

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Henry Kolber
April 20, 1994
RG-50.106.0008

PREFACE

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Transcribed by Mindy Martin (File One) and Devora Hackner (File Two), National Court Reporters Association.

HENRY KOLBER

April 20, 1994

Question: Today is April 20th, 1994. The following is an interview of Henry Kolber, conducted on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Please tell us your full name.

Answer: My name is Henry Kolber, K-O-L-B-E-R.

Q: And where were you born?

A: I was born in Przysietnica in Poland.

Q: Where is that near?

A: The Carpathian Mountain by the border of Czechoslovakia and Poland.

Q: And when were you born?

A: June 6th, 1923.

Q: Who were the other members of your family?

A: I have a brother named Aaron, a sister Monia, Minia, and Genia (sp.)

Q: And were they older or younger than you?

A: I was the oldest in the family.

Q: What were your parents' names?

A: My father is -- was Marcus Kolber and my mother, Leona Mandelberg Kolber.

Q: What kind of work did your father do?

A: My father owned a lumberyard in an adjacent town of where I was born.

Q: How would you describe your family? Was it middle class?

A: Well, in those days was considered middle class because we -- my father was in

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business and he employed some of the inhabitants of this particular town.

Q: Was your family a very religious family?

A: No. My father was not very religious but we attend services in the next small town because the town where I was born and where we lived later, it was composed only of two other Jewish family.

Q: So both towns were not primarily Jewish.

A: No, they were not.

Q: How large was the town that you first lived in, approximately?

A: Well, approximately it was maybe hundred or 115 inhabitants but they were all Roman Catholic.

Q: And when did you move to the next town? Do you remember what year?

A: I --

Q: Or how old you were?

A: From the time when I was born, apparently -- I do not remember when we moved. Apparently, I was very young --

Q: You were still young.

A: -- because my brother, who was born two years later, was born already in the next town.

Q: I see. Did you live -- what was the next town that you were --

A: _____ (sounds like Parchetza).

Q: And is that in the same general location?

A: That is the same general location. It's only like three kilometers away from the town

where I was born.

Q: And you had said that there were also only two other families that were Jewish in the town.

A: That is correct.

Q: Uh-huh. And did you grow up right in the center of the town?

A: Yes. I grew up in the center of the town and when -- and I attended public school there. And at age of 11 or ten, my father hired a tutor who taught us the -- prepared for the bar mitzvah, me and my brother. And we had this man -- or different men living with us. So he was tutoring me, my brother, and later my sisters in religious observance.

Q: Let's talk about your experiences with non-Jews when you were a young child because you must have had many of them because there were only two other families.

A: Well, in my case, I have to say that the neighbors treated us quite well. We did not experience like in other area because my father employed quite a large number of the villagers. So they had to be quite decent with us. As a matter of fact, I went to school with one of the fellows, who later, I feel that he saved my life because he came to Auschwitz much earlier than me and he had, by the time I arrived in Auschwitz, he was a _____ (sounds like schrieber) on the block. That's a quite high position. And he helped me quite a lot with the food and protect me from the atrocities which were occurring in Auschwitz.

Q: Okay. We'll talk about that a little later. When you were young, what about your playmates generally? Did you experience any antisemitism among your playmates?

A: Very little. Very little. Because, as I explained previously, those people were

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depending on the livelihood from my father.

Q: And the teachers --

A: The teachers --

Q: -- did not give you any problem?

A: The teachers never gave me any problem, because, as -- it was a village. It was not a town. And those teachers used to be involved with my mother because she was more intelligent than the normal villagers. So they came and sometimes socialized together.

Q: Were you in any youth groups?

A: No.

Q: No.

A: No.

Q: Did you do any sports?

A: Not really. Not organized sports. I played soccer, which was very popular in Poland, but nothing organized.

Q: Okay. When did you first notice a change? What is the first thing that became apparent?

A: Well, in 1939, when the Germans start to occupy Poland, some of the inhabitants became Volksdeutsche. That means that they were claiming that their ancestor were from German descent. And they got some positions of importance. And then there were like -- they felt they're much, they are much better and that -- but actually they did not -- maybe there was overt antisemitism. Did not, I didn't feel any repercussion from them except they did not socialize or have anything to do with us.

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Q: You were 16 years old when the war began in Poland. Do you remember that actual moment when they came to your village?

A: Oh, I do remember this because we -- my father felt, the day the war broke, that was September 1st, 19 --

Q: '39.

A: --'39, that we were not very secure in this village. So we packed our belongings on a horse and wagon -- actually, we didn't have no cars -- and went to the next town to be between Jews, where the town was, Stary Sacz (please check). And I would say it was at least 100 to 150 Jewish family live in there.

Q: What was the name of the town?

A: Stary Sacz.

Q: And then you stayed there.

A: We were there for about two days. And there was some incident at this first encounter with the Germans. They order all Jews to assemble on the marketplace. And they selected, I don't remember exactly, ten or 15 of the people, ordering them, and they shot them there. Then --

Q: This is something you witnessed.

A: Yes, I witnessed. That was my first part, encounter with the Germans. And --

Q: You were 16 years old at the time.

A: Yes, I was 16.

