

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with John Kowski
January 30, 1992
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with John Kowski, conducted on January 30, 1992 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.

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JOHN KOMSKI

January 30, 1992

Take one

Beep

Mr. Kowski, can you tell me what happened to everyday life when the Germans occupied Poland.

Well, I was, uh, first, I was uh, in Krakow after I have come uh, a few days after the war. Just, uh, very miserable life because eh, there was uh actually no food. Uh, we had to go, in order to buy a loaf of bread I had to stand up, get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and go to the bakery, and stand in line for several hours before I got a loaf of bread. Absolutely nothing to buy immediately. And, of course, uh, you have to have a spectacle of seeing all those uh soldiers running, you know, the streets. Uh, I uh, I faced the first encounter with the soldiers, you know, when uh, I was stop on the street, and eh, I had the impression that he wants to ask me a question, and instead he kicked me, you know, without reason, you know, and this is where I realize that the Poland is in war, that we have been occupied, that that things are not normal anymore. You know, something now, it struck me as something so unjust that he struck me, you know. I didn't do anything to him, and I, I remember it almost vividly today as it was then. So..

What did you decide to do, and why did you decide to join the resistance?

Well, it was, it was a spontaneous thing, you know, I had uh, several, uh, uh, friends of mine who were in the military, and in the action at that year, 1939, and they all came back home. And, first of all, it was nothing. It, it was, it was just a situation where uh, except of uh, uh trying to, to stay away from uh, from German view, you know, it was nothing else to do. It was uh, late fall, there was no school. There was absolutely no, no, no activity allowed. There was a police out all the time. So, spontaneous, our spontaneous thing, behavior was, you know, to organize something, uh, uh, uh an action against them. And uh, in the beginning it was just a 'we are trying to uh.....trying to find a proper people. Uh, and eh, and eh the role that we entered, the action.

So, how did you go about doing that?

Take 2 Beep.

Okay, Mr. Komski, go ahead.

Yeah, and uh, at the beginning, you know, uh, uh, uh affair was a, a just a try, or just, just something that we are trying to, we, we have not, uh, any, uh, uh, no experience in doing, uh, uh, things like that. So, um, it was eh, eh probably no, from the, for the outside it probably looked funny at the beginning, you know. There was no guidance, no, no uh, there was no higher, uh, uh authority that were established, and uh, there was no connections at the beginning. It was, as I say, spontaneous thing. Uh, few months later, the thing grew up into, uh, several eh, several eh activities. First of all, there was one, (clears throat): listen to the underground--to the, to the forbidden radios. And then, uh, we tried to print a, a sort of a newsletter, uh, the, this was the second thing. And, of course, build a membership, and organize into the units, you know. But, I was mainly active in the, in the, this eh, newspa, newsletter business because uh, was always to do, something to do with it, you know, and also, you know, I was a, I just finished the Academy of Arts, so I know, uh, uh, I could compose, I could uh, uh do the lettering which was necessary--lot of things was done by hand. Uh, um, le, by hand. And this is the thing that I could do. And, of course, there was another thing that's uh, uh, uh, headline story was always uh, uh, uh, went always with a caricature or cartoon on and, and this is where I became useful, you know, because I could do this. As a matter of fact, later on, uh after war, when uh, when uh, my case was in the Bavarian court, I won my case because I could uh, could uh testify to the fact that I was doing the caricature of Hitler himself. And, and that is why the court, uh, uh, uh, uh developed, why I won my case. Otherwise, I uh, uh, for example, cases, uh, uh of uh, uh other than that, you know, just a regular, reg, regular activity against the German army, and against Germany was considered a normal thing. The judge would not refuse, uh, refuse to, to, to, to see any offense.

Can you describe how you hid and crossed borders, and finally ended up getting turned over to the Gestapo.

Yeah, you know, after a while it became eh very dangerous to stay at home. At that time, I was already in my home town Sojov (ph)--a small town with a German garrison, which was a , a station in the, in the eh the high school building. And, of course, uh, uh, uh there was snooping around the soldiers, you know, looking especially for a radio. And, uh, uh, the organization was uh in danger that it might be, you know, it might be uh, uh, uh, uh might uh be uh known to Germany after a while. So, uh I decided to, to leave the that hometown and go to France, you know, and in France, the army was being uh, uh organized. The government in exile was at that time in frenzy since 1940, beginning of 1940, so with uh two other uh friends of mine, we walked to the railroad station about 15 km. away from my hometown, we boarded a train, and then by train we travelled

to Novitark near Sacopana(ph). We left, we get out of that train at that time, and then we walk toward the Sacopana, Boucovina, it is in a village about uh near Sacopana, and then we crossed uh, the Datre Mountains. It was in the beginning of uh March. Uh, so it took us two or three days, I think it was three days, uh to, around the higher reaches of, of uh mountains and of course you know we wa, we had to walk in the deep snow. Uh, this way, we entered, we came to a, a, a around the em, Datre Mountains uh to the Slovakian side of it. And then we walked right the Slovakia, and, and almost, almost we reached the Hungarian border. It was necessary to go to Hungary because in Hungary at that time were the, the uh Polish camps uh where uh we could uh, you know, stay for a while, you know, and uh, and then walk toward the, then find a, a possibilities to go further through other countries, especially through, through Yugoslavia and Spain and through France. So before we could uh cross that border, we was, we were spotted by a Slovakian man, you know. And I think it was he who was responsible for our arrest because he uh, uh reported us to the, to the police. And we were stopped...

We're going to stop and reload the film.

Right.

CR-2

This is John Komski's interview, SR-2, CR-2, TAKE 3

beep

Mr. Komski, can you describe for me your arrival in Auschwitz?

