or three stories high. And the only thing that I knew is this building was for the men, and I could go there. This was for the ladies, stay out.

Was there electricity there?

No.

How was it heated?

With some coal stoves and wood, stuff like that.

Did it have a name? I never did know, and I don't really care. I just wanted to get out of there. And I was very happy when my father bought another farm and we moved over there.

Was that place far from the holding camp, the farm?

It took you about almost two days to get there.

And how did you get there?

My father had bought a couple of horses. And so we used them. As far as my parents were concerned, walk.

So the kids, you and your brother, are on the horses, and your parents walked alongside.

Yes.

And who did your father buy the farm from?

That I don't know. Probably from the German military or whoever had taken over those places. The difference was that I could remember that anyone that was connected to that farm was not supposed to be working there. Of course, my father was kind of a cheat in that respect as well, because one of the ladies, she was born and raised there on that farm, and her parents were in town. So my dad hired her to help my mother.

Did he know that she had been from the farm?

He did, and so did my mother. But he said he didn't care. He says he had enough of somebody telling him what to do on his place, and he was not going to do it twice.

So in some ways, he wasn't being very obedient to the rules.

That's right.

And so there was this young woman whose farm it had been, or her family's, who was now working as a servant for your family.

Yes. And as I could remember, my father paid her some money, which was not supposed to happen either. And he told her not to tell them, anybody, that he she got paid. And so then whenever she went to the village where her parents were, she would take that money and give it to them, to her parents.

As far as her of working with my parents, she had no needs because she had as many clothes as she needed. She had enough to eat what she needed, and everything else in that respect, too.

Do you think she resented that they were there?

Not with us, no. But in a lot of places, that did not happen. So in one way, as a little kid, I was very proud of my dad, of what he did.

Of course.

That's when I started going to school over there.

We'll come to school, but I want to cut the camera a little bit. OK. So we were talking about this Polish girl who worked for your parents, and that your father paid her some money, which he was not supposed to do. And she would give that money to her parents. Did your families ever meet? Did he ever get to see or get to know her parents?

I don't know if my father did or not because he never said. But myself, no, I never met any of her family.

What about your mom? You don't know?

That I don't know either because they never talked about it.

Well, what I am assuming must have happened is that this Polish family was thrown out of their farm as that happened across Poland. And then German evacuees from territories like Bessarabia, or from Latvia or from other places that were in the east and were being resettled, would be moved into either apartments-- either Jewish apartments or Polish apartments or farms or things like that, not knowing, not knowing.

No.

Yeah. So the fact that it was forbidden for somebody who had previously lived there to be associated with the new occupants or owners is a rule I didn't know about, and that your father and mother knew about it, and then decided to do what they do anyway, and that you realized it as a young boy. That's what I was talking about earlier when I asked what were your father's values. And this is one of the ways that his values are shown. This is what he valued.

Yes. He valued the situation, what was going on on his farm, or supposedly his farm, nevertheless knowing that this farm was never his, but nevertheless he claimed it as such.

Well, he paid for it.

He paid for it.

He paid for it. Not to the ones who were thrown out of it, but to somebody.

Well, most likely I would say it all went to the politics of Germany, of what happened at that point. And that Germany had taken over Poland, that was nothing that we could even begin to think about or anything like that because even at that point, my father was not in the German army at that point. And he didn't get drafted into the German army until 1942.

Well, you see there is another interesting thing, that by 1942, he's 31 years old. That's not the age of most of your

draftees. That's older, significantly older.

At that point, I don't think Germany cared the age, as long as they could walk and shoot a gun, I think that was just about the only thing that they're concerned about. And like I said, my father was not a military man for anything. But when you get drafted into it, you don't have any choice. That's where he was, in the Third Army.

Do you know if he was a very religious man, your father?

About as religious as I could think of. He loved to go to church. He also knew how to read the Bible and tell us the basic facts. In our family, if you knew the Bible, you knew some about it, and you read the Bible and you could at least read, then that was a big plus.

So that gives me an easy segue way into what you said earlier about this is the place where you started school, when you were in this part of Poland and you had your second farm. This is where you started going to school.

Yes.

And is this where you started your formal education from, let's say, grade one?

Yeah.

What language?

German.

OK. Were there other children in the classroom who were also, like you, evacuees from someplace else?

Quite a lot of them. Actually, I would say at least 99% of them.

Well, that's pretty much everybody, isn't it?

Just about, yes.

So this would have been a school run-- do you know where the farm was located, what part of Poland, what the name of the place was?

No, I can't remember the place. I don't know any of the towns or any of those things, either. Only thing I know, it was on the northern end of Poland.

Was the weather much different from where you had been born and spent your first years in your own home?

Basically not. It was quite cold in the winter, lots of snow and stuff like that. And the summers were quite warm. And you know, when you're a young kid, you don't really care.

No, you don't. Was the farmhouse much different than your own?

No. Basically, it was an awful lot like the same as what we had before. It had a couple more rooms. But it was still the same. And then my dad had built another summer house.

Another summer kitchen. And did your mother's parents live with you at that point, or were they around?

She had lived with my dad's sisters.

That's your grandma.

My grandmother, yes.

From your father's side.

My father's side.

What about your mother's parents? Were they close by?

He bought his own farm. And he lived a few miles away from where we were, but he still stayed a blacksmith.

He still stayed a blacksmith.

Yes.

So the school, were there any Polish children in the school?