Q: What were your feelings, then, when you saw that as a young man?

A: Well, my feeling was that, here I am, witnesses finally what I had for few years, what

the Germans are capable of do to the Jews. After the execution of those people, they also selected a hundred of people and locked them up in a school building overnight. My father was between those. And that was quite big shock to the family because we did not know what will happen with those hostages. Next morning, though, they were released and after, oh, I don't know, three, four hours, we packed our belongings and went back home.

Q: And the next experience?

A: Well, the next experience was just that from time to time we were inducted in the work groups. In Poland the roads are not paved like we have paved here. They were, like, dirt roads. So we were, during the summer and fall, we built the roads. We chopped the stones that the roads are always ready for the transport of their heavy equipment and - the German equipment. And in winter we shoveled snow because the climate in Poland was much more severe than we have it here. And we were -- the roads have to be clear for the army to be moved.

Q: Are we talking about summer and fall of 1940 or --

A: We are speaking -- no, of winter of 1939.

Q: Oh.

A: And the spring and fall and then --

Q: 1940.

A: -- the winter in '40.

Q: In '40. And what was the name of the town that you were in then?

A: _____ (Parcheetza). I lived -- I came back --

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Q: Oh, that was back to your town.

A: Yes.

Q: I see.

A: Yes.

Q: Oh, I see. Okay. So you were building roads.

A: Building roads and cleaning roads of the snow. Of course we, as I previously said, there were only two other Jewish family so the workforce consisted of much more. They brought Jews from adjacent villages and they were always ready to, we were ready to work on --

Q: Were you living at home at the time?

A: Yes. I was living at home. And those conditions were to about 1941, when the _____ (sounds like youthenlaut) in Stary Sacz was ordered to select about 100 young people from _____ (sounds like Ermitz) and to be sent to Rabka, R-A-P-K-

A: The time when we were told that we will go to this place, we did not know what the function of our work will be.

Q: What part of 1941 was this, approximately?

A: May.

Q: In May. Okay. And you were one of these hundred people.

A: Yes, I was one of those people.

Q: Are these all men?

A: All men. We arrived there sometimes in May.

Q: Were you the only member of your family?

A: I was the only member of my family because -- well, maybe that's the best time to explain. My father was chosen by the man who was the _____ (sounds like guylighter) for this lumberyard as a necessary operator of this -- the German needed the lumber and the wheat, which -- so my father with my younger brother were working there. So that's why they were not selected for any ordered transport. But I went with this hundred people to Rabka.

Q: How far away was that?

A: Oh, 40 kilometers.

Q: How did you get there?

A: On a train. We got tickets.

Q: So it was a passenger train?

A: Passenger, passenger train.

Q: Were you very frightened?

A: No, I was not frightened because we did not know exactly what -- we thought that in this part of the country, they need young men for the same purpose as we were working previously because it was quite natural that they selected from one part people to go to another part. We were on their mercy. They -- So when we arrived there on Monday morning, we found that this was an SS school to train young volunteer Ukraines to become SS. The commandant of this school, by the name of Rosenbaum, greeted us with selecting one tenth of the transport, ten people, and he shot in front of us the ten young healthy men. It was -- this time it really, we realize that the German mean what they were saying, that they have to destroy the Jews. We lived there in Rabka. The Jewish

community of this Rabka was assigned to provide food and shelter for us. And we lived there and went to the school. That was a very short walk, maybe ten minutes' walk, every morning. We walked there in the beginning. We built a shooting gallery, digging in the mountain and preparing the war for -- a shooting gallery they built there to train the new recruits how is the most efficient way to shoot. But after about four weeks spending the time there, the adjacent town, ghettos, were to be liquidated and the people were transported to Rabka. And Rosenbaum had a couple actions. And then we really knew what were our duty were there. We were gravediggers and we bury all people which were killed.

Q: They had these actions in Rabka.

A: In Rabka in this particular mountains earlier where the school was there.

Q: And you said you were a gravedigger.

A: Yes. The other 90, 90 young men, because there were 90 in the beginning, but later on, seven of us, of the group escaped. And to punish the remain of us, he took 21 and hang. So there were only left about 65 or maybe 70. Life there was, I find that the first came in Rabka gave much deeper impression on us than the large camps or were much more people killed in Auschwitz but more vivid things I remember from Rabka because this commandant spent time. We have seen him every minute of the day and sometimes if he felt like, he came to the camp, woke us up, and direct us running all around the place. And his specialty, he had a reitpeitsche, that's a whip, and if he didn't like someone, he hit them from the back. He cut his eye or -- and by the next action, you were marked that you will be shot. So it was quite hard for a young man to live with this

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hanging all the time.

Q: You had said that the Jewish community was giving you food and shelter.

A: Yes.

Q: So were you living at the camp, though? You had said you were --

A: Well, the school was about ten minutes away from the --

Q: Town?

A: From the quarters where we lived.

Q: So you didn't live with other Jewish families.

A: No. It was made as a small camp, only we had guards on the gate where we lived. It was three small buildings.

Q: Uh-huh. You slept in barracks?

