

Ernest Kolben
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Abstract

Ernest Kolben was born in Vienna in 1926 and was taken to Theresienstadt, transferred to Auschwitz and was liberated by the Americans at Kaufering, a subsidiary camp of Dachau. He married and came to Canada and finally resides in Chicago where he now lives half the year and half in Vienna.

00.0 Ernest Kolben was born May 22, 1926, in Vienna Austria. His parents were from Czechoslovakia and he has a brother, Lipa (?) who is still living. They lived in the 10 district, a lower and middle class neighborhood of Vienna. Their apartment house had about 30 families, including two other Jewish families, and did not have indoor water or toilet facilities. His mother was religious, but his father was not, and the family only observed Yom Kippur. The family spoke German, and the parents spoke Czech when they did not want the children to understand. The father was a shoemaker and had a small workshop near his home, and his mother managed the store. Ernest completed four grades in a public school and four in high school but could not finish as Hitler closed the schools to Jews.

05.00 There were about three other Jews in his grade school class, and he experienced no problems. He attended a Jewish class one hour a week. From ages 8 to 12, Ernest enjoyed participating in the Temple's choir which his mother viewed. In 1938 when Ernest was 12, the citizens suddenly turned from Social Democracy to become Nazi and gave the "Heil Hitler" salute. He felt an outcast as he could no longer attend school. Some friendly people gave the family an apartment when they lost theirs. He attended the new school which was only for Jews, but it closed after a few months, so he did not complete his education. His father lost his store, and the Jewish Council secured a position for Ernest and his father digging graves. His brother was arrested and sent to Dachau on November 10, 1938, and the father managed to get him out on March 28, 1939. The brother stayed in a Kibbutz in Vienna for 7 days and went to Sweden where he has remained. Like others, the family had tickets to Shanghai but was unable to use them.

10.00 Ernest recalls when all the windows were broken and signs were painted, "Don't buy from Jews" and the Jews had to wash off these signs. He saw Hitler in 1939 as he was under Hitler's balcony so he had to scream, "Heil Hitler" so he would not be killed. It was a frightening time. Besides digging graves, he also dug pipe lines and other forced labor for minimal pay. The family obtained an apartment with another family. After November 10, he wore a star and people pointed to him that he was Jewish. Ernest was upset as he could not sit on public benches, had to sit in the back of streetcars and could not enter some places. The family had little food but he worked as a helper in a food company and

managed to sneak some food home. For awhile they were protected from the Gestapo due to their work, but in June 1942 the Gestapo came and arrested him and his father. By this time, his mother had died from heart trouble.

15:00 Ernest and his father were taken two days to the Old Age Home and then in trucks to the train. They brought suitcases filled with their clothes and some food. The train was a normal one with seats, but everyone was frightened as they did not know where they were going. When they got off the train, they found themselves in Theresienstadt and saw some people they knew. He and his father were put into a barracks with 60 people. His father's work consisted of unloading boxcars, and Ernest did some kitchen and garden work and played soccer which he had in the past. In September 1944, on Yom Kippur, he and his father were transferred to Auschwitz. Both were still healthy, but his father wore eyeglasses and had a beard. Dr. Mengele insisted that his father go to the left and Ernest to the right, and he never saw his father again. He saw smokestacks and learned that it was the crematorium.

20:00 They had traveled three or four days in a cattle car to Auschwitz. It was dark in the car with 50 people, and none knew where they were going. Upon arrival, they got their hair shaved and were given striped prison uniforms. After sitting around for a week with no food as it was accidentally thrown on the ground, he volunteered for Buchenwald with about 50 other young men. For the trip, he was given a loaf of bread, a piece of sausage, and a piece of cheese, but he ate it immediately and had nothing for the 4-day trip. They were put into a boxcar with the prisoners on one side and the SS on the other side. They did not arrive in Buchenwald but in Kaufering, camp #3, a commando post outside of Dachau. If someone tried to escape, the prisoners would be shot so he did nothing even when they passed his home.

25:00 Within two weeks in the new camp, Ernest lost a lot of weight and acquired lice. He used his shirt as his towel. His job was to carry cement bags from the boxcars to the cement mixers. Sometimes he found a hiding place to sleep but got caught and beaten. He lived in a wooden barracks and was given two blankets but was very cold as it was December, January and February (1944 to 1945). He had a bowl in which was placed soup and also received a slice of bread each day. Many of those his age passed away and he buried two. There were 9 Viennese and 4 Czech who stayed together. Ernest believes that Nicky Netches (?) the "*Lagerälteste*, saved him by giving him the job of burying the dead and going to the kitchens of other camps where he could steal potatoes.

30:00 It was near the end of the war when they marched for five days toward Dachau. He was happy when he saw the Americans bombing Munich and their lights went out. He ran away as there was no food on the march but returned. Landau, a few years older and his future brother-in-law, was with Ernest all the time. The nine Viennese stayed together and pilfered the kitchen together. They stole meat and sausage which they hid with the Red

Cross blankets and milk, but the SS did not find it in their search. Some people were hung or thrown to the electric wires if they stole potatoes, and others killed themselves. Ernest had the will to live and kept himself clean by washing himself and his shirt.

35:00 They had a hut with water from faucets but no towels or soap. The latrine was not private. Ernest was liberated by the Americans on April 30, 1945. He took a car from the Luftwaffe and drove with Landau to Salzburg. Upon arrival, the car was taken away from him, and he lost consciousness due to typhus fever. First he was placed in a German hospital as he indicated that he was German. Then Chaplain Kaplan told him to say that he was Jewish and Ernest was transferred to the *Laneskrankenhaus* [state hospital] for 30 days to recover. Meanwhile Landau met a Jewish Kapo who was in an American uniform. When Ernest was discharged from the hospital, he went to work for the US Army 7th Infantry, 3rd Division seeking SS by speaking German and looking for their unique arm tattoo. He tried to get to Russia but did not succeed and then worked in the kitchen of the Rainbow Division.

40:00 On September 24, 1945, he returned to Vienna as he felt that he could not think straight. He got married in 1946 and had a baby, Herbert. Ernest worked in the trucking business with his father-in-law. He left for Canada in December 1951 where he remained for 18 years and finally settled in Chicago. Now he resides in Chicago, but for the last three years, spends half the year in Chicago where his son resides and half the year in Vienna. He did not get reparations from Germany but received about \$300 to \$400 from Austria which he gave to his father-in-law. The war affected him in several ways. One was that he did not receive a proper education or trade. Another is that he hates the Austrians and, also, feels more Jewish although he is not more observant.

45:00 He never talked about the Holocaust as he hated it but is glad that it is over.