It was uh, uh, I came to Auschwitz from the prison in Tarnow by train. We arrived in Auschwitz about afternoon, about 5 o clock in the mor, in the in the afternoon, and uh, we really did not know where we arrived, where we came. When we arrived at the station, Auschwitz, which is in -----, we saw that huge sign, AUSCHWITZ, written on the second floor of that uh, Auschwitz, or that uh station bldg and we didn't know where we are, where we were, where, we thought we, we came to Germany already. But we uh saw an uh, uh railroad worker, and he uh, uh told us that this is really uh -----, and, of course, em, in uh, were, were, of course, did--did--we didn't not know anything uh, uh further wha, wha what's going to happen to us. But the train started rolling to a uh side truck, and eventually we came in the front of 3 large buildings. This was tobacco company buildings. The middle bldg was surrounded w/uh towers and uh, uh, uh barbed wire. And there

were, uh, and in the middle on that courtyard of that bldg, we saw about I uh, about uh 20 or 30 of a man, men dressed in striped uniforms, which, to me, looked like uh uh oh uh hospital patients. But, when the train stopped, and I looked around, and I saw everywhere guards lying with the machine guns in the bushes...uh, I saw those 30 men rushing towards the, the train, and when the door open they start, you know, hitting us with uh pipes and sticks, and los, los, los, you know like the Germans used to do. And, eh, we -----, and uh, and uh, in eh this fashion, we were brought to that courtyard, and immediately we were uh, uh, uh, uh segregated into smaller groups, and each groups went in the front of a uh, uh, uh rider with a tug, a tug machine, who would, you know, take the person-----of ours, and everybody received uh numbers, and that this was the all the, belongings of ours were taken away. We are not dressed in any uh, uh, uh uniform, uni, prisoner's uniform at that time because there were none. We are still walking in our civilian clothes. Uh, we went to the, inside that building, and there was a bedroom, there was a place to sleep, you know, uh, right on the floor. There was little straw on the cement floor, and, and uh, uh we spent the night, that that first night in this uh, almost in a sitting position because no room to stretch out. The next morning from the very early we woke up before the sunrise, and a...exercise began, and it lasted the whole day, that exercise, which consisted of, of, of, of, of jumping, running, uh, uh was uh really very exhausting. I remember when we arrived there was a tall grass all around bldg. The same day in the evening there was no blade of grass standing. We were, we destroyed it by our, by our bodies, you know, rolling and uh, uh, and uh jumping, and, and, and so. So that was the, the beginning of Auschwitz. We did not go to work. There was no work at that time. There were only five hundred, seven hundred-twenty-seven people in that transport. I arrived on June 14, 1940, uh, so our uh activities were daily exercises that lasted about 16 hours, so you can imagine how that after a while, everybody was had to have that. A week later came another transport from Krakow, from Montelupi (ph), about 300 men strong, and these ones was housed in a original Auschwitz. There were only 2 or 3 blocks uh, uh separated from the rest of the area with uh, uh barbed wire. There were provisor, uh, uh small kitchen added to it, and that is where they started uh, the activities, and you know, they started working on building a fence, on, for, around whole area, and also, the plans were drawn for building a prisoners' kitchen. Until this thing was done, we were uh, uh only living in those 3 barracks, and later on the, the uh our uh, uh temporary fence was removed, and we became the first inmates of the real camp.

Over the years that you were there, how did things change--in a very general sense.

Well, first of all, the Germans--this used to be--that uh Auschwitz used to be a military uh uh barracks. For design for cavalry. So there was inside a depression, inside the camp, for uh, exer, for a running the horses. So the 1st thing what the German did they uh leveled this depression up,

you know, raised them up, and the first commando that worked on uh mm uh doing the job was composed of priests???? and Jews, and the commander of this group was a, a German uh, uh criminal called Krankenmann. Uh, he was responsible for killing most of those people. You know, within a few weeks. Uh, the reason why they have to level up that depression was because they wanted to build another blocks, and they built six more buildings resembling the old style buildings. They needed desperately a space. Uh, the population of Auschwitz from uh the beginning several hundred immediately jump up to several thousand when the 1st transports of prisoners arrived from Warsaw of about 4 transports within about six weeks. And, still, the same year in 1940, the Germans discovered that they don't have enough room, so they started making plans for building another camp between the, uh this camp where uh, and the railroad station, and they called it------. Later on, uh, they brought about 15,000 Russian prisoners of war. From uh, Germany, there were uh, uh, mmm, forgot the name right now where, where they were stationed. Anyway, there was 15,000 men who (clears throat) started to build building a Birkenau. Birkenau was, in Polish name was Brezinka, there was a this name village which was level up, and all the surrounding villages bet, uh, uh, between the, the uh rivers Vistula and Sowa, from the, starting from the uh, uh mine uh, coal mine, uh bro, ------. So, it was uh 40 square kilometers earlier, which became the, the uh the, the terrain, called Interessengebit(ph), means the, the terrain of the, of the camp. And with two camps in operation, the old uh, uh Auschwitz, which they named Auschwitz 1, and then Birkenau, which they called Auschwitz 2.

We have to reload now.

Beep

I want you to explain to me about the different types of people who became inmates at Auschwitz, and whether they were treated differently. Were Jews treated differently from other people?