Not that I know of. Everybody that was there talked German. But then on the other hand, there were a lot of Polish children. They could also talk German.

OK. So German was the language.

That was the language in the school.

But there weren't Polish children in your class.

Not to my knowledge, no.

Did you ever interact with any Polish children?

Not too much because when we were done with school, we went home. And there again, my favorite place was my dog.

You got another dog?

Yes. OK. What kind of dog?

He had the same name as the first one.

What was that name?

Dog.

Dog. Or [NON-ENGLISH].

[NON-ENGLISH]. OK. But you know, one of the things that is different-- there are many things that are different. But one of the things that is different is that in your home village, everybody around you, except for the Gypsies who come by, the Roma who come by, are the same. That is, they're Germans like you are.

Yes.

But when you get to Northern Poland, you're no longer in this environment where everybody else is from the same background. And I'm wondering what kind of exposure and interaction you had with people who were either Polish or from another part of Europe or Jewish, if you met anybody who was Jewish.

They kind of segregated that to a certain extent. They wanted the Germans together in a group. And in that particular area, a lot of the people that bought farms and stuff over there, they were also German because they wouldn't let somebody else be in there.

As far as the Polish people, I have no idea really what happened there. As far as the Jewish people, back in them days, they were not segregated as being Jewish, that that was any difficulty, until a little bit later on.

Did you ever see any Jewish person?

Yes, I did.

While you were on that farm?

Well, later on I had one of my best friends in school was Jewish.

Really.

But we had no no confrontations whatsoever. They were having their religion and we had ours.

You mean when you were in Northern Poland and had settled into this farm, you had someone who was Jewish in your classroom?

Yes.

That's highly unusual.

I have no idea how that happened, but I didn't care. He was my friend.

Do you remember his name?

No, I can't remember.

Did he look different?

Not that I could tell. He was the same. Like I said, to me, if he would have hurt his finger and I would have hurt mine, it still would have come out red.

When I asked, he did he look different, is that some people who are Jewish had fair hair, fair eyes. They could pass as non-Jewish.

No.

You don't remember.

I couldn't tell one from another. He did not look any different.

But he said he was.

Well, because he went to a different church. That's all. And whatever the Jewish people do, that had nothing to do with us whatsoever

Well, as I say, I find that surprising because the history of Nazi policies in Poland was such that pretty soon after 1939, Jews were rounded up and put in ghettos, separated from--

Well, as far as I know, that was a myth.

Really?

Because a lot of Germans that did not agree with what was going on at that point, whether they are Jewish or whether they were not, all of a sudden, they had a star on their shirt that they were Jews. And it didn't matter what religion they were because if they didn't agree with what was going on--

Are you saying that there were people in your classrooms who had a star on their shirts, the yellow star?

Later on, yes.

Later on, yes. But probably, if it was 1941 that you were evacuated from Bessarabia, and then spent a number of months in this holding camp, and then your father buys the second farm, that means you start your schooling still in 1941, sometime around there.

Sometime in that area, yes.

And then you find that there are Jewish students with stars that they're wearing because that's the policy, they have to, in some of those classrooms.

At first.

At first.

And then later on, I don't know what happened, but they all disappeared from what was going on at that point.

So what was it that you say was the myth?

That they were not all Jewish people, that they had this star or any of those things. That was a myth because they were not all Jewish people.

Oh, no. No non-Jewish people had to wear a star. Only Jewish people had to wear the star.

That was the idea. But politically, it didn't work out that way.

I've got to say I'm a little confused by that.

OK. Let's say if I would go and I would say, just to some of the authorities, I would just go and I would say, OK, you're Jewish. The next day, you were. Whether your religion was Jewish or not, that had nothing to do with it.

Oh, I see. So if you want to go inform on someone, and say they're Jewish even if they may not be, that doesn't matter. They're already stigmatized as Jewish.

Exactly. Now I understand.

There's a lot of that went on that we knew that later on. But at first we had no idea of what was going on in the first place because we didn't even know why they were wearing them stars.

So in other words, the implication is that amongst people who were German-- whether they were from somewhere else or had come from Germany or whatever, but they're ethnically German-- if they wanted to denounce someone, they could go to the authorities and say, so and so's Jewish. And the authorities didn't pay any attention.

No.

They picked them up.

Yeah.

I see what you mean. I see what you mean.

I mean, it's not something that you would call that was a fair situation in the first place. But me personally, I didn't care whether the people were Jewish or whether they were not because to me, they were just people like the rest of us.

I see what you're saying. I see what you're saying. Wow. You know, the kind of atmosphere that you're describing means that you keep your mouth shut.

Exactly.

You can't trust anybody.

That's right. That's about what it amounted to.

And that means for a small child-- because you're still pretty young, you're in first or second grade-- that's quite a lesson to learn.

Well, I didn't have much lessons to learn because I was smart enough to know better even at a very, very young kid. And in them days, if you were really never a kid anymore.

Well, tell me about that.

Well, you had to be a grownup and think like a grownup rather than being a kid.

Did you ever get to be a kid?

Not to my knowledge, except when I was very, very young because you had to learn very quickly that if you had a friend, you kept your mouth shut no matter what he was because he was your friend. And I don't know why that kind of stuff was going on, but it did.

What were your subjects like? Did you have favorite subjects at school?

Me personally, in school? I was a math whiz.

Were you? Were you? So you liked math.

I always loved that. Even when I come over here to United States, when I was with my wife, I could help her out with math. I would write it down different, like we did in Europe or in Germany. But the answer was still the same.

