United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Ernest Kolben

April 6, 1994

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PREFACE

Transcribed by Patricia Lopez, National Court Reporters Association.

ERNEST KOLBEN

April 6, 1994

Question: The following is an interview of Ernest Kolben. It is being conducted on April 6, 1994 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Could you please tell us your full name?

Answer: My name is Ernest Kolben, K-o-l-b-e-n.

Q: And where were you born?

A: In Vienna, AustriA:

Q: And when were you born?

A: May the 22nd, 1926.

Q: Who made up your family? Who were the members of your family?

A: I had my father, Arthur Kolben, my mother, Josephine Kolben, and I had a brother, Leopold Kolben. I still got the brother.

Q: Where was your father born?

A: My father was born in Czech -- Czechoslovakia in the city of Lomnitz. And my mother was born in Hodinin, Czechoslovakia, too.

Q: Umm-hmm. Did you live right in the City of Vienna?

A: Yes, I did. In the Tenth District. Tenth District of ViennA:

Q: And what kind of neighborhood was it?

A: It was a nice neighborhood.

Q: Would you describe it as middle class?

A: Middle class. And lower class a little bit in those days.

Q: Did you live in a house?

A: Yes, an apartment. We had an apartment. It was a big apartment building, the older type with the toilet outside and no water in the apartment.

Q: And what about your neighbors? Did you have Jewish neighbors?

A: No. In the whole building, I think it was 30 apartments, something like that, I don't know exactly, there were us and two more Jewish families in the building.

Q: How big a building was it?

A: It was quite a big building, four stories high. Like I say, it was about at least 30 apartments in there. And that's big for those days.

Q: Um-hmm. Um-hmm. How would you describe how religious your family was? Was it a religious family?

A: My mother was religious, my father not. We were not too religious in the house, we were not.

Q: Did you observe any holidays?

A: Yom Kippur. That was the main holiday. Otherwise, we didn't -- we were not very religious.

Q: What language did you speak?

A: German.

Q: At home?

A: At home, yeah.

Q: At home, um-hmm.

A: Father and mother spoke once in a while Czechoslovakian if the kids don't under -- shouldn't understand.

Q: What kind of work did your father do?

A: My father was shoemaker.

Q: And did he work far from home?

A: No. We had our own little store, repair shop. My father had a little repair shop.

Q: Near your house?

A: Not too far.

Q: And did your mother work?

A: No, my mother was in the house, in the apartment, and she was running the store.

Q: And let's talk a little bit now about your schooling. When did you first start school?

A: I had four, four grades, first grade, and then I went to the hauptschule, this is the high school. The fourth high school I couldn't finish anymore because when Hitler came he throw the Jews out.

Q: Okay. The first school, was that a Jewish school –

A: No.

Q: -- or was that a public school?

A: No, public school. We couldn't afford a private school or something.

Q: Yeah. And so you went to public school with non Jewish children?

A: Well, there were some Jewish children in there.

Q: And non Jewish?

A: Three, four, yeah, maybe, out of that whole class, maybe 30, 40 kids in the class.

Q: Do you remember any unpleasant experiences when you were that young --

A: No.

Q: -- with the non Jewish children?

A: No. Never had any problem. The problem starts when Hitler came.

Q: What about in your neighborhood? Any unpleasant experiences as a young child?

A: No. Once in a while somebody would yell dirty Jew or something like that, a little kid, but there was never any problem.

Q: So you went four years you said to the first school?

A: The first grade, yeah.

Q: And then you changed to --

A: To high school. And the fourth I couldn't finish anymore because I was thrown out of school. We lost the store, we lost the apartment, we lost everything.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Everything we had.

Q: Did you have any kind of religious training yourself, religious schooling?

A: No. No. I went to the Jewish religion, I mean, I went to one hour every day -- I mean every week. We had one week it was only Jewish people in one class.

Q: At your school?

A: Religion, yeah.

Q: A rabbi came to your school?

A: It was a Jewish teacher. I don't know if it was a rabbi.

Q: Did you ever go to temple or synagogue?

