

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Kurt Klein
March 13, 1992
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Kurt Klein, conducted on March 13, 1992 in Beverly Hills, California on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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

KURT KLEIN
March 13, 1992

Beep.

Describe the things that happened in the early part of the 1930s that have made you and your family aware of what was going on.

Well, there was a, of course, a lot of political strife in Germany under the Weimar Republic, and uh, you, you could uh follow the, the events uh, uh you, you could see the parties fighting each other, and that every election uh some, some of the uh some party is gaining the upper hand, and uh over a period of time uh we saw uh the Nazi party uh, uh, uh gather momentum and, and gaining strength, although at a later date, they, they did uh again uh, uh fall off somewhat, but uh, but it was a constant see-saw, and there was much turmoil, and we were quite aware that uh (cough), of, of what was going on, uh, although uh, of course many uh, uh Jews in Germany deluded themselves that it would never come to the very worst, but I do remember, uh an incident in my uh during my boyhood uh when I uh overheard someone who had come back from Berlin saying that uh the, I believe that he belonged to the Social Democratic Party, uh, and uh he came back and said, "It just seems so we're uh we're uh fighting, and so we're doing something, but in reality, uh, uh, Hitler is gaining the upper hand. So we were in one sense forewarned, but uh we're always hoping for the best naturally.

Why do you think so many people didn't realize what was going on?

Well, uh, it's very easy uh to delude yourself, uh, when you feel yourself as much uh a part of the environment as, as the German Jews did, uh, most of them had been there for generations, had fought in the First World War, and, and, and uh and had a reasonably good life. Some of them had, had, had a very good life, and they felt that since they were so uh, they belonged to that environment and, and no one would, would ever uh, uh, uh depose them from, from that and it was as hard to imagine that uh even Hitler, uh, whose uh speeches certainly sounded ominous uh especially in the later uh in the late 20s and early 30s uh, uh but uh, but we thought that the matter would run its course or many people thought so and, and perhaps, and the Jew, there would be a place for the Jews again.

Uh, why do you think the Nazi party gained -----?

Well, uh, it's quite obvious that uh Germany went through uh some very difficult times as a result of, of the uh, Versailles Treaty and uh there's no question about that that, that treaty uh, uh was signed without much foresight uh on the part of those who drafted it, and uh it, it led to widespread unemployment. First the inflation, of course, which wiped out many people. Unemployment and uh and, and people were quite willing to listen to anybody, not, uh even if there, there some ----- --has considered them rabble rousers, uh, uh who, who promised them a change, a, a, a change of whatever sort, uh and, and they didn't know the price for that change of course, at that time and uh they were willing to try anything uh that that gave them hope and, and Hitler very cleverly could play on their fears and their hopes and he, he promised them to restore their pride which was also a, a, a considerable thing uh, uh to think about uh quite aside from, from employment or unemployment.

He has to change a battery.

Sure

Beep.

That was two.

Can you discuss for me how difficult it was to see persecutions leading to what was to come from whatever you know of that time. I'm curious as to how you knew, how you made a decision to leave when so many people didn't make that decision. I want to know more about how you were so sure of what was happening.

Well uh many people uh who, especially those who, who were older, of course, hated to leave their, their roots, so to speak, and uh, and kept thinking that perhaps uh this wasn't going to be quite as bad a-as it later turned out to be. However, there, there were many, many ominous signs on the horizon, and uh I could name one uh, after Hitler came to power, uh I came home from school one day to find the entrance to my home guarded by two SA troopers. Uh, they did let me pass through, but that was the famous or infamous boycott of the Jewish people and their businesses, which was meant to bring home to the German population that they ought not to do business with or consort with Jews in any way. Uh, that was one of the early signs. Well, uh you did also begin to hear of concentration camps, and to which at first mostly political prisoners were taken. Also in certain areas of Germany, not in the part where I lived, uh Jews were definitely uh, uh treated a lot