Yeah, that's true. Well, I know that my daughter, for example, prefers math and prefers the sciences because there are precise answers, whereas in the humanities and literature, you can have one interpretation and you can have another interpretation. She wants to know the precise answer.

That was my theory.

So what were your teachers like in the school?

Well, basically, my whole school, I only had two of them.

Oh, really?

One was a tall teacher, and he thought he knew it all. And we told him he didn't know anything, like a lot of kids. And what we picked on, because he was in the war, and they had shot half his ear off, so we told him his biggest smarts was in his ear that he lost.

Well, that's kind of uppity.

No, just being nasty.

Yeah. Well, how did he respond to things like that? He took it in stride?

He took it in stride because he couldn't bring his ear back.

And this was in the school in Poland.

Part of it, yes. And we had one that was quite short. And he thought he was the tallest guy in the country. And what he really liked was he liked to get a switch, and he would have you hold your hand out, and he would hit your hand with the switch, and right in here.

Well, that's nice.

Bad problem for him was also, I was kind of a nasty guy, and I put my hand over the inkwells. Remember we had the the inkwells, and then you had to dip your pen in it and write. And I held it over my hand, and then my whole hand here got all black and blue because it got hurt.

So it looked worse.

Looked a whole lot worse than it felt.

And what happened then?

I showed that to my dad, and he had him a nice talk with the teacher.

Well, I remember this incident. And this is an incident you write about, you talk about, after the war, after everything's over, right? It's not in Poland. It's not from the time in Poland.

But I had the same situation at that point, too.

You mean you got switched on your hand in Poland?

From one. I also had a lady teacher, and I liked her because I thought she was very smart in trying to teach the kids what they should know. And the other one, we had him very, very seldom. And that didn't last too terribly long. And then later on in Germany, we kind of had the same kind of situation.

Well, what didn't last very long with the second person in Poland?

He had to leave.

Was he called up in the army?

I have no idea. One day he just didn't show up any more as a teacher.

As a teacher. I see. And then we only had the one lady teacher, and she was very nice.

Did you ever have any lessons about Hitler, about German politics, about German ideas, the Nazi ideology?

Not there, not in Poland.

Not while you were going to school there.

No. But we did, then, later on in Germany, yes.

OK. We'll talk about that, then, later. And did you only have, then, the one lady teacher in your first years?

Yes.

All right. Let's go back to the farm that your father had bought. Was it as large as the farm in Bessarabia?

No, it was not. But it was more than adequate for making a very good living.

OK. And you say in 1942, he was then drafted.

Yes.

I'd say why don't we stop at this point, and we'll have a break for lunch and then continue later.

OK.

Thank you, because I think it's 1:15.

OK. Before the break, we were talking about the early part of your childhood, from birth in Bessarabia to then being evacuated to Poland, and then your father buying the second farm. And we stopped at the point where your father gets drafted at the third time. Do you remember when he left the farm and when he had to go into the military?

Yes, I can.

Tell me about it.

He was not very happy about that. But when you get drafted into the military, you go and do whatever you're told.

Do you remember saying goodbye to him?

Yes, we did. We had that much time. And they just come by, OK, let's go. And so then he had to go along with some other people that were drafted at the same time. And we hadn't seen him then for quite a while.

Did you get any letters from him while he was serving?

No, because there's two things. He didn't know where he was. And he wasn't sure that we would get any mail because it was in Poland. And he had no idea when or how long it would take to get a letter.

He did come home eventually, didn't he?

He had a furlough. The thing was, when he was home, he had to keep his military clothes on all the time.

Really?

They wouldn't let him-- he was not allowed to take his clothes off.

So he couldn't go out farming.

No, he wasn't home long enough to do this. But the most that he spent was probably, I would say, at the very longest, about a week.

On a furlough.

On a furlough. He had to keep his gun on him at all times and his uniform.

Did he say anything about where he was serving and what he was doing?

No, not at that time. I found out later on where he was, but that was already after the war.

So let's talk about that. So for that first deployment, where was he? What you found out after the war, what did he tell you about that first place?

He didn't really comment on where he was at the time. But he did say he was in Normandy. And that's where he got wounded, there.

Was he there during D-Day?

Yes. And he said he was on the southern part of Germany. And so then he was ordered to go over there before the ships and all that stuff come over there. So he was there during that nasty situation what was going on at that time.

Well, that's D-Day. That's the invasion. So he was not on the beach, but in the bunker at the top of the cliffs.

He was on top of the cliffs, yes. And he was pretty close to be out of ammunition or anything else by the time that that portion was over with. And then they ordered him to go.

To retreat.

Go somewhere else, yes.

Did he get wounded in Normandy?

Yes, he did.

And so then he was evacuated from there.

Not particularly.

No?

No. He had the shrapnel in his hip, and he got shot in the bottom of his foot. And so he kind of hobbled around there for a while until they ordered him to go somewhere else.

To still fight?

Yes.

But he's wounded.

They didn't care. There were a lot of people who were wounded then at that time.

Well, by that point it's 1944. That's June 6, 1944. But the first time he's taken is in 1942, you said. And he comes back home, and he has a furlough for about a week. He has to keep his uniform on, gun by his side. And then he leaves again.

Yes. But at that point he had no idea where he was going, and we had no idea where he was at, either.

That must have been very worrisome for everybody.

It was.

What were the sort of things that would go through your mind?

