

Henry Kolber
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Abstract

Henry Kolber was born in Poland on June 6, 1923, and after performing forced labor for the Nazis, was taken to the Krakow ghetto where he helped build Plaszow and was transferred to Auschwitz and then to Buchenwald.

Tape 2: This file takes Henry Kolber from his arrival in Buchenwald in December 1944 to liberation to transfer to Switzerland, to immigrating to the US where he was married and had three children.

00.0 Henry Kolber was born in a small town, Przysietnica in the Carpathian Mountains on the Czechoslovakian border with Poland. He was the eldest of five children. He had a brother, Aaron (?) and three sisters, Manya (?), Minya (?) and Genya. His mother was Leona Mandelberg Kolber and his father, Markus, worked in the lumberyard in the town where Henry was born. His brother was born two years after him in the next town, Barcice. They were considered middle class as his father was in business. They were not religious but attended services at a nearby town as their town only had two other Jewish families. There were about 100 Roman Catholic families in his town. They lived in the center of the town and he started public school around age 10 or 11. His father hired a tutor for him and his brother to help them prepare for their Bar Mitzvah. The tutor lived with them and later also tutored his sisters. The neighbors treated the family very well as most of them were employed by his father.

05.00 One of the children from grade school helped him later to obtain food in Auschwitz. The helpful person was the "scribe" (writer) on the block. His teachers did not give Henry any problems and enjoyed socializing with his mother who they considered to be intelligent. There were no organized sports but he played soccer. When Germany occupied Poland in 1939, some inhabitants claimed to be ethnic Germans, *Volksdeutsche*, who have German ancestors. They were given the more important positions. The *Volksdeutsche* did not cause the Jews trouble nor did they socialize with the Jews. When the war started on September 1, 1939, Henry's father felt insecure so placed their belongings on a horse and wagon and drove to the next village, Nowy Sącz where there were a few Jews but only stayed two days. The Germans ordered all the Jews to assemble in the market place where they shot and killed 15 and selected 100 including his father who were locked up in a school overnight.

10.00 They did not know what would happen to the hostages but they were let out the next morning and they returned to their own home. During the winter of '39 and spring '40, Henry and his father were inducted into work groups. They mostly worked on maintaining

and building roads in Barcice. In the summer they chopped stones on the road so they would be able to transport German equipment and in the winter they shoveled the snow so the road would be clear for the German Army. There were only two other Jewish families in their town to do this work. In May 1941, the *Judenrat* [Jewish Council] was ordered to select 100 young people to go to Rapka which was 40 kilometers away. They did not know what kind of work they would perform. His father and younger brother were permitted to remain to work in the lumber business to help the Germans.

15:00 Henry was transported to Rapka by passenger train. Upon arrival, he found out that it was an SS school to train Ukrainian volunteers to become SS. Immediately, Commandant Rosenbaum selected ten of the young men in Henry's group to be shot. This was 1/10th of the transport. This action showed Henry that the Germans were against the Jews. The Jewish community of Rapka was assigned to provide food and shelter for his group. They were provided shelter which was a 10-minute walk to the school. Henry was assigned work to dig a shooting gallery in the mountains where the new recruits would learn to shoot. After four weeks, Henry's group went to an adjacent town where Rosenbaum had an action to kill Jews in the ghetto. Henry's group dug graves and buried the elderly. There were now 90 in Henry's group and seven escaped so 21 were punished leaving about 70. Seeing his colleagues murdered affected him worse than the mass murders in Auschwitz as it was more vivid.

20:00 Henry saw Rosenbaum all day as he woke them up and had them running and would hit them with his whip which sometimes wounded their eyes. It was difficult living knowing that you might be the one shot at the next action. Henry lived in an area of three small buildings with guards at the gates. The buildings were previously residences of the Jews. There were 24 men in each building and some slept on beds and some on the floor. A member of the Jewish community came and cooked for them. They received coffee and bread in the morning and soup in the evening. The only clothes they had were what they brought from home. They were given passes every four weeks to go home from Saturday at 10 AM to Sunday. It was a short journey by train. Their clothes had yellow stripes painted on them and later they were given Jewish stars to wear. After 2 or 3 months they heard that the ghetto in Nowy Sącz (where parents lived) was to be liquidated.

25:00 Rosenbaum gave them passes to say good-bye to their parents. They did not disclose the brutalities or their duties to the parents though the parents knew that ten of the group were killed. The parents knew they were being transferred to a camp. They gave the children horses for the trip back to the train. After Henry said farewell to his father, he returned again and the SS guard beat him and his father could do nothing. A few weeks later Henry found out that his town had all gone to Treblinka and he knew they would be gassed. Action in Rapka continued almost daily by Rosenbaum as this part of Poland had to be free of Jews. Henry would dig graves from early morning to 4 P.M., and Rosenbaum

would check that they were large enough. Henry was ordered to return after supper to view the actions.