worse than, than we ever thought. Uh, they, they, they were being humiliated, beaten, if not worse, and also some dragged off to, to concentration camps, and of course, uh those um, st-uh-stories like that did filter through eventually, and perhaps not uh it didn't take too long. Later uh, the boycott was in 1933. By 1935, uh the Nuremberg Laws went into effect, and they uh further disenfranchised uh Jews of all their civil rights, and, and, and it became quite a hardship to, to comply with, with all that uh and civil servants lost their jobs right then and there, and in the meantime, Jewish businesses, the boycott had its effect and, and many were, were being throttled to the point of where, where they had to give up or sell to a so-called uh to so-called Aryan management, and many, many people were forced to do that. Uh, my own father found it increasingly more difficult to do business because uh they, they would see to it he, he happened to be a a produce uh broker who went around to the various farm communities to, to buy up uh hops and tobacco, uh and other items, grain. Uh, and they would see to it that that he wouldn't be able to buy sometimes uh, the beginning he could still get uh some things, but uh, but it took, it was definitely becoming much harder. And so we saw uh that apparently the direction in, in which this thing was going, uh and it came to the point where um he no longer uh could even afford to keep me in the school I went to uh the uh, uh well the it, it was called Reyel Gymnasium, uh which is uh somewhat like high school, but perhaps a, a notch above. Uh, and uh and for which of course you had to pay tuition, so it was very difficult for him to do that, and at that point when I had to leave that school um uh we all decided and we had heard of others who had done the same thing of younger people taking up trades with the idea of eventually emigrating and, and, and putting those trades to, to good use, where, where wherever they would go. And uh, since uh it appealed to me most I, I decided to go into printing, and I began an apprenticeship in that field uh, uh with a local printer, but after a few months uh the authorities uh also made it impossible for me to uh to work for, for a German printer. Uh, fortunately uh I did find some employment uh in, in, in a Jewish, uh with a Jewish concern, uh that kept me going uh for a while. In the meantime, uh my sister who had encountered similar obstacles in her work, which was nursing, had managed uh to leave Germany by 1936 and had come uh to the US and, and specifically to Buffalo, New York.

Now we just have to reload.

Beep.

Okay, why don't you pick up with your sister--

Sure.

-----and how you got out.

Due to my sister's uh coming to the US in 1936, it was uh then (cough) through her intervention uh that uh, uh I got the necessary papers that allowed me also to, to follow her in 1937, and I also settled down in Buffalo.

Tell me what your learned about Kristallnacht.

The...the first uh inkling uh any of us had of Kristallnacht was of course the brief uh articles we read in the daily press here in the US, but eventually, some letters reached us that attempted to brief us to some extent on wha-what had happened that night. Uh, I found out, although I didn't know any details at that point, one of the uh things that my, I still remember, my mother mentioned in her letter was that she said uh, "What happened uh on that night uh is really beyond description, I, and I won't go into it here, but suffice to say that we all acquired a set of mini-furniture in a hurry," meaning, of course, that they had come into the house and smashed all the furniture, and as we later found out from uh, uh other relatives who left Germany after Kristallnacht, uh, that a gang of, of uh SA storm troopers invaded my parents' home that night, and they were led by a former classmate of mine, who had been in and out of our home, who had eaten at our table, and, and who whose house I had spent some time, and he lined up my elderly parents against the wall, and they all m-uh-made very ominous threats tow, uh to towards them while they proceeded to vandalize uh the home and, and, and destroy mo-uh-most of my parents' belongings. They also uh arrested my father and hauled him off to the local jail and that was uh actually something that, that was still uh, uh a whole better than what happened to, to uh most people. Most men. My father uh was already quite elderly by that time and perhaps that uh can be uh for, for that reason perhaps uh he, he was not sent to a concentration camp, but all the younger and middle aged men were sent to concentration camps, and we would get these uh letters subsequently in, in, in which uh my mother or father would say uh, uh such and such a family uh still has no news uh, uh from their husband. Uh or uh some someone uh has now been reunited and uh and we talked to them and uh and they are okay. Uh, and eventually m-uh most of the men who, who had been arrested on Kristallnacht were in fact um sent back home, but so-but some never made it out of, of concentration camp.