I hope we'll see him again. It was not the type of thing that you were really thinking about. Even at that time, you kind of had to think more about am I going to be around? And when you have a lot of gunfire and you hear 24/7, it's not much fun.

No. But you know, up until this point in your story, although it sounds very disruptive and like your fate is taken out of your own hands, I haven't heard of any violence or danger. You go to a school, the school is in German, almost 99% of the classmates are like you who have come from somewhere else. The war seems far away, even though the authorities don't sound like they're anybody to be messed with. When do things change? What happens?

We were pretty much protected from the soldiers, or with the soldiers because all of those guys, they all needed to eat. And you're a farmer. I don't know any politicians or any of those kind of people, they all want to eat. And of course, in them days, the soldiers needed to be fed.

So were you feeding them? Were they coming to your home?

No. But we had the stuff that they would eat, and they took it, I have no idea where, to get it processed.

So if you were growing wheat, they would take the wheat for it to be milled into flour.

Yes.

Would they requisition things from your farm?

Not at that time. There was just a matter of taking that to a broker, or whatever they call it, to take this stuff somewhere else to be processed.

How did your mother manage?

She is a tough lady.

Yes, I guess. But I mean, everything was left in her hands.

Yes, it was.

Did her parents come to help?

No, they had a place of their own to take care of.

Their own. So did she have hired help, aside from that Polish girl?

Yes. She had a couple of guys.

And were the guys Germans, or were they Poles?

They were Germans.

They were Germans. So the Polish girl was the only Pole that you had there.

Yes.

Did she speak any German?

Yes, she did.

Do you remember her name?

No, I don't.

OK. What about your grandma from your father's side? She was still living with one of his siblings?

Yes. She was staying with her daughter.

OK. And you continued to go to school.

I did.

Did your father come back on more furloughs?

No.

So there was just the one time.

One time only.

He came back and then he's gone, and then he's gone for a very long time.

Till 1945.

Till 1945.

Or actually, '46, because after the war ended, he was in a camp to where they had the German people go and work for farmers and whatever till 1946.

When he was in a camp, was he in a prisoner of war camp, then, after the war?

Yes.

Who was running it?

I believe it was English soldiers.

It was the British, then.

Yes.

So British POW camp. So he never made it home after he was wounded in Normandy?

No. We found out about that after the war.

Well, then, let's go back to Poland, where you are with your mother and your little brother and little sister. When do things start to become different for you? What are the things that are changing as time goes on?

Basically, there wasn't a whole lot of changes until about winter of 1944 and '45, and then we had to leave Poland.

How? Who told you to leave?

Again, the SS guys. They said you're either going to get run over by the Russian soldiers, or you can leave and go to Germany from there.

So again, it was another evacuation.

Yes, it was.

And then now at this point, your mother is without your father. How did you leave? What did you leave with?

We were allowed to take a wagon. And it was similar to the wagon trains that went west from back east here.

In the United States.

Yes. They were similar.

Were they covered wagons or were they open?

Well, ours was covered, but a lot of them were not. But that was your individual situation, whatever you wanted to do.

Do you remember what your mother took, what was taken, that is, what you took with you?

Of course.

So what was that?

We had a pig and a pig steer in the wagon. They were butchered so we had something to eat.

That was important. And it could have also been something other people, hungry on the road, would have wanted.

Well, they didn't know what we had. And we were not going to broadcast this situation, either.

And this was in wintertime, yes?

Yes.

So in other words, it was cold enough that the meat would not spoil. It was very cold.

Do you remember the month that you left your second farm?

No, I can't. All I know was we had a lot of snow, and we had two horses. And then one of them, the hoof kind of got hurt because of the ice and what not. And so then we only had one horse and a wagon.

When you were on the road, describe to me what you saw on the road going westwards.

There's quite a few things happened. There were also a lot of people who were marching east.

Why?

Because they were herded that way by the soldiers.

Who were these people?

I don't really know. A lot of them were Polish. A lot of them were concentration camps.

Oh, so they could have been Jews who had been in concentration camps.

Yes.

What did they look like?

Same as anyone else.

Were they dressed the same as everybody else?

No.

How were they dressed?

Basically, they were walking without shoes.

They were barefoot.

Well, a lot of them had socks on. But that's about all, even though it was cold and icy and snow.

Did they looked different than everybody else?

Very hungry. But I think you probably read in the book that one of the ladies put her head under the wagon, our wagon, and when my mother make the horses go--

Over her head?

To kill her.

Oh my goodness.

And of course, my mother wouldn't do this because if she would have, she probably would have got shot. And there was probably 10 or 12-year-old kid, he got tired of all this, and he ran across the field. And they did shoot him.

So in other words, you have concentration camp survivors-- most likely concentration camp survivors-- who are walking in the opposite direction.

From the way we were going.

And there are still soldiers that are guarding them.

Yes. They were mostly soldiers, regular soldiers. And then every once in a while, there was an SS guy. And the soldiers had to do what they had to do.

And what was that that they had to do?

Just herd them people east.

But you saw the boy get shot?

Yes.

Was that the first time you saw someone get shot?

No. Tell me about the first time you saw someone get shot.

Well, basically it was one of our neighbors. And it wasn't a boy, it was a man.

So this was when you were at the farm in Poland?

Yes.

So what happened?

We were not allowed to have any guns. And this man's son was kind of bragging that my dad has a gun, which was a big mistake in them days because no one was allowed any guns except certain Gestapo guys, and that was about all. Course, we didn't have any guns either because before we left Bessarabia, my dad found out that's what was going to happen, that all the guns were going to be-- you had to turn them in.