Well, basically, everybody was treated very bad, and there was no really difference. Regardless of what type of uh, (clears throat), fir, uh the Germans uh, uh (clears throat) segregated them by (clears throat) attaching them a, a crime, uh, which was visible by the triangle that everybody has to wear. I wore red triangle, which meant that I am political prisoner. Outside of that were greens, which was a professional criminal--these are mostly German. There were people wearing black triangles, which was uh, uh, uh people who committed uh, committed uh, uh, uh...were, who didn't want, really did uh refused to work for German um, eh industry, for German war industry. Wore a black triangle. But, if that inmate was a woman, and she wore a black uh triangle, she was a prostitute. For example, when a, whe, uh, women's camp open in our camp, they did it by uh,

segregating us from women by a high concrete wall. The first ten one thousand inmates that came from uh, from uh, Robinsbrik(ph) were the prostitutes. They were all German and prostitutes, and they became the functionaries of the women's camp. The women who came uh from all uh, uh other European countries, you know, first women came from Czechoslovakia, uh, were Jewish, Jewish, uh they were, uh, they received a bla, a red triangle. They were considered uh, uh political with this distinction that they are Jewish, that means that they had, you know opposite triangle, uh, yellow, which together formed a David star. So this was a sign for all Jews in Auschwitz, that they wore that star. So, it might, there were a few uh, uh Jews that I saw with the black and yellow, or I even saw one with the green and yellow, but always had to be that yellow, which altogether looked like a star. So, besides that there were other crimes registered in by the Germans in the books, like for example, homosexuals. The camp in Gross Rosen, for example, where I was later on, had mostly homosexual, homosexual prisoners, all German, and they wore pink triangle. Those who were committed to the camp for religious purposes, like, for example, there were Jehovah Witnesses--were very ----- that were very spread out in Germany at that time. They wore purple triangle. And, oh, so this way, but as they prisoners, they were all treated equally. You know, that means, you know, very, very bad (clears throat). We are not, I would describe situation in Auschwitz and then in, in, in the other camp, same was, I would compare a prisoner to a soldier, who, uh, fights the enemy in the trenches (clears throat), and we were different from that soldier this, in this respect: a soldier had a gun, he had a rifle, and he could shoot his uh enemy before he was shot. We were like soldiers exposed every minute to a danger of dying, but we couldn't help ourselves because we have nothing for our defense, except the will to survive, but eh, will, not always eh was enough because very often, in most cases, the prisoner died, they were gassed, they were executed by the order of a Gestapo. And, in this case, nobody could, you know, do anything. We were helpless.

Tell me the story of the Auschwitz Museum and the translation of the bible.

Auschwitz uh, Museum (clears throat), and a symphony orchestra, there was 2 things that were established in Auschwitz eh, there was idea of a commandant Fritsch. The museum, the eh, the eh orchestra was supposed to indicate that there are joyful moments in the prison also, you know, in case if a commission, a commission would arrive and, and check on the uh living condition in Auschwitz. So was with the museum. The museum was supposed to uh, revealed to a would be commission that uh created like activities of prisoners have a uh, could be, could be uh uh exercise right in the museum eh where there was a sort of a like a studio, art studio. Besides that, there were all uh exhibits. Exhibits consisted of uh the uh items that were taken away from arrivals like when the Jews came, you know, a lot of devoted Jews came with bibles, especially from the Warsaw

ghettos, so the bibles found its way to the museum. There was military medals. There were maps. There were all kinds of uniforms. Of this kind of nature and all the, the, the artifacts. And uh, the Auschwitz museum from the very, very beginning employed two Jews. They were found, they were called by the report fuehrer, uh, uh, on one of the uh, uh rail, uh roll calls in the evening. The commandant wanted somebody who is a writer. So one step out, several step out, he just one. And, he was a rabbi. So he says, you gonna translate a bible into German. But, he says, "I don't know German. I know only Polish." He was from Warsaw. You know. So they chose another fellow who could translate from Polish to German. And, they received the place to work in the museum. Of course, they did only one page in the whole two years when I was there uh, uh, uh in Auschwitz, and uh, and they never uh, in the meantime, the commandant was changed. Came another one who didn't know nothing about this project because this was a personal project anyway, so but they survived because of that. Because they had a place to stay, and they were forgotten people. You know, other thousands of men were arriving daily to Jejinka (ph) men, women and children, they were gassed, but those two stayed alive and nobody care about them. You know, that is the ironic situation of the camp. If you found yourself in the situation that you, you became nobody, you could survive.

We're going to put another roll of film...

CR-4, TAKE 5beep

Now we want to talk about how you came to attempt to escape, and I want to know how it ended up that you could drive through the main gates of Auschwitz on your way to freedom.

Well, it, I have to say at the beginning that it took me one year to plan the escape. And uh, I really came to Auschwitz with the idea of escaping. This is why, therefore, I chose to uh, false name, I came with a false name. And, uh, but, there were no possibility of any kind of escape. The first possibility that I came on was when I walk one day with the uh mmm, with a group of surveyors to the city of Auschwitz, and beyond, into the terrain near the town, Auschwitz, and while they were surveying, I was painting a landscape for a commander of that surveying team, who was a German called Reischwein. And that was the, my first uh, uh, uh...time when I was uh, when I could eh, execute a sort of escape on my own. But, this was a time when there were uh, there were uh persecution for, for escapes, you know, they were always taking ten people hostages, and, and , and they finally, and they usually, they were found dead after a while. So I couldn't dare to put into danger the, my friends, in this uh, outfit. The, that next day, I, uh, found another fellow who had also a, uh, a false name, and that time, we were working in Arbegeisetz (ph). Arbegeisetz is a em,