Now um I want you to just describe the day of liberation when you came into that village.

Well, in the final stages of World War I, uh I, we had been, I was with the um, Fifth US Infantry Division which was part of Patton's Third Army, and we had gone through Germany, and were now approaching Czechoslovakia. Uh, the town immediately

ahead of us was Volare. Uh, we had actually been bogged down in the mud because it, it rained for, for, for almost a week, and uh, and uh we, we uh couldn't advance, but we were now trying to make our final push to link up with the Russians, and reports reached us that uh, uh the town of Volare in that area known as the Sudetenland uh which is the border area between Germany and, and Czechoslovakia, and which at that time, uh the Sudeten German, uh, uh mostly populated by, by Sudeten Germans, uh at any rate that town was flying white flags from the rooftops, and so we knew they uh, uh they were ready to surrender, and because of uh, my uh particular assignment uh, uh that I had throughout the war, and because I was German speaking uh I was sent in together with a small military government unit and, and one jeep of medics. Uh, there were 3 jeeps who went into Volare, uh and to, to do their various uh to perform their various tasks. The uh military government unit had to negotiate with the mayor about the surrender and it, it was my assignment to search for any remaining German troops. Uh, I did find uh a few wounded in, in a German field hospital, and made arrangements for uh, their evacuation, but because uh we, it was getting dark, this was late in the day, we felt we had to get back to our lines, and the war was not over yet either at that point. Uh, so uh once uh we returned to our lines, uh we compared notes of what we had done, and I learned from the military government unit that they had heard of a group of, of Polish and Hungarian Jewish women who had been uh dumped by their SS guards in a, in a vacant factory bldg, and um, who um uh had been uh liberated uh, uh by, by our troops, so I, we knew, we knew of course that we had to do something for them, even though we couldn't do anything that day anymore, and in the morning we set out uh, uh greatly reinforced to, to take care of the matter, and I had heard where that factory bldg was and I can remember approaching it uh and getting out of uh the jeep and walking across a courtyard uh where I saw some uh skeletal figures uh, uh trying to, to get some water from a hand pump, but over on the other side uh, uh leaning next to the en, uh against the wall, next to the entrance of the building, I saw a girl standing there, and I decided, and I decided to go walk up to her, and I asked her in German and in English whether she spoke either language, and she answered me in, in German, and uh I uh, I asked uh about her companions and she said uh, "Come let me show you," and we went inside the factory. Uh, it was an indescribable scene. Uh, there were women scattered over the floor on scraps of straw uh some, some of them quite obviously were with the mark of death on their faces, uh, uh, uh they, they all of them looked just horrible and uh of course we could see they were emaciated and, and ill, and something that I have never been able to forget uh was an extraordinary thing that happened. Uh, the girl who was my guide made sort of a sweeping gesture over this scene of devastation, and said the following words: "Noble be man, merciful and good," and I could hardly believe that she was able to summon a poem by the German poet Goethe, which was called, is called 'The Divine' at such a moment, and there was nothing that she could have said that would have underscored the grim irony of the situation better than, than uh what she did, and it was a totally shattering experience for

me. Uh, huh?

Go ahead.

I do remember talking to one of the women who, who was lying on the floor, and she addressed me in English uh but all she could say, as I remembered, she muttered, "Too late, it's too late for me," and I was later to learn that she died that same day. We did of course evacuate the, those women immediately to the German field hospital, and from that point on the medics took over.

Beep.

Can you tell me how all those, what all those experiences have ended up meaning to you?