My dad had an or arsenal of guns and ammuniton and everything. He probably could have started his own war. So what we did, between him and me, we went and we had one of the steers and whatnot. And he took the hide off and put it full of axle grease and stuff like that and wrapped guns into it, and we buried them.

In Bessarabia.

Yes. And even right now, if I'd go over there, and I know where the well is, I know where the guns were. In one way, it was kind of comical because I was a little kid and I knew what was going on.

Well, then you were really little.

I was very little.

So because this neighbor had a gun, what happened to him? Or how is it that he ends up being shot?

My dad was on furlough right about the same time. And the two neighbors, they were talking to each other. The farmer, that other farmer, was not because he had a bad leg, so they wouldn't take him into the army. and And two SS guys drove up to the yard. And one of them demanded that he would give him the gun, and he told them he didn't have one.

And so he decided he was going to take my dad's gun. He took all the ammunition out except one bullet, and he went and shot our neighbor.

With your dad's gun?

In front of his kid and his wife. And all he said was, I guess you don't need a gun no more. Then they got into their motorcycle stuff and took off.

Oh my goodness.

And I said, you know, if that's the kind of stuff that they want, I don't want any part of it. But you live there and you still do as you're told.

You know, you're bringing up something that was one of the questions in my mind, is it doesn't sound like you lost much love for these authorities.

I did not. But like I said, you still got to do what you gotta do.

Did you, in later years, or even at that time-- see, I keep remembering you're just a kid, and what can you expect from a kid to be able to process? These are your own people. These are Germans, supposedly, these authorities.

Supposedly.

Yeah. And you have this sort of reserve, distrust, recognition of their power. And at the same time, people who are not German see you, and how did they think of you? And do you feel like you were caught in between? Did you feel like you were caught, basically?

Well, come to think of it, at this time, I would say we were-- well, a lot of places, they would say we were between a rock and a hard place, or we were in the middle of good and evil. A lot of the German soldiers, they didn't want that war at all. But the upper people, they decided that's what they wanted, to make more money. That's the way I felt.

And of course, we would never get in here that kind of thing, just like you have in every country. You have people that got the authority, you have people that follow their orders. Whether it's right or wrong, it doesn't matter. And I just-- me personally, even in them days, I detested the upper crust, so to speak, of people that threw their dirty authority around, and other people had to go and take it. And I guess that kind of stuff happens worldwide. And I would think that nobody would ever change that portion of it.

You mean it's human nature?

I would think it is, because that's why you have good people and bad people.

But it's also, to see that violence, first of all, so unexpected against your neighbor. And the bitter part-- there are many bitter parts-- but taking your father's gun that he has, that he's supposed to use in fighting an enemy, and emptying it of bullets, and using that ostensibly neighbor's gun to shoot someone, to kill someone, there's something twisted in that.

That's kind of the way I felt as a kid. I figured the guy that used my dad's gun, he didn't have brains enough to use his own gun, and he had to use my dad's to do it. And maybe he was pretty well-satisfied with the situation. Nevertheless, it was still wrong.

Of course. And you didn't see this. You heard about it from your father, or you saw it as well?

I saw it when he did it because we were over at their place.

So you saw a person being murdered.

Yes. That was not altogether uncommon.

But it's early on, and you are six or seven years old.

Yes. And was the next time that you saw someone killed when you were on that road fleeing and going westwards?

Yes.

And that's when you saw the lady put her head underneath the wheel and ask your mother to run over it?

Yes.

As you continued to go westward, what other things did you see?

Well, we've had to cross a river, which they bombed the bridge. And we had to cross that on ice.

And the ice could break.

And there's ice across the river. I can't remember the name of the river.

I think in the book it's the [NON-ENGLISH]. It's the [NON-ENGLISH] River. Or the [NON-ENGLISH]. The [NON-ENGLISH].

All I know, it was a river between Poland and Germany.

Then it's [NON-ENGLISH]. Frankfort [NON-ENGLISH] and Frankfort [NON-ENGLISH]. And I think it was the [NON-ENGLISH] River. It's between Germany and Poland.

I can't remember exactly what it was. And probably at that time, I didn't care.

Of course not. So this was with your wagon?

Yes.

And how were you sure that the ice wouldn't break and the wagon wouldn't sink?

Every day during the day, they would put water on the river, and then it would freeze. And there was one wagon that I seen what part of it was what broke down into the ice. And there is only one trail that you could go. And I told my mother that I was going to drive the wagon. But the soldiers wouldn't let me do this. They said my mother had to drive it instead of me.

So what happened?

We walked across, and she drove across.

So she's the one who drove it across.

Yes. She didn't have a choice. Show had to.

Your mother had to deal with so much. Three little kids, the wagon.

Well, I always told them I was the man of the house, which I was. I was the only man in the house. But my mother and myself, we'd work together as a team.

She needed you.

Yes, she did.

Yeah. Your grandparents, your mother's parents, were they with you, or had they left separately, or were they still behind?

We run across them shortly after we had crossed the river. And then they had two horses and we had one. And so we tied the two wagons together. And then we had three horses. And then we went a very short distance. Then he lost a

horse, so we had two wagons and two horses.

Where did you sleep? They always found some old barn or something where most people slept. Me, I slept out in the wagon.

Did you? OK. And did you continue seeing these concentration camp survivors on the road?