A: No, no, we slept in the -- originally there were Jewish buildings, maybe two family in each. So there were, let's say, eight rooms in each quarters. So put 24 people in each room. Slept on the floor, slept on the beds. But that was a small, very small camp, consisting of 70, 65 people.

Q: And what about the food situation?

A: The food situation? The Jewish community had to provide it. There was somebody who cooked and when we came -- in the morning we got a ration of bread and a coffee. And in the evening when we came back to our quarters, we got a soup.

Q: Nothing in the middle of the day?

A: No, nothing in the middle of the day.

Q: And what were you wearing? Your own clothes?

A: We wear our own clothes, which we brought from home. Every four weeks or so, we got a pass to go home, ten each. Each week on a Saturday he permit us to go home, ten of us. Then we waited for our turn. And Sunday afternoon we came back. It was a short ride on a train from time -- from the place where we were living.

Q: Did you have to wear any identifying signs showing you were Jewish?

A: We -- the clothes were only painted yellow stripes. In the beginning, it was not -- oh, yeah, we had the, every Jew had to wear the Mogen David on the white with the blue thing. But otherwise, in the beginning, it was not required in the small camps, work camps, to be any way else identified. Well, this lasted for about two months or three months. And we heard that the ghetto in Stary Sacz, because eventually my parents were also moved from the village where we lived to a ghetto, Stary Sacz, that the ghetto going to be liquidated and everybody going to go -- be sent. So on this particular week, we all got the permit from Rosenbaum to go home to say goodbye to our families. I don't really know if our parents knew exactly the condition because we did not share every brutality as what happened to us and what we have seen to the parents, at least I will speak for myself. I felt that there's no point to burden the parents what is going on with us. They had enough problems of their own. So I did not share too much. I went with general ideas, what's going on, that -- but I did not inform them. They knew that they killed ten of us because ten never came home. But what we were doing, that we were gravediggers and we buried people, I did not share this with them. But there was a general feeling that more or less they knew that they will go to some camp. And Sunday, when we had to go back home, my father took the group, because we still had a couple horses, from the

ghetto to the train station. It was not a long ride but it was much better to give us a ride than we should walk because there was no other way to get there. So he came there to say goodbye to us. And I said goodbye to him already and went back almost to the train. And in the last minute, I decide to go back and I jumped over the fence, because by the train station there was a fence, to say another goodbye to my father. And the SS guard saw me and started beating me. And it's not the pain of my -- what hurt me but the feeling of my father, who was helpless, that he could not help anything to his son. That was more painful. But eventually we got away. And a few weeks later we found out that the ghetto from Stary Sacz was sent to Treblinka. We knew very well what Treblinka was. Treblinka was just a camp where people went to be killed, gassed. Meanwhile, those actions in Rabka continue in much bigger pace than originally because apparently they felt that this part of Poland has to _____ (youthenlate) -- euthanized (please check) and they will have to kill more. So then it was almost every day that he created an action. Rosenbaum, when the graves were ready, dug, we dug almost from the morning into like 4:00, then he inspected all those, if they're large enough. Then we went to the quarters, where we lived. We had some food. And we were ordered in the evening to come back and watch the actions. He grouped the people by the graves. They had to be disrobed, put the clothes on the side, and stay by the ditch. He generally gave the SS men some whiskey and -- oop, sorry -- gave an order to shoot. Take this away? No. After the graves were filled, we had to throw the dirt with some disinfectant. And next morning we cut the -- make like sod from further away and brought cover, that there was no, any evidence that there were graves there.

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Q: Were there men and women together?

A: To be killed?

Q: To be killed?

A: Yes. Men and women together and children that were killed. On one action he killed a family which lived in Rabka by the name of Rosenbaum. He found out that the people beared the same name as him. Then he was -- he felt that it was -- the son had his name so he tried to kill them. Of course --

Q: What was the commandant's first name? Do you know?

A: Some place I have the --

Q: Okay.

A: In those --

Q: Okay. It's all right.

A: -- newspaper clipping because -- all right. Yeah, that, I will have to come. After three or four months, I was sent from Rabka to Krakow. Krakow at this particular time was still a ghetto. We lived in ghetto for about four weeks.

Q: Are you talking about the fall of '41 or --

A: That was in fall '41, yeah, or early winter. Lived there for about four weeks.

Q: How did you get there?

A: I was transported. He got -- Rosenbaum sent two trucks filled up, with us on top. Krakow from Rabka was very, a short distance.

Q: Did you go with a whole group of young men?

A: Yes. Part -- half of the camp from Rabka was sent to Krakow. But I would like to go