30:00 People selected to be shot had to remove their clothes and stand near the ditch. Whisky was supplied to the SS, and then the order was given to shoot. After the graves were filled, Henry had to cover them with dirt and antiseptic. The next day they were covered with sod so there would be no evidence of graves. Men, women and children were killed. In Rapka there was a family named Rosenbaum so the Commandant ordered them killed as they had his name. In April 1941, Henry and half of his group went in two trucks to the Krakow ghetto where he lived for four weeks. In 1968 Rosenbaum returned to Hamburg and told the German government that he's back from the war and requested his pension.

35:00 Henry had registered the name of the camp and commandant and received a telegram asking him to testify against Rosenbaum in Hamburg. He wasn't sure if he should reopen wounds, but there were only three Jews left to testify. He attended the three-day trial with his wife and two children. Commandant Rosenbaum had appeared to be a large person in 1941 but now he appeared average in size. Henry felt satisfied when Rosenbaum was given a sentence of life imprisonment. Henry was thankful that not all the Jews were killed but did not feel the punishment fit the crime. He was treated nicely by the Germans. Some felt guilty as they asked their grandfathers what they did during the war. Henry had been sent to Krakow as he was experienced in building quarters for SS so could build Plaszow, a camp near Krakow. Every day he walked to the building area to work. They had another commandant besides the one portrayed by Schindler's List. Industrialists were selecting labor from Plaszow.

40:00 Henry knew that Schindler was in the camp but did not pay attention until he tried to organize a larger group, and people tried to get on the list. By this time, Henry was a "Muselmann," not healthy, as he was working very hard. He was able to transfer to the carpenter factory as the man in charge was acquainted with his father. The living conditions were poor. The barracks were quickly built, three rows high, and they slept on wood. The kitchen was built and one of the workers was selected as the cook. By 1944 Henry had been two years in Krakow. He was given 4 ounces of black bread and coffee in the morning and a pint of watery soup in the evening. Some people smuggled stuff or had money or gold and could buy food. Henry was still wearing his civilian clothes with the yellow stripes but no white armband. He felt lucky when he was sent to Auschwitz.

45:00 One day the guards took him to the *Appelplatz* [roll call area]. There had been a rumor that they were going to Auschwitz and Henry felt prepared. Some of the groups from Krakow worked with Polish civilians who were masons or carpenter and knew about the gassing in Auschwitz so the people knew they were going to die. This was late '43 and he was put on a cattle train with about 225 people. He was very weak. It took just a few hours to reach Auschwitz. Auschwitz was originally built for Polish political prisoners.

The cattle cars were the only form of transportation to the center of the camp. Others went to Birkenau. At Auschwitz there were 20 blocks of people in 2-story brick buildings. Sixteen blocks were for people who daily performed outside work, one block was for prisoners who tried to escape, one was a hospital, and one was the experimental block. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, the SS opened the train doors, and they were met by inmates with uniforms with blue and white stripes, numbers on their jackets, and different emblems (red for political, red and yellow stars for Jews, and green for German).

50:00 They were informed that they were in Auschwitz, had their heads shaved, showered and got their arms tattooed. They accepted it as fate— whatever will happen, will happen as there was nothing they could do. They tried not to get too close to anyone who could hit them. He felt that he must do anything he could to survive. He was quarantined for a week whereby he could not leave his block. He received 4 ounces of black bread and soup every day. Some of the longer-term prisoners heard there was a transport that had arrived from Krakow, so they came looking for relatives. A friend from school recognized him and brought him food. His friend arranged that he join a work group. Henry had a long walk from his block, but it was indoor work. Periodically, his friend came and helped him out. Henry's work consisted of producing steam by throwing in wood. The work was easy and kept him warm. During the 4 or 5 months that he remained in Auschwitz, he got some strength back.

55:00 When the Russians got close, the camp was liquidated, and Henry was one of the last to leave in December '44. There were no trucks. He marched for 2 days and 2 nights through the snow. About 1/10 of the marchers survived. Those who couldn't keep up were shot by the SS riding on horses. There were only men from his block on this march. The Germans got panicky and ran away when they saw an English military plane overhead. The prisoners did not think to escape but followed them as they knew they couldn't escape wearing the blue and white stripes, couldn't undress, couldn't go into German homes, and were conditioned to follow orders. The Germans returned.

60:00 Henry does not know how many were marching as he was not concerned with the others but just tried to survive. When they arrived at the German border, they were allowed to rest overnight in the barn of a large farmhouse. They were loaded on a train and arrived in Buchenwald where they were placed in the block for children and were not given work.

65:00 This was 1945.