A: Oh, yeah, I was even singing in the choir.

Q: Yeah. How old were you then?

A: I would say 8 till 13.

Q: So you went quite regularly to –

A: I was one of the best singers.

Q: Did your family come along with you?

A: No. My mother. My father didn't have the time.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: He had to work.

Q: So your religious teaching was that one hour a week?

A: A week, yeah.

Q: And then going and singing in the choir?

A: In the choir, yes.

Q: Umm-hmm. And when did you start noticing that conditions were changing?

A: March the 11th, 1938.

Q: Okay. And you were 12 years old, about?

A: I was 12 years old.

Q: And what do you remember from that day? What's your first memories?

A: Memory. The day before it was saying we wanted the social democrats, and the day after they all changed. They were turncoats. They all say, "Heil, Hitler." That's what I remember on that. The Austrian people, they changed a lot overnight. But there were some good people, too. They helped us when we lost the apartment, they gave us another place to sleep for a while.

Q: Well, we will talk about that, okay. So your first recollection was what? What was the first memory that you as a child at 12 --

A: I am an outcast. I don't belong there anymore.

Q: And how did your life change in the beginning, in the very beginning?

A: It is hard to say. I was a kid, I mean. You don't think that straight -- myself, I didn't think that straight, so --

Q: Anything change in school in the beginning?

A: Well, there was no more school then. They throw us out of school and they made a strictly Jewish school. And that school I couldn't finish anymore.

Q: So you changed over --

A: There was only Jewish people, Jewish kids in that school.

Q: Right, right.

A: And it was only for the time being. And I really don't remember that anymore.

Q: Do you remember your parents' reaction in the beginning in 1938? Did they say anything to you especially as a child that you remember?

A: I don't remember that, what they said, no.

Q: So then you started this Jewish school with the other Jewish students?

A: Yeah.

Q: And then what happened?

A: And they closed the school down after a few months and that's it. We didn't go to school no more.

Q: Okay. And -- and so you were home?

A: I wasn't home. I had to go to work.

Q: And where did you work?

A: I did a lot of things.

Q: What was the first?

A: A lot of things. I was a grave digger. 13 years, 14 years, I was digging graves with my father in the cemetery in ViennA:

Q: Did your father have to stop working, doing what he was doing?

A: He lost his store and he went for the Kutsche Command (ph), the Jewish -- I don't know what to say, Jewish –

Q: Council?

A: charge in the cemetery and everything. And my father had a job there as a grave digger and I was digging graves with him.

Q: What was your brother doing?

A: My brother went to concentration camp.

Q: When?

A: One of the first ones. I think it was –

Q: When did he go?

A: November 10, 1938. He got arrested. He went to Dachau and we -- everybody was trying to leave the country in those days. My father had some tickets for Shanghai, China, but we couldn't go through with it. And then he joined the kibbutz. He came -- I remember exactly. He came -- November the 10th he got arrested.

Q: This is your brother?

A: Yeah. And my father got him out by March the 28th, 1939.And he was staying nine days in the kibbutz when he came back. He didn't talk to anybody because he was scared.

Q: A kibbutz in Vienna?

A: In Vienna, yeah. And after nine days, March the 9th, 1939, he left for Sweden. And since then he is always in Sweden.

Q: I see. Do you remember any particular violence, physical violence in November 1938?

A: They throw all the people in the Jewish stores out. They broke the windows. They let them wash the sidewalks, and they wrote dirty Jews, and don't buy by the Jews. And they had to wash all that off, the Jewish people. The Jewish people had to wash that.

Q: And you as a child saw these scenes?

A: I saw all this, yeah. I even saw Hitler once, too. He was standing in a balcony in Vienna in Hotel Imperial, that's one of the biggest hotels, and he was standing in the balcony. And I was a little boy, about 13 years old, and I had a pair of shoes, I remember exactly, I was going to the cemetery to my father out there. And if I wouldn't have put my hand up he would have killed me. So I was yelling, "Heil, Hitler." And I wished I wouldn't have been there. I would have been dead.

Q: This was early 1939?

A: That was '39.