back to Rosenbaum. In 1968, he came back home to Hamburg and he told the German authority that he's back from the war, he was in the Wehrmacht, that's the army, and he likes to get a pension from the German government. When I arrived to United States, I register for Wiedergutmachung to the -- from German and I got all the -- I gave this organization all the information, which camps I spent and what the name of the commandant were there. So they contacted the German -- the German authority contacted, apparently, the Jewish organization and they got my name. And they send me, first, the prosecutor from the trial sent me a telegram if I am willing to come and first recognize -- they show me pictures of him and I recognize him, if I am willing to go to Hamburg to testify to his trial. In the beginning, I was quite hesitant because it was only '68. I started -- I was married. I had two young children. And to renew the wounds was quite hard for me. But after discussion with my wife, we decide that it's my duty, because there was really, there were only three left from the whole group who were in Rabka who could testify as witnesses to his atrocities. So we went to Hamburg and testified. I had my wife and my two children, then I had only two, right now I have three children, to Germany and I, I testified for, I think, three days there to his trial. And, I don't know, I had a feeling when I was in camp with him that he was a big statue, big, heavy-built man. After I met him on the witness stand, he was just a normal, small -- so apparently his authority of life and death, which he had make in our mind, the statue so big. And he got convicted and he got life in prison. I don't know. I didn't follow this up, if he's still alive or he's out of his -- but at least that was a satisfaction, that, after all, he killed enough Jews but he did not kill everybody. There were some who could witness

his -- and give witness to the future generations. And he was punished. Of course I don't feel that the punishment was -- met the crime but here at least he was punished. And then I -- with the Germans, the young people, I have to say that at this time when we were there, we were treated quite nice. And the Germans had, at the time when we were there, some also guilt feeling because they, I presume they had to ask the fathers where were your grandfathers at this particular time, what did you do during the war. So there was some, I don't know, maybe I'm not -- I had some sympathy with them.

Q: Let's go back to when you were -- you were sent to Krakow, you said.

A: Yeah. We're going to go back, yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: We were sent to Krakow because apparently the authorities there, knowing that we already experience for months how to build the quarters for -- because first we had to build a couple barracks for the SS there. So they decided they're going to build a camp, a war camp near Krakow by the name of Plaszow. For about two or three weeks, we walked every day, a group of us, from Krakow and then there was another detachment from the ghetto to Plaszow to prepare for the camp because that's where -- their way to build the camp. They had -- apparently, they wanted to eventually evacuate the Krakow ghetto and the people who lived in the ghetto will be sent to the camp. Krakow -- Plaszow, rather, at those days had another commandant than this _____ (sounds like get) who was portrayed in Schindler's List because that is the same camp as is portrayed in Schindler's List. Well, those days we knew there are many different industrialists who were renting the Jewish labor from the camp of Krakow, Plaszow, but

we did not pay too much attention about Schindler. We knew he had -- that there were some people who worked in his part. There were parts in the pants factory. But later on when it was already close to evacuate Krakow and Schindler tried to organize a larger group, we knew that people who, either who lived in ghetto or previously who had some means to get on the list, I never -- in Krakow I was quite already, what did you call this then, Muselmann. In other words, I was not very healthy. I just work. Because the work was very, very hard. I -- By the end, after a year and a half working just with the digging ditches and building barracks, I was transferred to a carpenter's factory because a man who was in charge of the carpenter's factory was acquaintance of my father. And after he found out that I'm there in Krakow, he took me in.

Q: What were your living conditions like in Krakow?

A: In Krakow they were very, very poor because there were very -- we built these barracks quite quickly. And we slept there three rows high, like you have here in this museum, how the sleeping, we slept on wood three story high.

Q: This is in Krakow or Plaszow?

A: Plaszow, Plaszow.

Q: No, no. But when you were living in Krakow, what were the conditions?

A: Well, that was a very short time and we spent very little time --

Q: In the ghetto.

A: -- in the ghetto.

Q: You went right to Plaszow.

A: We -- that was the purpose of bringing us to Krakow ghetto, to build, to show the

people how to build a camp. Because we were the experienced carpenters.

Q: So you're sleeping in the barracks in Plaszow.

A: After we built two or three barracks, we did not go no more to ghetto. We slept there. We built a kitchen. And one of the -- was selected to cook. He was never any, had knowledge of cooking but, you know, you learn quickly. In Krakow, I spent about two years. In 1944, (inaudible) '44, one morning -- I worked on the night shift because they worked, people who worked day and night. There were two --

Q: This is in the carpentry?

A: In the carpentry, right.

Q: Were you getting enough food?

A: The food were almost, in every camp they were the same. You got, in the morning, four ounces of black bread and a pint of coffee. And in the evening you got a pint of watery soup. If you have any means, like people who lived in Krakow previously, who brought from the ghetto something, because it was possible to smuggle stuff, then they had, for money or gold or diamonds, there were a way to buy. But as I previously stated, I was quite down in my life in Krakow. So --

Q: Were you wearing, still wearing your own --

A: Still wearing civilian clothes and still just yellow paint.

Q: A stripe on your clothes.

A: A stripe on the clothes. And no more, even, no more, because this was a camp, no more white --

Q: Star?

A: -- arm bands. You see, through the whole thing, I feel somehow that was luck. If I say that I was sent from Krakow to Auschwitz was luck, it was, to me, because we -- oh, I skipped. When we were ready to go to the barracks on this one particular morning --

Q: This is in Plaszow.

A: In Plaszow -- the guards took us on the appellplatz and we didn't know what, what was wrong. We were not permitted to go to our barracks no more. We were put in different barracks and the guards were all around. Rumors came. I mean, we heard from the Jewish inmates who were in the police, Jewish police, that we will go to Auschwitz. But we heard already what Auschwitz was and we were prepared for the worst. We told -
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Q: How had you heard?