office of uh labor, a labor office. He, uh, at that time, uh, we uh, that fellow who, who I mentioning, you know, he was, he was a good organizer. He knew everybody, uh old prisoner, and he knew most of the old-timers who work in various positions around the camp, where they could uh, uh come up with uh, with the items that the SS would like. Like money. Like uh, like for example, like the play things from the Canada; Canada was the name which would uh, which would uh, uh, which uh, uh, uh mean anything of value that came from the Jewish transports. At that time the Jewish transports were already arriving to the Brezhinka to the gas chambers. So uh, uh she orga---she make a story that uh, she would uh, give him that uh, uh SS man, who was our boss in the office of uh, uh, uh of that uh arbeitssetz, uh money. You know, the boss wanted the money because he wanted to buy bikes for his children. And the SS man did not earn lot of money, you know. So, we came one day to uh, uh, left the camp, went through the Auschwitz, to a place called Starstave, on the outskirts of the camp, where uh, the underground were uh, prepared for us a, unifo--the civilian clothes, and weapons even, and also they had a car waiting for us on a road, and to take us to the mountains. Of course, how we wanted to get rid of that SS man, who went with us. And, we prepared a whisky with a sleeping pills in it, you know. So, we thought, well, he might, he might drink some of it, the stuff, and then, fall asleep, and make, enable us to go away from, to run away. Of course, he said, "No, he, he, he was not liquor, you know, which is unbelievable, soldier not drinker. He says "Maybe beer or two, but not the whiskey." You know, so we couldn't get rid of him, we had to come back to, to the camp. And then, at that time we realize that we cannot uh, uh, uh wait for a situation where uh, uh a SS would be willing to, to take us out or something--we have to escape by our own eh means. So, we started to organize the German uniform. We decide that one of us will be uh, uh dressed as a SS man, and guard us on our escape. (Sigh) By this time, there were four of us already. Two others joined. So, the organizing of the items of uh, uh, that would, that would uh eventually became a, a full uniform took lot of time, and we had to hide it, we have to wear it several, all the, the, the pieces under our tunics, you know, going to work, coming back, uh, risking a revision on the, on the, the gate. Of course, we also knew that we have to have something tangible, you know, some money or something. So, one of us was a, a dentist. He worked for a while in the dentistry, and he knew everybody in that dept. So, he went to his friends, and he organized some gold. You know, there were Germans uh, were collecting about 2 or 3 lbs only removing the gold teeth from the dead. Uh.....

missing some dialogue

got, and we had, you know, a chunk of, a, a piece of gold that we had to carry in our pockets, oh, again, going back and for the through the gate, you know, risking all of this uh, uh revision. When, when this, everything, was, you are ready, there was a question of (clears throat) providing a uh, uh

necessary documents for the SS, who is gonna be accompany us on the escape. Now, the one who was supposed to be a SS man, he went to the effectenkamer(ph), which is the storage of the civilian clothing, and he found in his bag, an old photograph that he brought from home. We sent this photograph outside through Auschwitz through the underground. Uh, they made it an enlargement necessary for the identification card. It came back, and I painted on that photograph a uniform and a hat and everything, all the distinction, and again, it went out, and it came a uh, Mr. Kujbara, who was the, the friend of mine who was supposed to be the, the SS, and already looking like an SS man. And, in a uh, in the uh, uh, uh printing shop in Auschwitz, uh, in, in, in, in the camp, I had again, a lot of friends, who supplied me with the forms for identification. So, the rest was easy. I had to make the stand, and everything. Everything was uh, uh copied on original, on original documents. Uh, the SS would have to have with him in case, in ca--, in case if we are stopped on the gate and he has to show a document. On the top of that, there was a question of the, the order that uh, he was suppo-that we have to go as a group, as a commando, you know, outside doing something. And, with a SS man. This was always issued by the labors uh, uh officer uh, night before, because we all work in arbeseisetz, which was preparing these documents.

We have to reload again.

Right.

CR-5, TAKE 6

beep

So now you have just about everything...

Yeah, I had, you know, this uh, the document was signed by an SS man in charge, and we had it in our pocket next morning. Next morning was 29 of eh, Dece-December. On that day, I did not go to the office in a normal way, only behind the backs of the SS men. So my number was not registered. I did, I did this in order to create some confusion because at the end of a day, there was always a roll call. On that roll call, everybody, all the number had to fit into an, an, an, if somebody was missing, they would immediately know the number, which was missing. In this case, in my case, they did not know, and it took them several hours before they found out that I was missing, because there was a situation that a prisoner was missing, but there were no number of his. Uh, and I, we did it in order to confuse them, and delay a eh, eh, rescue operation that was always uh immediately follow the escape. Because we wanted to have a time to hide in between. So, on,

on the 29th of eh of Decem-December, we uh, I went to the office by the, on the uh, uh on, on, un recognized, and 2 of ours escapees, they, they went to the uh, to the uh place called uh Landviersaw(ph). Landviersaw was a uh, uh, well a office for all the uh activities having to do with the agriculture. And they uh rent a, a pair of horses, and a ----- in exchange for bringing the director of that office to uh, uh, uh cabins, office cabins. With that empty platform, prisoner by the name Otto Kiesen, he was a German, we took a German. He was number 2, he was one of the first Kapos who arrived from the camp of Zaksenhaus. He had, also had a green triangle--that means he was a professional uh criminal, but he was extremely well uh, uh, uh, extremely nice fellow, and he never hit anybody, and he always liked Poles in the Auschwitz. So, we thought we have a friend in him. We took him because he had this possibility of organizing many things, and we needed to make that escape successful. So, he drove into the camp with that platform and horses, and ordered people who were running around in that area to bring four uh, uh, uh, uh, oh uh, the cabins, you know, the four cabins from the uh lot 24, which is not far from the gate. He loaded on that platform, he drove out of the gate, gate--in Auschwitz, the main gate was not guarded during the day because during the day, the guards were stationed around the large area of the camp uh where the pri-prisoners were performing uh doing uh work. So uh, he drove out of that uh gate with the inscription Arbeiten------. He drove to the Landviersaf, he left over there two cabins, and he drove to the Noybough(ph), to that unfinished camp near the station where uh, one, uh, that prisoner who was supposed to be a guard and I, we uh, uh waited for him, he dressed already in the prisoners uniform, and when they arrived, two of them, you know, we jump on, and we had a uh, uh, uh we had a guard, an SS man, and us 3 prisoners, and we started toward the gate, main gate near the architect office at the point near, at the road, uh, toward Auschwitz, near the Sower River. It did not, it went very well, you know, the, the uh in between something happened because as we were driving, riding toward that uh gate, all of a sudden from nowhere we sighted a commander, uh Fritsch, and he knew all of us because we work in the same barrack where he had his office. So he stopped for a while, and he thought that he will see what we are, what we are up to, and then uh, he just made a motion with the hand like that, you know, see, he went away. This was enough. It was a signal for us to hurry up, and we drove by the gate, you know, the SS raised the hand, said Heil Hitler. He had a response Heil Hitler. The gate was uh, raised up, and we drove on the road. And uh, and that's it. You know, that's was the...