Q: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. You said you saw all this violence being done. Do you remember how you felt as a child? Was it very frightening?

A: I felt very bad. Very, very bad. It was frightening, yes, definitely.

Q: Did you talk this over with your parents?

A: Not much, no, I didn't.

Q: Umm-hmm. Okay. So then you started working with your father as a grave digger?

A: Grave digger. I did other jobs, too. I was working for construction companies, digging for the lines for pipelines. I worked in -- (spoke in German) I don't know how I can say that. It is not easy for me to translate this.

Q: Okay.

A: I was forced labor in one way with very, very small pay. I got paid, but very, very small pay.

Q: You were still living at home with your family?

A: Well, we were living four families in one apartment.

Q: Did you have to move out of your apartment?

A: Oh, yes, we lost it right away. We had to move from one apartment and they put four families in there. And that was in the Tenth District, and then we had to move to the Second District. And then we were three families in one apartment.

Q: Were there other children with you?

A: No, I don't -- I don't remember. I don't remember.

Q: Did you have to wear a star?

A: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Q: When did you get your star?

A: After November, I think it was.After 10 November was it.

Q: Did it bother you to wear the star?

A: It bothered me, yes. Yes, it did in one way. Because everybody was pointing their finger at the Jew. You can't sit on bench. City bench you couldn't sit because you were marked verboten, you were not allowed to sit on the bench. You have to go in the back in the street car. You are not allowed to sit down. And you are verboten, you are verboten, wherever you want to go is the Jews, you can't go in, you can't go in. I mean, that bothered me. I was only 13, 14 years old.

Q: Were you physically harmed by anybody –

A: No.

Q: -- on the street?

A: No, no, not me. I was lucky in that way.

Q: And then --

A: I had a little -- a couple fights once or twice, but nothing serious, nothing serious.

Q: All right. So you were doing -- you were living at home. What was the food situation like?

A: Food was bad. We didn't have too much food. But I worked, oh, yeah, I worked in a trucking company then as a helper, a little boy, and they carried the -- it was a food trucking company with all food. And to be honest now, I could say I brought some food home from the truck, fish, cheese, eggs, I brought this home.

Q: So, okay, you were doing these jobs. And then what was the next change after that? Or what then happened?

A: The next change was 16 I got in a concentration – I was actually in the ghetto, Theresienstadt. I was 16 years old.

Q: So you stayed home and you did work?

A: Yeah, because my father was working for the -- for the Israeli Kutsche Command (ph) there, and they were (spoke in German) I still -- it is hard to translate. They were protected from the Gestapo, those people. But a lot of people went on transport already. They were gone. We were still there through my father, because he was working in the cemetery. But finally we had come to turn to us and we went.

Q: Tell us about that moment, that time when they came to you.

A: They came there, they throw us out of the apartment, and that's it. I got arrested, I went to the Gestapo in ViennA:

Q: They came to your house?

A: To the house.

Q: And everybody was home at the time?

A: No, my mother wasn't alive anymore. My mother passed away. She had with -- a heart problem with all the excitement, and there was only my father with me. And like I said, we went (spoke in German) in the Jewish old age home it used to be. That was a camp. They made a camp out of that. And we stayed a couple days there and they put us in trucks. A couple days after they send us on the train to Theresienstadt.

Q: This was you and your father?

A: Me and my father.

Q: And a lot of other people.

A: Oh, yes. A whole crew, a whole transport. I would say at least three or 4,000 people on the train.

Q: On a truck?

A: No, on the train there.

Q: On trucks to the train station?

A: Yeah.

Q: And then you got on trains. And when was this, do you --

A: That was in June 1943 or '42.

Q: You were 16, so it was '42.

A: '42.

Q: Okay. You said you were 16.

A: I was staying in Theresienstadt still.

Q: Before we get there, tell me about the train ride to Theresienstadt.

A: It was not that bad because we still had our own clothing, we had our suitcases.

Q: What kinds of things did you take with you?

A: Only -- only the clothing and a little bit food, what we had. But otherwise you couldn't take nothing with you.