Part of was-- I'm not quite sure. I think it probably wasn't Poland. Maybe it was in Germany. I'm not sure about that. But we've seen some black smoke, probably a kilometer, which was probably a mile or less, real black smoke. And we were told the Germans were burning tires. And we found out later on that was Auschwitz.

Really? Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness. Could you smell it?

Well, we figured it was tires. They smell. So you know, that's kind of what it was for quite a while. And then later on, we found out it was not the same. And as far as getting lied to all the time, that was a normal situation.

Did your mother ever say anything about the authorities?

No. Never. We never discussed it in any way because she said if we say something and it's wrong, then we could get shot. Said it was never discussed in any way.

Can we cut? In the book that your wife Carol wrote down some of your memories, there is a part where, as you keep going westwards, you come across the snow being more and more drenched with blood. Do you remember this incident or these sites?

I couldn't quite understand what you were saying.

That the snow-- you know, you talked about the one boy that you saw shot.

Yes.

And elsewhere in that book, you also mentioned that you see splotches of red from people being shot on the way.

Yes. Or they were bleeding about something. I don't know. Maybe they got beat up or something like that because I'm not sure about what it was. We do know it was blood.

Did you ever see a greater concentration in the snow, of the snow being more red than white?

Not really. It was kind of rare where you've seen some of those because even while we were going there, it was still snowing. And so maybe a lot of it got covered, that we had no idea.

Was the roads full of people, that is, with wagons and some of these survivors? Or was it times where it was emptied out?

Except at night, I never seen it empty for quite a long while. So there were probably several thousand people that were going in the wrong direction.

And were there always soldiers on the roads?

Yes, always.

When you crossed the river into Germany, did things change? Did you still have those camp inmates on the road, or did they stop?

No. They kind of disappeared, then, after a while. But the thing was, a lot of people said go on the south side of Berlin. And a couple soldiers told her, don't go on the south side. Go on the north side. So we did. We went on north side of Berlin. And we didn't run into a lot of problems that we heard later on that a lot the guys run across that were on the other side.

What were some of the problems that they had that they experienced on the south side?

They had a lot more military activity than we did on our side. But listening to guns 24/7 all the time, all day long, all night long, it got to be quite-- I don't know-- quite disgusting.

Yeah. So that's the noise that accompanied you from the time you left the farm in Poland on your way through Germany? You kept hearing the guns, the cannons, and so on. So you knew the fighting was close by.

Yes.

Is there any place that you stopped for any length of time?

We stopped at a place, and I cannot remember the town where we actually stopped. And so there was a lady. And she didn't have a farm, but she had some animals and stuff by her house. And the tragic situation then was the soldiers, they were on a tank.

Were these German soldiers?

They were English soldiers.

So you were already in an area of Germany that was being controlled by the British.

Yes.

OK. So you're in Western part of Germany by this point.

Yes. And then what happened is there was a mill, a flour mill. And the building was relatively tall. And that's where the soldiers were during the day. At night they left. I don't know where they went. But anyway--

These are the British soldiers.

They were British soldiers. And anyway, during the night, some of the German soldiers come over there, and they burned that mill.

So there was still fighting going on.

Yes, there was. And then they situated a tank in between two buildings that they could shoot into another town. The big part was, then, is when that mill was burnt. It was on a Sunday morning. We had breakfast. And they took a flamethrower and shot into our house.

The British.

Where we lived, yes. And whether they were ordered to do that or whether they were just ignorant and done it on their own, flamethrower went between us kids and my grandmother and grandfather and started the whole house on fire instantly.

Oh my goodness.

My mother and my grandpa, they went out and they pushed our wagon out over to the neighbors, and the horses, except

they couldn't come back and get the rest of the horses and stuff, which they died right there in the fire.

The animals.

The animals.

What about the people? Did the people make it out?

There is only one lady.

Oh, that was her house?

That was her house. And then my grandfather helped her and grandma, my grandmother, and said go across the street. There was an empty lot, and so we went over there. And then when my mother and my grandfather went and taken care of all they could on that house, then they come over there as well.

The bad situation, from the way I seen it at that time, was that them soldiers thought that was the biggest thing they ever could do. They were laughing, slapping each other in the back, and whatever. To me, it was a stupid joke.

It's cruel.

It was very cruel.

And then we done something after that. A friend of mine and myself, there was a little creek right on the backside of that house. And we went over there and we started a very small fire. And we took some machine gun ammunition, and we set it on there.

So it started spluttering and exploding.

Exactly. And that was the idea. So then we run all we could, got around and got back over there where the soldiers were. And all of a sudden all this explosion was going on. They had no idea what the heck was going on. So then we had our fun.

But in your fun, no animals died.

No.

And nobody's house got burned down.

Nobody got hurt in any fashion. But it sure got them shook up a little.

Well, what did you all do? Now you had no roof over your head again. Where did you go?

A neighbor just down the road, he had a butcher shop. But he hadn't used it for quite some time. So we lived in that butcher shop.

Do you know the name of this place?

No. I have no idea what it was. That was the same time my best friend got killed standing right next to me.

What happened?

Airplane.

You were playing?

An airplane.

An airplane.

An airplane went and shot him. And from what I know about airplanes, you do know whether it's a child or whether it's a grown person.

You know, you're saying.

You know, because he was very down low to the ground when it happened. Three days later, the same thing happened except we were down there by the creek at that time, and we could follow this bullet. And because it was bouncing, kind of. But 1/8 of a mile or less, there was a road. That bullet hit the back of the horses, killed both of the horses and the man that was in there, and kind of cut the woman's throat.