So who was in the wagon when you drove through?

Was 3 prisoners and one guard. There was a driver, and his asst and myself. And a guard in the, sitting on the cabins in the back. We also had a, I had a in eh, under my care, the documents that

we have stolen in our office, and in the, the uh hospital area, hospital office, especially those in hospital, these were a very uh, uh, very important documents because this was the uh uh list, list of people who were supposed to be all were already executed with original signature of a SS doctor. In our office, I took some 40,000 names of dead in the, from the uh, uh from the files. In, in the, so, when we arrive in our place of hiding, which was in the Libuge, this uh, uh, uh this documents were taken from us, and, and, and, and travelled to Warsaw, to the main headquarters of the underground organization.

And, were you worried about people being killed after they discovered you escaped?

No, not at that time because uh, so many SS were involved in it, to a degree that we knew that they will try to, you know, try to, find excuse for themselves rather than persecute and make that whole episode very famous. So, there was not a lot of fame at that ----- at that time, you know. I remember only that only one man went uh, I mean I know that from the report that I heard about later on, it was a German--he was a LagerFeuhrer, he was the oldest in the camp, uh, uh it was a office of the, the eldest of the camp, you know. He, name was uh, his name was Brodnevich, Polish name, but he was a German. And uh, he was accused being helpful to that fellow, Otto Kieser, who was #2 in uh, uh also German. Uh, in that group of that arrived once, you know, from the uh, uh Ranenburg(ph). So, this is the only one who really was demoted, and uh later on and he spent uh time in, in bunker, but he was such an ugly uh fellow anyway, you know, he was such a, he, such a killer, that it really work for a good for a lot of prisoners.

Let's reload.

Beep

SR-3, CR-6, TAKE 7

In your time in the camps, what different kinds of resistance did you see? Did you see spiritual resistance?

Yeah, I did. There were a lot of, a lot of uh, uh priests...at the beginning. Uh, preachers, and there were pre, protestant preachers, and there were Jews who were praying constantly that I know. There was a mass even that uh took place in one of the blocks in my time, which I didn't attend because, you know, in camp, you didn't believe the people which you, whom you didn't not know, personally. As a matter of fact, even father, if he happened to be together with his son in the camp

would not really trust his son, because, you know, people were uh, uh, uh, uh for, the denouncement, you know, the revealing of uh, this kind of uh personal stories to the to the SS were uh very common. So, uh, there were a lot of things happening that uh a common prisoner did not know nothing about it. I would say that uh, most prisoners, they went to Auschwitz, if they don't die, and they really survive, they only knew they own account--what happened to them. Otherwise, they did not know where they were, how the camps is operated, who is responsible, how many people are dying. People generally did not know in Auschwitz that the gas chambers are in operation until the time that there was, they have so many bodies, and the stench from these ovens indicated that something very fishy is going on in Birkenau. Because the things were, the gas chambers were located was camouflage, nobody has any access to it, except those who work there, so the average prisoner did not know much. So, it goes for the any eh, uh, uh resistance movement. The first resistance movement was at the very beginning to go out, if it's possible, and uh, carry the names of imprisoned people to the outside world. There were ladies, and there were a voluntary groups of people, young and old, all around Auschwitz, and in ----- who'd volunteer and, and take all those addresses, and then, uh, uh, get in contact with the families, you know, you have to remember that the beginning the reading, writing of letter was not allowed for about one year, so the people who once were in the prison, they finally, the even--they disappeared and the families did not know where they were. So, uh, this was a very important function, to, to organize, to make a contact between the families, and those who were in a, in the camp. Now, through this uh, uh, by the same way, found the way to the camp, the medicine, and an extra food, which, and the group of surveyors, I work with them very often, were very eager to do this. They always bring, brought medicine and food to the camp. In excha--in uh, we, prisoners, we were working on drawing maps of the defenses of the Auschwitz, of the position of the uh, uh guards and the machine guns becau--which the underground wanted from us. They were always uh, uh, uh, uh making us uh believe that one day they will uh, uh come to the camp, and destroy every all the guards, all, all the defenses, and, and free us. Of course, this never happened. Uh, the, the part, it did happen several times that the uprising was uh, uh taking, uh taking place in Birkenau, in the area of uh, of the gas chambers, uh, uh, of course, I know this only from other people telling me that because I at that time, I was already in other camps, but I understand that uh, some 2 or 3 times, the, there was a revolt in the crematorium area with the use of weapons, and some people were killed, some because of that, some were able to escape. I know of one name, a man who escaped and went eventually to Czechoslovakia, and, uh, and he wrote a book--I have that book uh right here, and he notified the uh, the Jewish authorities over there what's happening in Auschwitz, but he was not believed. That's what he reveals in his book. He was not revealed that he's telling the true story. Nobody could believe from on the outside, in the outside world, you know, that this uh, uh what is happening behind the barbed wire in Au, in Auschwitz. You know, because this was uh, an