A: Well, people who were living in Krakow-Plaszow, they were working on certain, with certain groups, went outside, out of town, of the camp, and worked with the Polish civilians, who were masons, carpenters, or other -- so it came through the grapevine that Auschwitz was a camp where people mostly go to be gassed.

And the condition of our health was such that we already were resigned, well, you're gonna die, you're gonna die, what else can you do. There's nothing else you could do.

After two days spent there in this barrack, finally we were, one evening we were put on a train and the --

Q: How many people were with you?

A: It was 225.

Q: And this was when? This was --

A: Late in '43.

Q: You were put on a train. What kind of train?

A: Cattle train.

Q: Cattle train.

A: Yes.

Q: And you said your health was not good.

A: Not good. I was very weak already. And when we came to Krakow -- to Auschwitz -
-

Q: How long did it take?

A: It took maybe two, three hours. That's all. That's short distance. Also, Auschwitz was on a Polish territory and originally Auschwitz was built to accommodate Polish political prisoners. To my knowledge, after I was liberated, I tried to research, I could not find any other transport which came directly to the central, to the center of the camp. Generally, all the transports came to Birkenau, where there were selection made to go to work or to go to the gas chamber. This particular transport of 225 from Krakow came directly to the central camp, where there were 20 blocks. There were two-story brick buildings. On 16 blocks people lived who were sent to do outside work. Every morning they came back to work. One block had a hospital. One block was a bunker where all prisoners who tried to escape and they were caught, they were put there. And one block was the experimental block. So we came there to Auschwitz --

Q: What happened when the train stopped?

A: When the train stopped, the SS opened the gates of the --

Q: The doors?

A: Doors of the train and let us out. We were met there immediately by the inmates who were in Auschwitz for a longer time with the blue and white stripes and numbers on their --

Q: Jacket?

A: -- jackets with the different angles because the political, they wore red. And the Jews had a red and yellow star. And there were also with the green German that -- well, I mean, should we go over this? That is well known, what they were.

And they told us that we are in Auschwitz. Shaved our heads. We took a shower and get tattooed and put the tattoo on the arm. We spent --

Q: Do you remember what you felt like at that point, your thoughts?

A: Well, the condition after that was already three years I went through from one to another. You were so conditioned, that whatever will happen, will happen. You did not dwell too much what you gonna do. You start to believe in fate already. There's nothing much you can do. You better don't think too much. Just watch yourself. Not to be too close to somebody who gonna hit you or beat you or whatever. You just try to be in the background and maybe. I had a very strong urge then when I arrived in Auschwitz that if there's any chance to survive, after what I went through, I'll have to survive. And, I don't know -- a good thing, though, that we were there on the quarantine. Each transport who come, was, I think, the whole week we didn't do anything. We could not get out from the block. We got food like normal, four ounces of black bread, coffee, black coffee, and in the evening you got a soup. But it was known to the rest of the inmates that the transport

from Krakow came here. So there were some people who were already longer in the camp who were interested always to find maybe their brothers or whoever is family. So they came and tried to ascertain who -- the names and everything else. So after a while, someone somehow told the friend of mine who I lived and went to school with that I am here, you know. So he came visit me and brought me more food. And then after the quarantine, in the beginning, he arranged a good work group for me. I work far. We walked every today. But it was indoors.

Q: What block number were you living in?

A: 18A. And every so often, he came, visit me, and helped me out.

Q: What kind of work were you doing?

A: I was working in a steam producing -- my duty was they had a big, big oven and that was a factory for cabinets and they brought pieces of wood and I threw in the -- to create steam. It was very easy work and warm. No elements of cold weather go through and everything. So if I wouldn't have lived there -- I mean through this period of, I think I was in Auschwitz four, five months, that's where I came to more strength, because when Auschwitz was liquidated in 19 --

Q: Liberated.

A: Liquidated. Before -- the Russians were very close so they wanted to send everyone who was in camp away. I was almost on the last transport. It was already middle of December, in winter. And they did not, they could not spare any trucks or wagons. So we marched for two days and two nights. If I wouldn't have the strength in Auschwitz, I could not survive the march. For two days and two nights we walk through the snow and

there were, I would imagine it was maybe one tenth of the marchers survived.

Everybody else who could not keep up with them going was shot by the guards, who were riding on the motorcycles.

Q: Were you with -- was it just men on your march?

A: Yes, there was on the particular march was men. And this particular -- in Auschwitz, on the barracks -- I mean on the blocks, it was only men. In Auschwitz, in the central lager, there were only women who were secretaries but they did not live in this particular camp. But a very strange thing, what I still cannot have answered to what happened on this march, sometimes during the march, there was an English military plane going quite low over our heads. And the Germans, the guards got panicky and started to run away from us. And how we were conditioned through this four years, we could not decide for ourselves what to do. So we followed them. We knew very well that there is no way to escape because we were with this blue and white stripes. It's winter. You could not disrobe yourself. And you could not go to a German house. But it is just that the conditioning through so many years, you did not function by yourself. You had to get an order. We didn't get the order to go away -- go turn right; we followed the guards. And it is quite puzzling to me how a human being can be conditioned to do things against their will. So finally --

Q: How many were in your group? How many people were on your march?