Tape 2

- 01.0 Henry Kolber arrived in Buchenwald in December 1944 which was in disarray as prisoners from many camps were brought there because the camp was secure from the Allies. He was placed in the young men's block along with Elie Wiesel but did not know him at the time. Wiesel in "The Night" wrote about Gustav, their Block Master. They were not required to work during the day. Sometimes rations got scarce so they were only fed every other day. He could have transferred to another camp where more food might have been available, but he did not want to volunteer for an unknown situation. Time passed slowly as there was no activity. Henry just tried to live from day-to-day. Henry felt that the Block Master did his best under the situation and tried to do his best for the majority although sometimes someone might get hurt. Some of the Kapos did not do their best. The German authorities required they do certain things, or the Kapos would be punished. In April 1945, the English and American armies were close so you could hear in the quiet of night the sound of explosions of bombs.
- 05.00 Henry's health was satisfactory at that time. There were rumors that the Allies would come soon and the camp would be evacuated. Food ran out a week before liberation. Since it was early spring, the prisoners ate whatever they found on the grass and cooked the grass with water. The Germans encouraged the prisoners to leave. Later, it was reported that those who left were taken to the next town and shot. One morning he heard loud shots, and soon the American army arrived. In the first group was Rabbi Schechter, a young chaplain who organized a transport of sick young people to France which included Elie Wiesel. Henry went with the next transport with the Red Cross to Switzerland. Inmates in his camp just traded first names so he did not know the name, Elie Wiesel, whose speech he recently heard. In Auschwitz and Buchenwald only numbers had meaning to the Germans.
- 10.00 You were punished if you did not know your number. Henry's number was given to him in Auschwitz. It was 1740609. Before the march from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, someone gave him two eggs. The eggs were valuable, and the guard looked in his canteen and saw them. Henry was to be given 25 lashes as punishment but he escaped the punishment as the camp was liquidated. Since residing in Brooklyn, he has seen Rabbi Herschel Schechter. On the way to Switzerland, the American army went to Weimar, the next town for wagons of water so they were able to bathe. They had to remove their camp clothes as they were not sanitary for the walk away from the camp. They were fed and many got ill as they were not used to eating and some overate. Then the soldiers donated their rations, including chocolate. The soldiers did not expect to see such conditions. Henry spoke Polish at home but now spoke German and Yiddish to the chaplain.
- 15:00 Henry had to quickly learn German to respond to the guards. Rabbi Schechter escorted the group to Berne, Switzerland, where they were helped by the Red Cross and the Jewish community. Zionist organizations helped them to go to Israel as that was the only place for

them at that time. He did not want to return to Poland because he had heard about 7 Jews who had escaped Germans and returned home. Six of them were killed by Poles with a hatchet. The English blockaded Israel and the group decided not to be smuggled in but go when legally permitted. The group's names were published in Jewish papers and his parent's friends saw his name and helped him to come to the U.S. In 1947 he came to New Jersey, and he married an American woman in 1950. Henry feels the war influenced him negatively as he is looking for answers. Where was the American Jewish Community as it was well-known in 1942 what Hitler was doing to the Jews. When Eichmann came to Hungary, the Jewish community gave ransom for 10,000 Jews, but the American Jewish community did nothing. Although he blames the war mostly on those who helped Hitler, he cannot understand the numbness of the American people. They turned back a ship of German refugees.

20:00 Why was the industrial area bombed near Auschwitz but not the train to Auschwitz? He realizes that people would have been killed but they were murdered anyway. The crematoria could have been destroyed. Hitler got no opposition to his goal. Henry felt that he resisted daily so is still alive. If he had escaped and hid and later killed by a Pole, it would not be better. In Rapka, if he had escaped, others would be killed in retribution. He would not want someone else's life on his conscience. After liberation, the American soldiers placed some of the prisoners with the commandants and gave them sticks and guns to attack the SS. Others took advantage of this opportunity, but he did not want to lower himself to their level; perhaps this shows that he is a coward.

25:00 Henry did not change his attitude toward being Jewish nor his level of observance. He questions where G-d was during the Holocaust but does not blame the event on G-d. He accepted what happened. He feels Israel would not exist if the Holocaust had not happened. He believes that reparations cannot pay enough for what he experienced, and he would not accept anything. At first he did not speak much about his Holocaust experiences to his children, but later he spoke to anyone who would listen: schools, congregation, his family. His sons, aged 26 and 42, do not wish to speak of it, but his daughter does. Now he wants to return to his birthplace in Poland next year since it will be 50 years since he was liberated. Until now he did not want to spend his money in Poland. Now he wants to go with his brother-in-law and sister-in-law to show that he survived. He already knew what was happening to his family when he was in Rapka though he had no documentation.

30:00 Once ten years passed after liberation, he felt that he must face facts.