Fortunately we run over there. And or maybe I was tougher than two of my friends, and I told them to hurry up and run, get a doctor. And so I kind of held that woman's neck.

So blood must have been coming out all over the place.

It was. But I was holding it very tightly and got to where we could stop it a little. And the doctor came over there. Then he took over and we left. Almost a year later, this very lady come looking for us and the doctor, and she thanked us for saving her life. But it's one of those things, you know? You have to do what you have to do.

Yeah, but you're 10 years old.

That's right. Or nine years old.

So we were kind of figured that doctor would handle things, and so we left. And then she came over and thanked us very profusely for what happened. And I think the one that told her about us boys was the doctor because she found the doctor first.

But what a brave thing for a child to save a grownup.

Well, like I said, sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do, no matter what age or whatever else happens. And not long after that, my mother went and went with Red Cross to find my dad. This was after the war.

When it's over now, yeah.

So then we didn't really expect much. My dad did the same thing. He informed the Red Cross as well to find us.

Where was your dad, by the way?

He was in kind of a concentration camp, but they would let him go out and work for farmers.

So it was a prisoner of war camp.

Yeah.

Yeah, OK.

And I believe it was English soldiers that were guarding them. But they could go out and work, which was OK. A man come along the road, and he asked about his family. And I said that village on the other side-- the one that I said where

they could him over there and shoot over there-- that very same village over there, I told him I thought there was a couple of kids over there with that name, his name.

And so I asked him, I says, if you come out of that camp, is there anybody by the name of Koppenstein over there? He says, yeah, there is a guy over there. He claims that's what his name is. So my grandfather and my mother went over there. They said, well, he's working. If you want to wait a little while, you'll probably see him, that same guy. But they had no idea who he was. And with all the luck, it was my father.

How amazing.

And they said, well, with all the paperwork we gotta do, he can leave in three days.

So they released him.

Yes.

And did you go there to meet him, or did you first see him when he came back to your village?

My mother and my grandfather went over there, and we waited.

What did he look like? It's been years since you had seen him.

He looked like my father. And basically that's all I cared. That's basically how we got together again. And then after that, we moved.

Where did you move to?

Well, we moved further into Germany.

And do you remember any of the places that you lived in that you moved to?

Well, that was the last place that we lived before we come over to the United States.

And what was the name of that place? Was it Northern Germany, or in Southern Germany?

It was kind of Southern. One of the major towns are over there was Hanover.

Oh, OK. I know where that is, yeah. It's sort of in the middle.

And so we settled over there for a few years, until 1952.

And how did you support yourselves? Did you go to school? Did your father work?

I went to school again. And there was more than a year we didn't have any school because--

There was a war.

Because of the war. And so anyway, so I decided I need to get eighth grade out of the road and get that done. And so I took two years of school in one year. And what they called homework in them days, that was just it, home work. And you did not do the homework in school.

You did it at home. And is that where you had those teachers, the one with the switch and the one with the ear?

Yes.

But that was the second time with the switch. But that was OK. I didn't care.

Well, you'd been through worse.

The bad thing about a lot of those things is that you never know where your relatives are during that time. And it really doesn't really matter much which end of it or what part of it. It all seemed to be in the same kind of situations.

There's a lot that you went-- by the age of 10, you would see seen an awful lot and had come this close to death.

Very close.

Very close.

And the whole thing is still you never did know one day from another if you're going to get up in the morning and you're still breathing. And you know, it's just--

Were you afraid all that time?

Well, to a certain extent, yes. To another, I guess it happens to me. It happened to a lot of other people as well. And so I just never really worried too much about it myself.

How did you come to the United States? What was the means of being able to get here?

We had different places that we could go.

Through what organization?

Lutheran church.

Through the Lutheran church.

But we could have either went to Canada, which we had relatives there. We could have went to Brazil. We had my grandmother's brother lived there. Or we could come over here. So my dad decided we were going to come over here.

And why would you leave Germany? Why leave? You were finally, actually within Germany proper.

My father was afraid that if there was anything going to come of it again, they're going to start it again over there, the same place.

So he wasn't secure.

He didn't feel secure at all. And the thing was that he had work, but it was a government situation, and we got a certain amount of food stamps, not money, stamps. And you had to have a certain amount of stamps to buy a pair of shoes.

So things were still rationed.

It was very rationed. And if you want to buy a pound of butter over there, if you had money and you actually wanted to pay for it, it would have cost you 5,000 mark to get one pound of butter. And so then after a while, the money changed. And so there wasn't any money per se.

Did you feel at home in Germany?

I was at home wherever I went because I had friends over there. And I had other stuff, and stuff that I'd done on my own

without. And I went to the all the farms in the fall of the year, and I asked them, there's a wheat field. They couldn't get all the corners and stuff like that. So I went over there and I picked heads off of that, and then we took it out in the yard, and we kind of trashed it with sticks and whatnot to get the wheat out of the hull. And then we went to the mill and traded it so we would have flour.

For baking.

We also had sheep, a few. And we had wool. My mother was very good in knitting stuff with sheep wool.

Did you feel like you were accepted by the local Germans?

No. We were always outcasts. And we were not wanted because even there, where we lived, we lived with a farmer couple over there. And we had one room that was assigned where they couldn't even do anything with. It was assigned that way from the immediate government.

We had one room, and we had the house. There was a hallway and the cows.

So you were in the barn.