A: Well, it's very hard for me to determine how many people. It was a long, long line of people when we started. Only the historian can decide that the march started in Auschwitz and how many people came here and there because it's -- you know, it was

quite -- I mean, I don't know if this is a nice way to talk about our way but everyone was only concerned about himself. You did not care what's going on there in the front. You didn't care what's going on on the left side. You were only hoping that you will survive, so. But that was the condition. And you had to apparently adjust to the condition, what they were. And maybe it's, like today, it's not too good to dwell too much what -- how we behaved because, I mean, I don't know -- finally we arrived in a small town in, on some border of Poland and Germany and they gave us a big farmhouse.

Q: Were any of the German soldiers with you or was it just the survivors?

A: No, no. There were all German -- I mean the guards -- after the, after the --

Q: You were still with the guards.

A: After the plane left and they came back and we marched again. So after we -- they give us a rest for overnight. We rest there, slept there in this barn, and next morning we were loaded on some trains. And, well, we didn't know where we were going but we arrived in Buchenwald. In Buchenwald, we were placed on this block for young children. I mean, at least I was placed there. And in 1945, in Buchenwald, in this particular camp, in the old camp, we were not required to do any work. Just they brought us there to be stored if they need someplace else.

End of File One

Beginning File Two

Q: You were talking about how you had arrived in Buchenwald?

A: Yes. We arrived in Buchenwald at those times, already 1945, or might be '44, December, and Buchenwald was already in disarray. There were many people brought

there because the place was still more or less secure from the allies. I was put on the young man's block and this block became quite famous by Elie Wiesel's book, "The Night" where he speaks about Gustav, who was the blockälteste. I lived there and during the day we were not required to go to any work. It is just that once in a while food got more scarce. Instead of every day the rations what we were supposed to get, we got every second day. But they told us, if you volunteer on any transport to another camp, you might get more food. But somehow, I decide that I will stay there, at least I know what's going on here, I don't want to volunteer for any unknown situation. So time was very hard to pass, because we did not do anything, and as I said previously, the food got scarce, but we tried to live from day to day. Close by end of March

Q: Did you have any contact with this Gustav, whom you mentioned?

A: Well, he was my blockälteste. He was in charge of the block and he the Jewry (ph), the book about what Elie Wiesel was not very he but ok

Q: You described your experiences with him?

A: My experience I felt that the man did the best he could under those circumstances. You cannot please everybody all the time. The man tried to do good for the majority. If he hurt someone sometimes then I feel because I thought about this quite many years now. How we survivors sometimes handle the people who got the jobs of a kapo to be in charge. Not always they did the best in my opinion what in their position required. The one who criticize, let him put himself sometimes in a position of the other one. You know they were required to do certain things by the German authorities there and they had to do, otherwise they would be punished. And so in April

Q: In April?

A: In April, the English and the American Army was quite close, we could hear sometimes at night when there was quiet, quiet, the explosion of high the bombs or whatever it was.

Q: Up to that point you said you really didn't do anything you just waited around?

A: Yes, just waited around, yes.

Q: And your health was ok at that point?

A: Considering the situation we didn't have to work the health was pretty good. But

Q: In April you heard bombs?

A: We heard bombs. The rumors started going that the army the allies are very close and soon they're going to come to Buchenwald. And we were informed that the camp going to be evacuated. For about a week before we were liberated we didn't get any food. So you it was early spring, so we ate whatever we could find on the outside because there were quite grassy molds (ph) there so we took the grass and ate and sometimes we took some water with the grass and cooked look a soup. You had to somehow survive because there was yes, they tried to induce people to leave and they say that if you are going to go out from the camp, you are going to get more rations.

Q: Who tried to induce you, the Germans?

A: The German authorities.

Q: Tried to encourage you to leave?

A: Tried to encourage you to leave, and later we found out that all those people who fell for that, they were taken to next town and were shot there, where they were prepared already for well I mean, I

Q: But you decided to stay?

A: I decided to stay. But I still cannot understand. They had the power if they wanted to do this, to come and say a thousand of you come with us and we would have to go. So I mean it is not my personal knowledge that that would have happened, but that's what we were told. Anyway, one morning we heard those shots very loud and a few minutes later we had seen the American Army came to the camp. In the first group it was a young chaplain, Rabbi Schacter, who when he saw what's going on there, it didn't take him long, he organized a transport of young people who their health was not very good. Half the first transport when to France. On this particular transport Elie Wiesel was sent to France. The next transport he organized to Switzerland through the world Red Cross and I went to Switzerland.

Q: When you were in the camp did you know Elie Wiesel, had you met him?

A: I'm sure I met him, but I didn't know we were not formal, we never told the second name. Maybe I met him as Elie who was sleeping above me, no, I don't know. When I just have seen him last Sunday, he spoke in the temple where my daughter lives, and I spent quite a few minutes with him to talking about different things it's not the first time I talk to him, but you know who knew.

Q: So generally when survivors spoke in the camps they did not give their last names?

A: Well, if I met you, let's say you were inmate with me

Q: No. I meant during the time of the war, I meant during the war?

A: Yes, why?

Q: You just said your first names?