Q: And could you stay with your father during the ride?

A: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: Did you have seats? Were you sitting?

A: Oh, yeah, we were in box cars -- not box cars, they were regular deal --

Q: Railroad cars, train cars?

A: Yeah.

Q: And so you sat and took a train to Theresienstadt?

A: To Theresienstadt.

Q: Do you remember what the feeling of the other people was like and were they frightened? Did they have any idea what was happening?

A: We all were frightened. We all were frightened. Very, very much. We didn't know what -- we didn't know if we were going to Theresienstadt. We had no idea where we were going. We were just put in the train and we went.

Q: Okay. And then you arrived in Theresienstadt?

A: I arrived in Theresienstadt.

Q: What happened when you got off the train?

A: Off the train there was people we know already. And they put my father and me in a -- in a stable. It was a barracks. The barracks, big old barracks. There were about 60 people at least in there in bunk -- bunk beds. It wasn't a nice side, but there was better than some of the other ones. Some of them were living in worse. They were living in little houses,

they were living in one or the other. So my father started working for the transport unloading box cars, and I was playing soccer then.

Q: You were playing soccer in the camp?

A: In Theresienstadt. It was not a camp, it was a kibbutz.

Q: In the ghetto?

A: And I had to work, too. I had to work to put cars -- I can't remember what kind of work I did. Little work, kitchen work I did do. Gardening I did a little bit. But mostly I play soccer. With the soccer, I played soccer. So I was a little bit better --

Q: You were more athletic?

A: I was athletic a little bit, yeah, and I had a little bit --

Q: You had played soccer as a child –

A: Yes.

Q: -- before that? I see. Okay. So then -- then things went on until what was the next --

A: September '44. Before September they start getting transport together. We didn't know where they go. They send us out of Theresienstadt. And we came on in September '44 and I think was Yom Kippur even that day, Yom Kippur arrived, maybe, I don't know. Anyway, we were put on box cars and sent to Auschwitz.

Q: There was a large group of people?

A: The whole train. I don't know how many people there were on them, but it was a whole train were sent to Auschwitz.

Q: How was your health at this point?

A: I was young. I was healthy. I was strong. So was my father, too. But the thing when we got out there, you know, Auschwitz, he wore glasses. I didn't wear no glasses then, and had a beard from the train ride and he looked tired. And Mr. Mengele was standing there at the train, we had to go in lines, and Dr. Mengele, left and right. My father went to the right, I went to the left. And I said, "This is my father. I want to go with him." This man, he had a whip and he whipped me with my bag and I was running to the left. So from that date on, that was the end of my father. I never saw my father again. And I found out there was a fire, I think it was a fire, yeah, smokestacks. And I said, "What is it?" Somebody told me that's -- they burn the bricks, until I find out -- it was really messy and stinky, you know. So what it was, it was the crematorium.

Q: When you were taking the train to there from Theresienstadt, were these cattle cars?

A: That was cattle cars, yeah.

Q: Yeah. How long did it take you to get there?

A: I think it was three or four days. I don't remember.

Q: Did you get any food during that time?

A: We had still food on us. But the worst part was I was voluntary -- they was looking for people, I never got the tut (ph). I was only stamped like an animal. And I was voluntary to Buchenwald. I said to myself I wanted to get out of hell, because what was going on there, I can't even say all that. I said go away from here. I want to get out, just out of here. So when a group of Viennese people, about 50, we got voluntary to Buchenwald. But we never came to Buchenwald, we came to Kaufering.

Q: Well, now, wait a minute. You left Theresienstadt and went to --

A: Auschwitz.

Q: Auschwitz, okay. We will get to the later part in a minute. And I was asking you about the ride from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, and you said it took three --

A: Three, four days. I don't remember exactly.

Q: Yeah. And that particular trip, again, was the feeling of the people -- did they have any idea where they were going?

A: We didn't know where we were going, no, I said this. We didn't know. We had no idea.

Q: Did they let you get out at all?

A: No. No way.

Q: What were the sensations in the car? Was there any light?

A: No. There was no light in there. Cattle bar -- cars.