inhuman story. That everybody would tell you about. So, besides that, there were attempts to steal documents, and then send these documents, the originals, out into the uh, uh, uh outside world to the organization, especially to the, to the underground uh, uh resistance movement, and one of the successful ones was stealing a book of Bunker. I was in Bunker once, and uh, I got a book, uh, with all, with the list of the uh, of all those imprisoned in the bunker, and my name is over there too. That book uh, uh, Bunker was, in Auschwitz, was a, an extra prison. In the basement of block 11, where the people were uh, uh, uh, uh, uh kept in the, in the dark rooms and awaiting execution. Or they were brought from a civilian life, as a civilians, and faced a special court that once or twice a week would, would uh function in Block 11, and then they were executed on the courtyard of Block 11. So, the stealing of that book was a very important thing in our mind, because it was, it uh, it was a very important document. There were uh organizations who uh tried to save the lives of famous people, of known politicians, of the people of uh, uh, uh, like actors, like writers, painters, by finding them a suitable job, a job on the roof, where they would, you know, for example, uh peel the potatoes, or instead of going on and face the rain and snow and cold. Uh, these, there were uh, there were uh, attempts made to uh, to hide the people who were in danger of being called for execution. Several times, this was a successful. For example, in my case, when I came 2nd time to Auschwitz, uh, I was immediately not knowing even about it, you know, taken care by a group of uh people, organization uh, they, they, they saved me from being uh, uh, uh being uh, uh, uh taken, being uh dressed into the prisoners guard right in the place, in the old Auschwitz, uh Auschwitz. Uh, uh, they took me to the, to Birkenau instead where nobody knew me at that time, and uh, uh, I received a number, which was a, a, a completely different number from my first number, and then they sent me to another camp.

Reload one more roll.

Yeah.

CR-7, TAKE 8

beep

What choices could one make in the camp that could help you survive?

I would say that all those people with the special talents, with special professions, had chance to survive by uh, uh working in that uh, in uh, in uh, in that field, in his own field, field. Like, for instance, spo-sports people, you know, those who could play a soccer game, had a time, good time

for survival because they would occasionally, the SS would get tired of this camp routine, and they would say, "Oh, let's play a game." So they would play a game. In camp Gross Rosen, where I was sent later on in 1944, commandant of the camp was a sportsman, and a soccer player himself, so we had 27 teams of soccer team, soccer game. Of course, in Auschwitz, a painter had a place, uh, his place in, in uh museum, where he could, you know, do his thing, and also earn a little more uh food. A musician could survive by playing in the orchestra. Good cook would go and cook for a SS people in the, in the SS club. Things like that. But no teacher, no lawyer, no uh, uh, uh scientist would have any chance of survival, you know. As a matter of fact, the higher education, education you were, the more in danger were you were, because, you know, they would just kill you because, you know, there, there was a, a trend, trend to, to eliminate all the intelligentsia.

What about age? Who was eliminated from an age standpoint?

Among Jews, children first, and mothers. All the women and children were eliminated always first. They went to the gas chambers 100%. The young Jewish women, you know, when they were attractive, or uh, uh educated, or strong enough, you know, sometimes they found its way to the uh woman's camp, and they had certain various function. In 1944, for example, as my friend's told me, in most offices, the Jewish women were, are, are occupied. From the, from, overall from each of the transports that arrived in Auschwitz, only about between 10 and 15% of people were spared of gassing. And it was always a doctor who was a functionary uh whose job was to pick up those who were strong enough you know to do the, the, the uh physical jobs in camp. So, about, as I say, about 15% most, they went and were mixed up with other prisoners. There was no special camp for, for Jews only. There was no special camp for Poles only. You know. The only distinction, the only difference was, you know, of gypsies, they had they own camp in Birkenau. They were eventually all destroyed by gas too.

Can you tell me the story of Paleish, is that right?

Palietsch. Pali. Palietsch. Palietsch. Palietsch was a report fuehrer. It was a rank of Sergeant. His function was to count all the, all the, the, the present at the roll call, you know, added up, and report this to the uh the uh commandant of the camp. That was his function. Besides that, he had a special function. He was an official executor. At that time, well, the execution were uh, German were performing on the, uh cor--on the courtyard of Block 11. He was the one that did most of the execution. The first execution were by the, the team of uh the uh by the uh, uh small commando of German soldier who had came in the uh, uh with the rifles, and he would shoot--it was just like a, like a, like a military show. Later on, they discontinued this because the cannonat, after that

execution was so loud that the people in Auschwitz heard this, and then the story about the execution went further towards everywhere else. You know. So they stopped that, and instead, they employed Palietsch. He would go, uh, uh, he would go to the Block 11, with a silencer, small rifle, small caliber rifle, silencer, and he would uh, while the naked uh, uh prisoner would run to the wall where the execution were taking place, he would place that uh, uh rifle right at that spot, and pull the trigger, and the man right away was, the, the blood burst through eyes and mouth and nose and everything, and he fell dead immediately. And, at one point, he killed that way over 350 people, in one sitting. This was a transport of intelligentsia that came from Krakow. Uh, it was arrested in uh 1942. And, there was in the camp one maybe allowed to stay about 2 weeks, and they were all executed. It was done by Palietsch. The Palietsch later on fell in love with a Jewish woman, and he was put into that Bunker where he used to lock lot of prisoners. And after that, he was removed from there, and taken probably to an East front, and of course, he is the only one, and that we don't know what happened to him. You know. Really we don't know--you know--he is a question mark until today.

Okay, I think I've asked all the questions. We just need to get room tone, unless you have something you want to add.

Well, what?

Maybe, maybe I would tell something about the uh, uh tattoo, you know. A tattoo that was uh, uh, uh, uh place on the arm of each prisoner in Auschwitz was an accident of things. Nowhere in other camps that I saw any tattoos--only in Auschwitz. And the reason for it was that when the women arrived, and they lived in such a horrible sanitary condition, that, you know, they accumulated lot of dirt on the, on the hands and on the chest, where the number was written all because there in a special pencil. When uh, uh, when the woman died, and they tried to wash that place, and come to that number, they couldn't. The number was washed with the dirt. And, by the number, we were all registered in the books, not by the name. So the number was utmost important. So, somebody came an idea, how 'bout making a tattoo? And they did the tattoo to all the women. Later on they found out, this is a fantastic thing because it makes it more difficult to escape. And they did it on the men in Auschwitz, but only in Auschwitz.

Do you still have your tattoo?