A: Yeah. People didn't know each other by second name. I mean, if you looked for somebody then something else but it's just casual

Q: A new person?

A: Casually if you sleep next to somebody, I don't know the second name. It wasn't important, I mean, besides in Auschwitz that was completely different. The names didn't mean anything. The numbers. We were called by the numbers and we did not the same thing in Buchenwald. I had my there were numbers printed here. There were numbers. The Germans communicate to us by the name if they want by the number, not by the names. The names were registered there but the numbers were the important thing. So if you did not remember your number, you were dead. If they called your number and you did not respond immediately, you got punished.

Q: Do you remember your number?

A: Auschwitz was 1740609. As a matter of fact, I mean, I don't know how important it is, but it's just curious because now we hear about this that these young men gonna get flagging when I marched to the camp, to Auschwitz from my work, one day somebody gave me two eggs because we carried those canteens with soup. So I had two eggs. Eggs were very valuable in camp. I would have gotten something in camp for that. So the guard randomly looked, he said, "open it." He looked in my canteen and started stirring with his stick and he found the eggs so I was selected on a side. My number was taken

and I would have gotten 25 lashes. But fortunately for me the camp was liquidated and they didn't have enough time to do this. So you know it's very hard to condense everything. You know, I'm just going with at the moment what comes to my head I find important.

Q: You were then taken to Switzerland, you said?

A: Yeah. Well, we were sent to Switzerland.

Q: Because of Rabbi Schacter?

A: Rabbi Schacter organized a transport, yes. Rabbi Schacter I met a few times here, he spoke to us many times. He lives in Brooklyn.

Q: What's his first name?

A: Herschel Schacter.

Q: And what were you thoughts when you were on your way to Switzerland?

A: Well, finally we were liberated. I lived only in Germany for, I think, in June, by the end of June, so that's only two, three months. But before I gonna go to the thoughts of the German the American Army after have seen what happened to us there they went to next town, that's Weimar and they confiscated first they brought wagons with water, because we didn't have no more water. We didn't take no showers, we didn't take no baths, so they gave us baths. We walked for, I think, two days without clothes, naked, everything, because that was more sanitary than wearing those old, lousy clothes. They burnt everything what we were wearing.

Q: This is while you were in Buchenwald?

A: Yes.

Q: After liberation?

A: Liberation, yes. They went outside to Weimar and they brought some food, the American Army. They confiscated pigs and chicken and everything else and they came and they start cooking and they gave us -- and that was not very good thing because we didn't eat for so many weeks and now we got the food and many of us got really sick, diarrhea and type of illness from overeating. So then they got the rations of soldiers that also donated chocolate, the chocolate helped us. But, see, those soldiers did not expect the condition what occurred there, and they were just trying to help us.

Q: What language did you speak then?

A: What language? German. To Rabbi Schacter we spoke Yiddish.

Q: Growing up what did you speak in your house?

A: Polish. So that was also a good thing that I knew a little Yiddish. And Yiddish was -- and I went to school to Gymnasium that was a little (inaudible) learn a little German, because the guards at the commandant gave orders in German, and if you did not respond to the order that was not in favor either. So you had to quickly you had to learn the German. That's why the transport that came to Auschwitz from Greece, those Jews suffered greatly because at least the European Jews understand a little bit Yiddish and they could respond after a while to the orders. But the Greek had a very hard time to understand the language and they were very quickly killed.

Q: So you were on your way to Switzerland after the

A: After the transport organized, Rabbi Schacter came with us to Switzerland. We arrived at some Red Cross quarters in Bern and then the Jewish community of

Switzerland were helping us. Some Jewish organization, the Zionist organization, because originally we went to Switzerland just for a little health and then go to Israel, because that's the only place we could go. We did not want to go back home to Poland, because we heard about the seven who escaped, escaped the Germans. They came home and they didn't live long because there is one who survived who is in Israel told us because I met him there to the trial he was the one who escaped, six, the poles came with hatchet and killed them. So we did not want to go back to Poland and there was no other place to go, so we decided to go to Switzerland and then go to Israel. But unfortunately England had a blockade to Israel and Switzerland did not permit we could have gone on our own through the borders of Italy, but that's whole thing was illegally and we felt at least the whole group who was in Switzerland from Buchenwald, we decided that we had enough smuggled then, whatever will be when there will be permitted to go here or there we will go. So friends of my parents my name our names were published in Jewish papers in I suppose, through the whole world but here we speak about in United States. And one day I received a letter from friends of my parents who came here much earlier to United States, if I am willing to come to United States they will send me papers. I decided I grabbed the opportunity and I came to the United States in 1947.

Q: 1947? So you were in Switzerland up to that point?

A: Two years, yes.

Q: Two years in Switzerland. Then where did you come when you got to the United States?

A: I came to Irvington, New Jersey?

Q: And when did you get married?

A: 1950.

Q: And you stayed in New Jersey ever since?

A: All ever since in New Jersey, yes.

Q: Is your wife a survivor also?

A: No. My wife's born here, she was born in Brooklyn.

Q: Can we talk about some general questions now about your thoughts and your feelings and your experiences? How do you think the war influenced you?