Q: Could you lie down at all?

A: We were sitting down. There were about 50 people in there.

Q: Was it all men?

A: I don't remember. I think we were all men. No, no, we were mixed. From Auschwitz away we were all men.

Q: And then you got to Auschwitz and you said you were separated from your father and that was the last time you saw him. And then where did you -- where did you go in Auschwitz? Where did you --

A: I went to the (unintelligible). I got clean in and I got dirty out. My hair was shaved and they took all the clothes away, everything I had they took away and gave me the striped uniforms. And then we were sent to one of those mogs (ph). And we were sitting, I don't know, a week. And they asked for volunteers for Buchenwald. So I said let's go to Buchenwald. And then when we left there, it was September 2, and we left and went over in cattle cars again.

Q: Okay. How many -- how many people went with you?

A: There were about 50. In half a thing, half a box car only, because the other half were the SS in there.

Q: These were young people like you?

A: Mostly young men, yeah.

Q: Young men volunteered to go to Buchenwald?

A: I didn't know everybody volunteered, but –

Q: Well, you did.

A: Quite a lot volunteered to get out of -- out of Auschwitz.

Q: Uh huh. Because you knew what was happening in Auschwitz?

A: I saw what was going on. We didn't get no food.

Q: They did not give you any food that week?

A: When they carried the food through the block, people coming out, they kill them, they shoot them. But they were going under with the food container and robbed the food container. So the most of them was in the underground. Before they come to the block, they had no food. But when we left there, they gave us a piece of bread. One loaf of bread, actually, not a piece, a loaf of bread, a piece of sausage and a piece of cheese.

Q: Each person?

A: Each person, right. Till I get to the box car I had no more bread, I had no more sausage, I had no more cheese. I eat everything up. Then we were four days in that box car to go to Auschwitz without food, without water.

Q: To go to --

A: Auschwitz -- Kaufering. That's a commando post from Dauchau. It was not far from Dauchau, camp number three, I was.

Q: And in the car you said was half filled with German –

A: Half were the SS and half were -- there were three or four people in there and –

Q: And how did they treat you?

A: Well, they didn't say anything to us. They just said if one goes -- tries to escape --

Q: Escape?A: We shoot them all. And the train when we left Auschwitz went to ViennA: I could see from the top under a bridge where we passed on the train, I see the house where I used to live. And I tried with the barbed wire, and then he said if one goes away, everybody is dead. So I said forget it. I didn't do it. I don't want to go.

Q: Okay. And then you got to Kaufering. You got off the train?

A: Kaufering, yeah.

Q: And where did -- what did you do when you got off the train?

A: I went to -- that was bad. Very, very bad. The first two weeks I think I lost all the weight. I was skeleton. Nearly a skeleton. I couldn't walk anymore, we were full of lice. I had one shirt on for six months and that was my towel and everything. I slept in it at night and I worked in the -- at night -- for the first two weeks we were carrying cement bags from the box car to the cement mixer. That was going steady. Steady, steady for two weeks I did this. And I said to myself, if I keep on doing this, I won't live long. So I disappeared always. I got caught a few times.

Q: Where did you disappear to?

A: One of the big halls with the lager haus (ph) where they place the cement, the warehouses, and I crawled up there and I made a hole.

Q: To the ceiling?

A: I made a hole and was laying in there and I covered myself and I slept a couple hours every night and I went down. I got caught a couple times, too, and they hit me. But it was worth it. It was worth it.

Q: What was the living arrangements like in Kaufering?

A: Not good. Very, very bad.

Q: Describe the barracks. Were they barracks?

A: The barracks were all right. Wooden, wooden -- were wooden -- one long -- long --

Q: Platform?

A: Platform, right, with two blankets each. And that was not enough. It was cold.

Q: What time of year were you in Kaufering?

A: December, January, February, '44-'45.

Q: It was during the winter?

A: Yeah, it was bad. It was really bad.

Q: And what about food?

A: Well, we had -- everyone had the –

Q: A bowl?

A: A bowl. We got a soup and a piece of -- slice of bread. That's all we get all day.