I have tattoo when I came the second time. See? When I came the second time, also under false name, a different one, uh, the second or the third already, you know, so I came and they made this

tattoo in Birkenau. And I stayed in Birkenau. And with this tattoo, I was transferred to the camp of uh Buchenwald. At, the reason why I have only that because I escaped before the order came to tattoo everybody in Auschwitz, the old timers. You know, so I didn't have that, you know.

Did you know a man named Sam Bankhalter. He was at Auschwitz for a long...

beep

...time.

No, no, no I didn't.

CR-8, TAKE 10

beep

First I want you to talk to me about how you feel about what people experienced when they were in the camp. Whether they knew what was going on around them.

Most, in most cases, not. Uh, uh, and this is uh, why so many died before they could realize where they were, because they didn't know, they were shocked. First of all, by beating, you know, by the reception that they received. The reception was so ugly, so terrifying, that they forgot to eat, that they forgot to stand in line for food. Therefore, they were immediately hungry. Lot of people didn't like the food that they were giving, so they refused to eat it. The beginning, they were still full of good things from the uh, from Warsaw or Krakow, or somewhere you know, good restaurants, so they refused. And, if they kept on refusing more than one week, they died. Because they, they finally, you know star--became so hungry you know that you know from hunger they died. And, uh, it is only those who immediately realize that they have to be on guard, physically and emotionally, psychologically, that they cannot show any, any anything that would uh register as a, a, a rejection, or uh, something that they didn't like because, you know, there were uh specialists who only look for this kind of thing, and they would teach you a lesson immediately. And, therefore, beating was the most tragic thing that happened to almost everybody. And a common prisoner, when he came and-----and performed that uh, low job, that means he was going to, he worked with the wheelbarrow and a spade. He was uh, subjected to a, to the, to the heat and the cold, he was rain, uh during rain and during snow for 16 hours, who could not sleep because there was such an overcrowding that 6 people sometimes slept in one bed, that means

that they didn't could, could, they didn't uh, uh lie down, they were just sitting right there in that bed, you know. So, when he uh, instead of resting, he got uh, he got uh, uh in this situation during the night, and then he was uh, he had to go, and work 16 hrs a day, and at the end even uh, when, the work was over, he still had to march on the parade before a commandant when he entered the camp, before the commandant, and the orchestra they was playing tangos! You know, so (laughs), and then, he had to encounter a uh, uh roll call, which sometimes it lasted 2 hours. Suppose somebody was es-escaped? And they were looking for him? So until they found him or dead or alive or you know, the rest of the camp has to stand at still stand and wait for that to happen. So, the whole atmosphere in the camp was designed in such a way to make you immediately so low and so despair, that sometimes a death that came, that was a salvation, really, for many, many people.

Tell me about the-----

Oh, oh, yeah. I work in the, in the, with the files, you know, I had two files, besides working, uh doing artwork in the office, I had also files. And I had to go out and register newcomers too. So, uh, uh I had to do some uh, some uh filing and uh and pulling out the files when the list came from the Gestapo announcing, you know, so and so-----the whole list from the, from the, when they came once in 24 hours. So, we had to, first of all, pull out all the files of the dead, put it in a special compartment. And, in the book, in the main book, where there was a name, there was just one book with a name, you know, we have to put, you know, by the dead person, a cross, a red cross, this was a sign that he is dead. In oth, uh other instances everywhere else, in all the files in the whole business of the camp, the dead was hidden under the few character which indicated -----, which means transferred dead or alive from this camp to another, or to another life, if, if you believe in it. Because, as a matter of fact, this was the end, this was the, the, the, the, the common thing in every camp, the proceeding. When the transport, for example, was sent from Auschwitz to another camp, we used to pull out all the cards and put that Eiberstadt mark on every one of them. When the people were executed, the same thing happened, you know. When uh, when uh, uh somebody escape, uh he was uh his file was pulled to a separate compartment, but in the book was registered as Eberstedt too. They always keep that sac, uh, uh sacred, you know, what happen to the people.

Talk about you anger.

Oh, (laughs) I was angry from the very beginning, you know. I was angry that I allow myself to be arrested. Therefore, at the very beginning, still, when I was on the, in the Slovakian territory, I

gave, I gave my uh false name, you know, register false name, and with that name, I came to Au, to Auschwitz. Of course, it was very inconvenient, and dangerous too because, you know, they are all looking for, because every, after, under every name of that kind, you know, there was always a secret, a story that the Gestapo wanted to know. So, uh, even to the friends, you did not say to anybody, absolutely to anybody that you have a false name. And, what happen when you run in a person that you know you. And it happened to me many, very often, you know, that the people knew me, you know. In uh, in, in certain point, to Auschwitz was brought one of my professors from the Academy of Art. You know, Professor Denekovsky, the, the sculptor, you know. Uh, and here I am with the name of Baras (ha ha ha), and he knew me! In the school! So, and it was a, a thing that they have to be always on the guard, and uh, always creating a, a uh, uh lies about yourself, and about the circumstances. The second thing that makes me so mad, uh, uh, was that I had to take the hat off in front of every SS man, even the common soldier. This was a rule. For not taking a hat and standing still in the front of him when you talk, when he spoke to you, this was a, a punishment of 25 on, on your eh, behind, you know. At least. Or sometimes, it was a hanging for 3 hours on the, that way, on a, at stake, I hung that way 3 hours on a stake, and until today, you know, this finger is always numb, you know, for 50 years. So, uh, sometimes I wander a 1/2 mile away when I saw an SS man, so I could, you know, escape uh marching in the front of him, and having this uh, uh, the burden of taking the hat off. So this everything accumulated to the point that I couldn't stand anymore. And all those uh, uh execution. This was a terrifying thing, a nerve-breaking situation when you stand in the line, and the report fuehrer Palietsch is calling the numbers, this one and that one and that one, your friend next to you might be called, you know, or somebody else you know, you know, and they have to, and immediately they taking out to Block 11. And nobody knew, no uh, uh, whether next time, you never was sure that the next time, you not be that, the one that would be called too. Because we all were, all the secrets about our crimes, that were written in our uh files in Gestapo were never uh, was always in secret, you know.