Basically, yes. And then later on, that farmer, he decided, well, you know, I'm going to get along with these people very well. And so I got another small place over there. And I'm going to take the feed out of there, and that's where they had the feed for the horses.

So that was your room?

And then my parents decided, well, my brother and myself, we could be in that room. But there were five of us in one room first by the cows. And we got along with that farmer very well.

Did people look at you as not really being German, or not really belonging?

We never belonged because-- well, we were kind of outcasts. We moved there and took over their area. And so we also worked for that farmer somewhat, what they called a peat pit. It was off a little ways from the house. And we helped him go and get some peat, if you know what that is.

I have to say I've heard of it. But if you were asking me to point it out, I wouldn't be able to.

OK. The peat that they had, it's in area that used to be timber and stuff like that. And it all kind of fell together.

So it rots.

Water. And so then if you took the top off, that was very mild, and you could use it in the summertime to cook and that kind of stuff. They also had no electricity there much either. It was common, but not right then. So you burned that in the stove. The lower part of it was like coal. And so we had to go out there, and we'd have to dig this. And the horse that we used, we put shoes on them to make the feet larger so they wouldn't sink. And so we kind of had fun doing that and helping the farmer out with that.

So your father decides he doesn't want to stay. He wants to have a new beginning, I guess.

That's right. And you were able to come-- did you have relatives in the United States?

Yes.

And through the Lutheran church, you were able, then, to secure visas to come here?

The church sponsored us to go from Germany to Ellis Island.

And then from Ellis Island?

Ellis Island is in New York.

Been there. And from Ellis Island, did they sponsor you?

From Ellis Island, there was a farmer sponsored us to go from there to eastern Montana.

That's a hike. Well, we got on a train and went over there. But the thing was, the deal was that my father would work for that farmer for one year. And then we kind of cheated on that a little bit because I worked there, too.

Well, the farmer got two for one.

That's right.

But we both got paid a little, you know, whatever there was. And then I started work. Then I got work on a railroad, and I got all kinds of money. I got \$0.53 an hour.

But this isn't money with inflation, where you have to pay 5,000 for a pound of butter. This is different kind of money.

Different kind of money. We could spend it. But I took all my money, except for probably \$5.00, and I used that for a smoke break.

A what?

A smoke break.

A smoke brick?

Of course. You know, when you smoke?

So it went on cigarettes?

Of course. I had to do something.

You have to find something to invest your money in. Of course.

Exactly. The rest of money, I give that to my parents.

Well, you know, we're coming we're coming close to the end of our interview, and I've got a few final kinds of questions. You know, you experienced this war during the most tender years that a child can have, from before age 10. You've seen it all.

Yes.

How did it change you? How did it shape you? How did these experiences change you? What did it make of you?

My feeling was-- and this is very personal-- in my life, I had very, very few years where I could say that I was a child. In one way, I never regretted that because I learned a lot of things about good and evil. And that is the thing that kind of installed in my life. And as far as anything else goes, to me, it's something that happened years ago, and I don't want any part of it. I never wanted to talk about it. And I simply never regretted any minute of it because--

Excuse me. Continue.

Because I just felt like to me, that it was just about like reading a history book.

Does that mean you never talked about the war years to anybody when you came over here?

No, never did.

When did you start?

My grandson started it.

So in other words, your wife didn't know. Your children didn't know.

No.

It was only through a grandson.

Yes. He had to write an essay in school. And I think he did very well, from what I taught him. Whether the school teachers believed him or not, I don't know. But at least he asked the questions.

So he was the first one who asked the questions?

The first one.

And how long ago was this? 10 years, 15 years?

I think maybe my wife would know a little bit more when she started writing the book.

Hang on a minute. Let's cut the camera.

OK. So we just asked your wife, and she thinks it must have been around 2005, maybe a year or two before. But something around that time.

Somewhere in that area.

So it would have been 60 years, a good 60 years that you never talked about it?

No. Not to no one.

Not to anyone.

I figured it was my history and I was going to keep it that way.

Was it too hard to talk about?

No. It was just, I couldn't remember things in sequence. But and my wife went ahead and put it more in a more perspective manner because I couldn't remember everything in sequence, and I didn't want to. And so Carol had no idea, basically, of what I went through or what the situation was or any of those things.

And I got to know her in 1952. I was hauling hay off of her father's place to the guy that I was working for. And she had no idea who I was, just some guy that hauled hay. And then she didn't know about me. But her grandmother knew who I was because her grandmother and myself, basically we were born in Bessarabia.

So her grandmother was from the same part of the world.

Yes. But she didn't know that, and she had no idea that I was going to go after her because I told my brother in 1952 that I was going to marry her. And he told me that I was nuts.

Well, you did, didn't you?

I did. And that was only 50 some years ago.

Is there anything else you would like to add to our interview today? Anything that you think we've missed that is necessary to highlight?

I wouldn't know. All I know is I probably talk too much and didn't let you enough time to ask questions.

You did wonderfully. You did wonderfully. And I can't tell you how grateful we are that you agreed to share.

I'm the one that has to be grateful that you took the time to even talk to me.

Oh, come on. Thank you for sharing this.

Well, you're very welcome.

And I'll say, then, that with this, this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Christian Koppenstein on March 24, 2018, in Overgaard, Arizona. Thank you again.

And I am very grateful that you did.

Thank you.

And that's all I can say about it.

It's mutual. It's mutual. Thank you again.

No problem I was going to show you some pictures.