Q: Did you have any friends who were your age?

A: Oh, yes, oh, yes. They passed away. They all passed away. I buried them, too, then. I was, after those first two weeks, the camp -- not the commander, there was an SS man there, but the camp (spoke in German), that means the camp first inmate.

Q: Right.

A: He was a Viennese. And we were -- we were -- we were left nine Viennese and four Czechoslovakians and were singing at night a little bit. And this man came in at night and sung with us and he -- he is the one who saved our lives.

Q: In what way?

A: In what way? Because he took us out of that cement factory. He put us in the camp. And we did everything. We digged holes, we buried the dead, we went to other camps with the hand wagon to get some provisions, me, then whatever for the camp. And we got in the kitchen. And we were in the kitchen, and we were bad guys, too. We stole. We stole potatoes, whatever we put our hands on. That was our life. He saved us.

Q: What was his name?

A: His name was Neches (ph), Vichy (ph) Neches. I don't know if he is still alive. I don't think so. I met him once after the war in Vienna.

Q: So you lived in these barracks and left the cement factory, did these other jobs?

A: Yeah, I worked in the camp after. We didn't go out on command anymore. I mean outside.

Q: Outside.

A: We stayed inside the fence.

Q: Uh-huh. And for how long did you do that?

A: Until the end. Until the end. Until the -- the -- what, the Americans came from one side -- right now the Americans only came from one side and they closed the camp and we had to march for at least five, six days. We were in a march from Kaufering to --

Q: When the Americans came did you know that, were you –

A: Well, we only saw the plane flying over when they dropped the bomb. The lights went out from the fans.

Q: This is an American plane?

A: American plane, when they were bombing Munich. They were bombing Munich. The lights went out always and we were happy. We were lucky no bomb fell in. But on the march from Kaufering, we were supposed to go to Dauchau. But we came again next to Dauchau, Allach. They called this Allach, the camp was Allach. And next to the Camp Allach was a German artillery, and the Americans were shooting in and the Germans were shooting back. And every American shell that went to shore came in the camp. There were a lot of dead people. But in the morning then it was April the 30th, April the 30th, 1945, I was right. And I run away right away.

Q: When you said you were on this march going to the different camps, different camp, what were the conditions of the march?

A: No food. A lot of people fell over. A lot of people died, a lot of people run away, they hide. I don't know what happened.

Q: Did you go with anybody specifically?

A: I tried once, but I came back. I had always my future brother-in-law was with me all the time.

Q: This was someone you met in the camp?

A: No, no, we know him in Vienna. That's my wife's -- my wife's brother.

Q: Okay. He was with you all along?

A: In Theresienstadt, in Auschwitz, in Kaufering.

Q: He followed along with you. And his name?

A: Was Landau, Ivick (ph) Landau. He passed away.

Q: So you two stayed together?

A: Always.

Q: Was he a young man your age?

A: He was older than me. I think four years, three or four years.

Q: Uh-huh. But you stayed together with him?

A: Always together.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I helped him, he helped me.

Q: Did you have any other friends?

A: Well, lots of friends I had.

Q: People helped each other? Did you have the sense that people helped each other?

A: There were nine Viennese in that Kaufering. We stuck really together and we helped each other. We did a lot of bad things, too, in there.

Q: Like what?

A: Not -- I didn't kill anybody, no, but I -- we broke in -- in the -- in the kitchen, because we know where everything was, you know. We took the meat out, the sausages out for the SS. The next day the SS over fuhrer came in and said we had to go in, we had trucking transport, transport –

Q: Group?

A: Group, yeah, thank you. And we have to search the camp. And that the oldest one, Mr. Niches (ph), he had all the camp, we know where it was right away when he said, so we went to each one. And he said this is the Red Cross. We had our barracks, the Red Cross had blankets and milk was inside and we had the key. And we hide everything there. And he went inside, Mr. Niches, the oldest, camp oldest, got in and found it right away and he came out and (spoke in German) there is nothing inside.So we were lucky, otherwise we would be hanged. Because the camp hanged a lot of people in the camp, in Kaufering.