Well, it shows, of course, the, the utter senselessness of man's inhumanity toward man. Uh, and naturally the lesson that emerges from that is through better understanding never, never to let those things happen again. It did show me how easy it is to incite masses of people against any minority whoever they are, and that any clever demagogue who tells the people at any given time what they want to hear ge-uh has them in the palm of, of his hands. So we must always guard against that sort of rhetoric and those movements that espouse this type of intolerance.

And tell me more about this young woman who led you in there.

Well, it, I, the rest of that first day when I met the young woman uh is a ----- somewhat nebulous in my mind, and I had to go back to my, to my unit because the next day, May 8th happened to be the official end of the war, and uh, there were masses of surrendering German troops, and I had to help uh process, and uh, so I was kept quite busy for a number of days before I could go back to -----, but uh, I did manage to go back there a few days later, and uh, I, of course, I uh would never have forgotten the, the impression this girl had made on me, and I I found her soon among the many others to whom I talked in the hospital, and I uh, at that point I learned that she, she had collapsed on being admitted to the hospital and was listed in critical condition, but um, I talked to her, and, and she seemed quite lucid, and we had a lengthy chat, and...I, I, so I made it my business to come back to the hospital as often as I could do it, all, not only to check on the progress of, of all the others, but, but in particular this, this girl, and the more I talked to her, the more I realized uh what a sensitive human being she was and that she had had something very special about her, uh, call it an aura or whatever that that certainly interested me, and uh, so from that point on uh a relationship uh um developed uh that uh later became even closer. Uh, when I

had to uh leave the area as I knew uh my division would uh because there were even then rumors that uh this same area would be turned over to the Russians eventually, we were still relieved by another American division, but I uh exacted a promise from one of the uh captains I knew uh at that other division, that uh when those women would be uh, when the Russians wou-would would take over the area, and they themselves would have to leave, they would make it possible for uh the women to be r----- to the American zone and, and in the case of Gerda and a friend of hers, uh to, to be sent to where, where this Captain knew I was stationed. But in the meantime I still came back several times from where I was now in, in Bavaria, which meant 5-1/2 hours, a cheap ride to, to, to Czechoslovakia, and I came back several times to uh, uh watch her progress and, and, and eventually she of course she got out of the critical situation.

Okay, we have a little bit of time left. To the museum you talked about you interrogated Hitler's chauffeur.

Yeah.

Tell me a little bit about that.

Beep.

Toward the end of the war, a group of German prisoners was being brought in and uh when I uh interrogated them, one of them quite uh freely admitted that he had recently come from Berlin, that he had been Hitler's chauffeur, and that he, he had been present uh at the time when Hitler committed suicide. Uh, and that Hitler had had given him instructions exactly what to do uh with his, his body, and with that of Eva Brown, Hitler's mistress. And, he told me that um uh that they were to be taken to the courtyard of the bunker at which Hitler had his headquarters, and that they were to take these five gallon cans of gasoline and pour them ov-over the two bodies, and uh set them on fire, and then bury them so that they would not fall in into the hands of the Russians or who were taking Berlin, and because he felt, Hitler felt very strongly uh that that should not happen. The chauffeur's name is Erich Kempka, and uh, uh I, I have since then uh heard the same story confirmed in, in some books written by some famous historians.

Do you have anything else that you want to talk about?

Uh, I think it uh, uh, the uh, uh, the uh, one of the major problems that the Jews of, of, of Germany had at that time, and that is perhaps applicable to today's times and, and, and, and similar

circumstances although no circumstances are exactly like that, uh was the fact that no country was willing to take them. It was very, very difficult to, to, to get a country to, to, to accept you, and it is to that that I attribute the fact that my own parents never made it out, and I think people should have more empathy for victims like that wherever they happen to be in the world, and really, we have to come to a fuller understanding and, and, and make it possible for, for others to, to, to build a normal life.

We have to -----.

The following is 30 seconds of room tone for interview with Kurt Klein.

We have to have 30 seconds of quiet.