A: The war influenced me very, very negatively. My I'm still looking for answers to the questions. Where was the world? Where was the Jewish community of the United States where we were there? Today we know that was well known in 1942 that what Hitler was doing with the Jews. It is known also that when Eichmann came to Hungary, because Hungary was the last bastion of Jews, the Jewish community in Hungary saved about 10,000 Jews for money. And they were paid and when they were asked United States government or United States Jewish community were asked to donate more money for some reason, somehow, it was not forthcoming. So sure the blame lies directly on those people who helped Hitler or Germany, but the numbness of the world, of the demographic committee in United States, I still cannot understand. A ship of German refugee came here to this shores and was turned around and sent back.

Q: Uh huh.

A: When we were in Auschwitz, it's only a very short distance where there are Buna workers -- that was industrial area for a military purpose where (inaudible). It was bombed. Why they never threw at least one or two bombs at the trains which were coming to Auschwitz with the people who died? We were realized the people would have been killed, but they were killed anyway. But the crematoriums or the trains would be wrecked for a couple of days or weeks and at least the destruction would not have occurred as occurred. So Hitler did not hear really any opposition from no one. So he continued to do what his goal was. I get many questions, why the Jew resisted. My answer to them is I resisted for every day, because his aim was to kill me and I am still alive. So what resistant would it be, I mean I am speaking about my personal thing, would it have been better if I would escaped and hide someplace and be killed later by a Pole and I knew from right from the beginning we were told in Rabka, that you are responsible for your neighbor, for your person who you are living or who you are working, if he escapes you be killed. I never, never through the whole my living in camps had any time, notion, of taking a life of somebody else on my conscience. There are different types of people. I'm just speaking for myself. And I cannot, and I'm not sorry that I did not know, that I did not do. The next thing what happened in Buchenwald after the liberation, the young army soldiers grabbed few of us who were near, and they immediately, after the marching they took the commandant, previous commandant from the camp, the Germans, with the guards, and put them there closed in the bunk. They came to us and said, come with us, we show you something. They took us to the bunker there and showed us SS lying there on the floor and said, "you want a gun, you want a

stick, do whatever you want.” Yeah, very true, there were many of my inmates there who took their advantage, but I felt, and that bothers me today, sometimes, did I act the right I couldn't make myself to happen. Because I felt if I would do this to him, I would lower myself to this position of what he did to me. So I don't know. And sometimes I'm ashamed to tell this, that I was a coward.

Q: How do you feel about being Jewish, did it change because of your experience?

A: No. It didn't change much. As I previously said I was never very religious and I am not today. There were questions when I was much younger, where was G d, where this happened. But I cannot blame this on G d or religion or whatever. I accepted what had happened and I feel that maybe it always of suffering of some something different comes. I strongly feel that if the Holocaust did not exist, Israel would not exist either. So I feel that maybe the world to do something, that it did not do during the Holocaust, so gave us a country of our own.

Q: How do you feel about getting war reparations?

A: Reparations?

Q: Yes.

A: Despite what some people feel, I feel whatever they they cannot pay me enough for what I went through and I will get anything they are willing to pay.

Q: Have you communicated to your children about your experiences in the Holocaust?

A: Well, that is also just a few days before I spoke with my son who is now 42, he does not want too much to hear to my story. He reads. He looks for all the information, but he does not listen to me about the story. He never I sometimes volunteer in the

beginning, I did not want to speak myself, but later, a few years pass, I decide that I whoever wants to listen I'll speak. And I speak with schools, I speak with Hebrew schools, and congregations, I go to public schools, and whatever. But my daughter, yes she I have one son who is 42 and one son who is 25. The boys, for some reason don't want it when I start talking about some Holocaust, when we have company they walked out. So the son told me that he cannot stand to listen what I went through, cause it hurts him, so that's why. But the daughter for somehow, I can communicate with her, I can talk to her.

Q: Does the war still affect you any way besides for what you already said?

A: Well, yes it affects me I mean for so many years I would like to go back to Poland, to time where I was born and maybe next year I go because I also going to go to Buchenwald because 50 years when I was liberated. I feel that I have to complete the circle, the cycle has to be closed. I resisted to go to Poland just purely that I will spend my good money to give to the Poles. But there is something more to it. I have to see the place where I was born, how it is, and then put a lilt salt in their face that I survived. So I'm going with my brother in law and my sister in law. I asked my younger son to go, he doesn't want to go. He belongs to the Hashomer Hatzair, Jewish organizations which go every year the young children go he never wanted to go, but

Q: When did you hear about the members of your family, about what happened to them?

A: In Rabka. Right in the beginning. Right in the beginning, I knew, I knew. I heard. I did not have any factual evidence. And many, many people don't have no factual evidence. That's where they were burned, that's where the ashes are. I mean, after all I

knew that after I was liberated in 1945 and five, ten years pass, and my names were published all over. I never heard anybody, who from my family, who knew something. So I had to face facts, and it's already 50 years.

Q: Is there anything else you wanted to add?

A: No, no, it's ok.

Q: Well, thank you very much for this interview.

A: Thank you.

Q: This concludes the interview of Henry Kolber. It was conducted on April 20, 1994, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

End of File Two

Conclusion of Interview