Q: Did you see people being hung?

A: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I saw people between the fence. They got caught stealing potatoes, they put potatoes in their mouth. You stayed between the two wires for many, many

hours. When they didn't want to live anymore, they just touch the wire and they fell over. When anything you steal, they put you between the wires.

Q: Did you ever feel just like giving up?

A: No. I had a will, will to live. I always had the will to live. I think I was strong. I was very strong. I saw so many people dying, dying like flies, but I never gave up. And I always washed myself. I dried myself in my shirt that was six months old. At night I put it under the blanket so it dries. And I was shivering, but still it dries for the next day to go to work. But I washed myself. The people -- the first two weeks when they were in Kaufering, they had the cement coming out of their ears, out of their nose, and it was like, like concrete. They couldn't get that off no more because they never washed.

Q: Where did you get the water from?

A: Well, we had a fountain, we had –

Q: Faucets?

A: We call it -- it was a little hot, a faucet around, but no towels, no soap.

Q: What were the sanitary facilities like?

A: Very bad. Very, very bad. The toilet was called the latrine, and there was just one two-by-four, four-by, something like that, and everybody was sitting on it next to each other.

Q: Um-hmm, um-hmm. And your health, you said --

A: My health went bad after I got freed. I had typhus, typhus. I got freed on the 30th of April in Allach, and I went with Landau, I went --

Q: What were your feelings when you got freed, when you realized what had happened?

A: Well, the war is over and we live. That's all. I want to live. I want to live. So we went to -- we took a car from Luftwaffe and we drove to Salzburg.

Q: How did you get the car?

A: It was standing in the street with the keys inside. It is a long story, too. But, anyway, we came to Salzburg.

Q: And the two of you just got in the car?

A: Got in the car and we drove. And I was sick, I was very, very sick. I didn't know what I had. And we came to Salzburg and they took away the car from us, but when they opened the door I fell and I went unconscious. So they put me in a Lazarette, in a hospital, in a German hospital. They didn't know I was in -- because I didn't speak a word of English.

Q: Okay. You were 19 years old at this point?

A: Something like that. I didn't speak a word of English and I didn't even know what German means. I swear that's the truth. I said I am German, I am German. I want to say I am a Jew, I am a Jew. And I said I am German, because I hear that so often, you know. So finally explained to me a chaplain that, I don't even know the name, Kaplan, Kaplan was his name. He said don't ever say that again. So they put me in that hospital.

Q: This is in Salzburg?

A: In Salzburg. They put me in that hospital and that was -- the war ends on that day and there were a lot of shooting going on. And I was scared because there were only German people in there. So I explained it to them. Then they transferred me to -- they transferred me to Landis Kartenhaus (ph) in Salzburg.

Q: This is the American Army that kind of took you under its wing?

A: Right. They put me in that Lazarette, in that hospital with the German soldiers. I didn't want to go in there, I was afraid. So finally they send me to Landis Kartenhaus, (ph) and there I was about a month, month and a half.

Q: Was that also in Salzburg?

A: In Salzburg, the Landis Kartenhaus (ph). I still got (unintelligible). That's the only two things I got. And I was there for about 30 days.

Q: Recovering from typhus?

A: Typhus, yeah.

Q: Uh-huh. And you were very thin?

A: Skeleton. Real skeleton. But like I say, I am lucky I am alive. I am still alive.

Q: Where was your future brother-in-law at that point? Was he still with you?

A: No -- I was in the hospital and he met one of the kapos in Salzburg from our camp, too. It was a Viennese, too, and all of a sudden he came -- an American soldier came in the hospital, and I looked, it was the kapo from the camp. It was a Jewish boy wearing an American uniform. I said, "How you got on a uniform?" He worked for the CIC, and I did the same thing. When I got out, I worked a few months in Hielbrunn.

Q: So you were in recuperating from typhus?

A: Right.

Q: And then you got out?

A: I got out and I went to the American Army for a few weeks. I was looking for SS people.

Q: They hired you, the American Army?