Put on another roll.

Take 11

Beep

Can you tell me about some of the differences between camps, and how Auschwitz related to other camps?

As I mentioned before, Auschwitz had two industries, one uh, the main industry of Auschwitz was

death industry. The people were brought by thousands, tens of thousands every day in order to die. And they were brought as civilians. They were not considered prisoners. All those who went to the gas chambers came direct straight from the car, from the railroad car. And uh, there were no list made of records, any records made of how many of them were, you know, the only records that, that were made was of those who were chosen to become a prisoners, and that's generally about 10 to 15% of each transport were saved that way, uh, because, the Ger-the Germans needed uh, uh the people uh, to do the killing. You know, the Germans, SS, was never using a gun. Uh, officially. Uh, they were never assisting a death officially. There was always a prisoner who dood it, who did it. A prisoner who, who was uh burning that, that corpse in the oven, or the prisoner who was uh, uh, uh loading the, the cars with the corpses from the gas chamber to the, that went to, from gas chamber, to the, to the crematorium, and so forth. There were always prisoners who assisted killing the people. And they in turn were killed later on too. Because, you know, the, the transport, sometimes the transport, I know some transports that was called ----- Commando. They were called different names. They, they consisted of some 5-600 men, strong men, you know, who lived in special quarter, uh, isolated from the rest of the camp, who had enough food, who had everything what they needed, who were half drunk, in order to do the job, but, whose life was very short, sometimes only one month. They, then, then, they, too then, later on, became those who, who were gassed because the Germans that way wanted to get rid of all the witnesses.

Did you or did you see others try to warn people what was happening when they came in?

No, because those who assisted the transport were part of that special group who assisted the dead of the people. So, they were uh, they were, they had no uh, no uh, uh, opportunity even to tell because there were always SS around. And, if a person tried to warn somebody, he would be thrown into that pack immediately and executed immediately! You know, so uh, so just simply, there was not occasion to do that. But, as I say, there were some revolts of those who knew what is going to happen to them, and some were successful, most of them not. Few probably escaped. But not many, because these was in under constant guard, and there was a hundreds of SS who were guarding that area. The area was completely isolated, a common prisoner did not know where the gas chambers, where the gas chambers are. The chambers were camouflaged, there were trees growing around, you know, that, that that, most of the buildings were underground, the, all those prisoners, there was areas where uh the gas chamber was uh, uh where the gassing was executed, was done primarily underground, you know, in those uh, uh rooms. Of course, nothing, uh, nothing survived because German, before they retreated, they destroyed everything. We only know how the, the gas chambers and all those crematoriums looked like because there are some photographs that survived in the files, in this architect's office. They were all designed in

Auschwitz. I even don't know name, you know, of those who designed them. You know, there were two officers, one name was Gediako, another was Ertre. They were both from uh, uh Austria, you know. And good SS, you know, and they were, they were the leading architects in Auschwitz. They did, they built everything. And more important things were built by the, by the uh, in Germany by various industries. You know, the ovens, for example, they, we know that, they are in file, the names, I don't know them, but, uh..

What happen to families? When they arrived. Tell what it was like to be a family arriving in Auschwitz.

You mean a family arriving as a prisoners, that's what you mean?

No, as a transport, and someday they would become prisoners.

Oh, well, you know, they were separated immediately. Uh, children, uh, uh, mothers and children were, and all the women were kept in one group and men separately in another group. And they never saw each other. Maybe there were some instances if they happened both uh uh members of the family, if they have survive, and lived in the camp later on, probably they were trying to find each other. Maybe there was a situation like that. But the Birkenau area consisted of several camps, each camp was with a spe, with a had its own set of uh barbed wire. (clears throat) Electrified fence, and visiting a -----was non-existent. So, uh, uh, uh there was situation like for example, I had a friend. He worked in the same room where I was in Arbegeisetz. He was in Auschwitz. His wife was in Ravensbrück. Both survived, happily, you know. But, uh, there were other other uh, uh instances where, you know, one of them died , you know. But, uh as I indicated before, and I always say it, uh, it was up to the Gestap-the Gestapo, local Gestapo, the arresting Gestapo was a, the organization that uh, uh, uh directed a prisoner to a certain place in a certain time, with a certain purpose. Lot of prisoners went, with this description, that, uh, his or hers return, is uh, is uh, not unwelcome. It was, they would say it this way, "Richter ommervierst,(ph)" for example, and it was this adnotation?? would be in the file. You know, this was indication that that person sooner or later would be called out on the, on the roll call, and uh, uh, uh would go to the uh Block 11 in Auschwitz, or to the eh, eh area where the gas chambers were in Birkenau, and it would be finished with it.

Did you have no control over this?

No control. No, no. You live from day to day. You are happy to have lived one day. Especially,

you were so more happy if you were not beaten, if you were not hit during a day. Because, you know, this, uh, uh seldom happens too, especially if you work uh, if you eh, if you eh, with the eh, if you work with the, the, with wheelbarrow and spade. You know, they were always hollering you, rushing you, "Loos, loos, loos, loos!" They were always telling that, you know. And, it was not SS, because the SS was a commander of the group. It was a German kapo with the eh green triangle, you know, professional criminal, who was your boss. And, each kapo had at least hundred people under him. Some kapos who were called Oberkapo, you know, had even thousands of prisoners under them, you know. And, they were directing them to work, although they were, they didn't know nothing what about the eh, eh, eh characteristic of that work, but just the--standing there and shouting and beating the prisoner or killing them because, you know, sometimes eh a killing was a eh prescription for the, for how, how the, you know, the commando eh, eh should, eh, should eh, eh, look like after they return to the camp. Sometimes it was said eh, eh before -----, you know, they have to leave 5 or 6, you know, bring them dead.

beep