A: They hired me. They took me in the wings -- under their wings. And they put me in it because I spoke German. And they were saying to me, don't say nothing. Just listen. And if I see somebody with a tattoo under the arm, then we know it is the SS. I catched only one.

Q: And you came and told the Americans?

A: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. And then I was with the Seventh -- Seventh Division, Seventh Infantry, Third Division. A long time with them.

Q: What were you doing?

A: Nothing.

Q: Nothing?

A: They treated me so nice. And I said to myself, there was a demarcation line between -- in Austria between Linz, Wuffe (ph), and I said I want to go back to Vienna. And so I left them and I could not go over to the Russian side -- they didn't let me -- I couldn't go with them. So I came back to Salzburg. So I worked for the Rainbow Division in the kitchen for the time being, and after this I got back to Vienna.

Q: When did you get back to Vienna?

A: September 26th, 1945.

Q: Okay.

A: I know exactly because my brother-in-law got a baby -- no. I got back, I am sorry, I got back on the 24th and one of the brother-in-laws got a baby on the 26th.

Q: What were your feelings coming back to Vienna after the war?

A: I didn't think straight. I didn't think straight. I was happy to be back in one way, but --

Q: And then what did you do when you first got back?

A: I got married. I had a baby. But I left -- he was five years old and I left for Canada.

Q: You got married?

A: 1946.

Q: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And then you stayed in Vienna with your wife?

A: Until 1951.

Q: Okay. So you got married in '46. And did you work between 1946 and '51?

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of --

A: Yes, with my father-in-law, trucking business.

Q: Uh-huh. And you had one child, you said?

A: In those days I had one child.

Q: What was the name of your child?

A: Herbert.

Q: And how long did you stay in Vienna?

A: Until 1951. I left December 1951 for Montreal. I was living 18 years in Canada. And after this I went to Chicago, and since then I am always in Chicago.

Q: Uh-huh. Okay. Do you receive reparations?

A: I didn't get nothing from the Germans. I never got a penny out of the Germans. I got -- from Austria I got a -- it's nearly nothing what I got from Austria. I got a few checks but I never -- whatever they got, my father-in-law, let him rest in peace, I said whatever you get, you keep. So he said three or four checks maybe, about 300, $400, that's all.

Q: Um-hmm. Do you think your experiences during the war have influenced you a great deal?

A: Influenced to what? In what way?

Q: In any way. Have they influenced you in any way?

A: I couldn't learn anything. I was a dummy in one way because I was only a work -- a hard worker in my life. That's -- I could not go to school. I didn't learn a trade.

Q: How did your experiences affect your feelings about being Jewish?

A: Nothing. I am Jewish more than anybody else. I am not religious, but I am a Jew.

Q: Did your degree of observance change because of your experience during the war?

A: Oh, people wise, yes. I still hate the people over there. It is a nice country. Beautiful country. But I still hate the people.

Q: Does the war experience affect you in any other way? In any other ways?

A: What do you mean by that? Health wise? No.

Q: Health wise, thought wise, any? Do you think about your experience frequently?

A: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yes, I do. Especially now I live in Vienna now for six months, and I hear something I will go away. I just turn around. I don't want no conversation or anything with those people.

Q: How long have you been living in Vienna for half the year?

A: Three years now. Three years. This is the third year now.

Q: And you look forward to going back there?

A: Yes.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Yes.

Q: Uh-huh. Do you have any other children besides –

A: Yeah, I got one more son. One son, another son, he lives in Chicago.

Q: Did you talk to your children about your experience when they were growing up?

A: I had no time to talk to them. Once in a while I -- but I -- I always hated to talk -- this is the first time, honestly, I talked about it. I never talked -- I never mention anything to anybody because I hate it. Bad memory.

Q: Yeah. Is there anything else you would like to share? Anything else you wanted to say?

A: No. I'm glad it is all over and I am still here. That's the main thing.

Q: Well, thank you very much –

A: You are very welcome.

Q: -- for doing the interview. This concludes the interview of Ernest Kolben. It was conducted on April 6, 1994 at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Conclusion of Interview